A.S. KEEPER



A Devil So WICKED

DEVILS OF HAVEN
BOOK 1

A DEVIL SO WICKED

A.S. KEEPER



OceanofPDF.com



Dedicated to those who knew loss before birth and whose hearts get broken over and over.
Fuck infertility.

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CONTENT WARNING

A Devil So Wicked is a love letter to grief and set in a realm shaped by oppression, civil unrest, and wicked devils. Please read the following list for mature and potentially triggering content:

- Pregnancy Loss (with someone other than the MMC)
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Anxiety, Grief/Loss
- Systematic Oppression, Prejudice
- Childhood Abuse (Physical & Emotional)
- Mention of Suicidal Idealization
- Graphic Depictions of Violence and Gore
- On-Page Torture
- Death. Lots of Death.
- Kidnapping
- Explicit Sexual Content, Open-Door scenes

The MMC is able to wield fear. Those with thalassophobia, nosophobia, arachnophobia, or claustrophobia may find content triggering.

A more detailed list can be found on the author's website at www.askeeperbooks.com. Please read with care and prioritize your wellbeing.

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HAVEN
TRAITOR'S FOREST
MERCY LAKE
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NEW HAVEN
DEVIL'S HARBOR
MORNINGSTAR MANOR
IRONCLAW
SCALERIDGE
TAIL COVE
DRAGON'S DEN
THE VEIL

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1

THE BEGINNING OR THE END?

EMELINE



Emeline wanted to die.

Okay, that was a bit dramatic. But the idea of sailing to very dodgy, very restricted waters wasn't the least bit enticing. They weren't even equipped to sail in the waters off the coast of Iceland. They were a private charter from Spain, and they'd sailed all the way to Southend to stock up before taking the *Serenity* up to Iceland.

Now, Emeline was American.

She had a high school diploma, no college, but she was quite sure that the Mediterranean Sea was NOWHERE NEAR fucking *ICELAND*.

“You look thrilled,” Luis mused beside her as they stood midships, port-side. He wiped his hands on a grease-covered rag before stuffing it into the pocket of his jeans. “Didn’t you tell me once that you love to explore? Think of this as a new adventure.”

She glanced sideways at the tall Spaniard, unnerved by his happy-go-lucky attitude. The wind was picking up, and at the turn of her head, several strands of dark auburn hair whipped against the side of her face. She tucked them behind her ear, mildly annoyed.

At first, she’d thought Luis’s attitude was all an act, but really, Luis was simply the kind of guy that didn’t dwell on the bad stuff. Not like she did.

“Sorry, the wise words of Luis won’t work when I can see you’ve been down in the engine room all day because the ship can’t handle these conditions.”

The waves were beginning to get worse the further north they went. To make matters worse, they hadn’t on-loaded the whole crew that was making them go to these waters in the first place. Only one person came onboard in Southend from what should have been a crew of six new ship-riders. They had to be paying Gabriel—the greedy captain of this vessel—an incredible amount to risk his boat.

“She’ll withstand the seas,” Luis assured her.

Emeline flicked her gaze to the dark-blue waves that mirrored the darkening skies. The crest of the wave was clearly visible, which was the first bad sign. Between the trough, the wave’s length, height, and velocity, she didn’t need to get exact measurements to know they were fucked. This ride was about to become a lot less enjoyable. The wind was beginning to pick up, as well, which was odd. Gabriel never mentioned they’d be going through a storm.

The sea was known to be unforgivable, but Emeline decided she would be, too, if Gabriel put the crew at risk for *money*.

“Your positive thinking isn’t going to keep her afloat.”

He snorted. “Neither will your cynicism.” He paused, eyeing her for a moment. “Is there something else bothering you? You’ve seemed down for weeks now. You know you can tell me anything.”

There was, but it wasn’t something she wanted to tell Luis. She didn’t want to tell him that their one-night stand had resulted in a positive pregnancy test. And she definitely didn’t want to tell him that before she’d even had the first ultrasound, she’d lost the pregnancy.

It was just sex.

It was only a few weeks of… being pregnant.

This wasn’t something by which Luis should have his day ruined. Although, she was doing the job well enough by being a negative Nancy.

Offering him her best *fake* smile, Emeline shook her head. “I’m nervous is all. I’ve never sailed through these waters.” She hastily thought of an excuse, rambling, “I’m nervous enough with the pirates—never mind what we’ll face out here. If the waves get bad enough, do you think Gabriel will have us turn around?”

Luis gave her an affectionate smile. A clear sign they got on well, but they wanted different things. Luis never wanted to stop sailing, while Emeline did. Sailing with a private charter was a short adventure in the grand scheme of things. It was a whim more than anything. Just like her decision to join the Navy at a young age, it wasn’t her forever. “As *codicioso* as Gabriel can be, no. I don’t think he’d risk the boat. It’s the only way he’s making money. His whole life is this thing.”

Gabriel was in his fifties, whereas most of the crew ranged from their late twenties to mid-thirties. Emeline was the youngest at twenty-five, while Luis was turning twenty-nine soon. Sailing was rough on the body, but when the boozy clients tipped well, working on a private boat had its perks.

Money always had the ability to sway people.

Forcing another fake smile, Emeline nodded before glancing back out to the sea. Melancholy struck her as her thoughts returned to the pregnancy. They only broke when she thought she saw an odd shadow in the water, but it was gone almost as quickly as it’d appeared. Probably a fish.

She ran her fingers over the bracelet she wore on her left wrist. Pink beads were strung together on an elastic cord with a few gold accents. The charm kissing the inside of her wrist was shaped into a cherry blossom, reminding her that moments were fleeting. The anxiety burrowing deeper into her skin with each passing day couldn’t stay forever.

Emeline forced her smile to grow brighter when in reality, there was a darkness fissuring deep inside her. Threatening to split her open at any moment. “Yeah. You’re right.”

Despite the conversation turning more casual and about a recent woman Luis was seeing, there was still a block of ice in Emeline’s stomach. Dread that couldn’t be warmed regardless of how inviting Luis’s smile was.

.—— ——.

Note to self: Luis was not right.

The ship was lifting and plummeting down. Waves were crashing over the foredecks, and rainwater was pelting against the boat—hard enough that they could hear the rain hitting the steel walls and fiberglass.

With each dip, Emeline’s anxiety skyrocketed.

Simply put, the severe weather outside wasn’t a squall that Gabriel could brush off. It was damned-near hurricane winds. Even Luis had doubt on his face for the first time today. Maybe it was because a bottle of hot sauce flew from one of the cabinets, almost hitting him in the face.

“Should we turn back?” Ana glanced nervously over at the steep stairs, leading up to the bridge.

The luxury yacht wasn’t grand by any means, but it was at least ten meters long and had a few decks. At its lowest, there were the engine rooms. All the lighting and hydraulic systems were stationed in those rooms. For the small crew, there was only one berthing. Two rows sat with racks lining each corridor that were so small, one had to brush past another. Each individual row was segregated by male and female with a silent rule not to be a fucking creep. Since Emeline had been with the same deckhands for the past few years, there was a good foundation of trust.

Except for Gabriel.

But he had his own quarters, so fuck him.

There was the main deck where a small lounge with a television lay flat against the wall. A bookcase with cords securing the wooden structure to the bulkhead. Emeline had once found an erotic novel with cowgirl aliens and had yet to determine for sure whom it belonged to. Was it their fearless leader? Greedy Gabe. She trained her eyes, looking at each of the sailors that occupied a seat at the table.

Possibly Ana, who had a degree in electrical engineering and went to school with Luis, who majored in marine engineering.

Less likely, but still possible, would be Will and Harlem. They used to be merchant sailors but moved in together and now travelled as deckhands.

Emeline was certain that Gabe was under the impression that they were ‘*mejores amigos’* and not *‘amantes.’* Lovers.

Arlo was the first mate, a cranky bastard at thirty years old, and glared at the electrical engineer while she wiped her glasses with the bottom of her T-shirt. Ana had showered and pulled her long brown hair into a bun before chow had been served, but there was still a spot of silicon lubrication meant for the wires by her ear.

“We’re not turning around,” Arlo snapped. But then his tone changed when speaking to their singular guest, who was also seated next to him. “Don’t worry. Captain has no plans to pull into port anytime soon. We’ll be making our first waypoint here soon. The *Serenity* will be at the prescribed location exactly when the moon hits its peak in the sky tonight.”

Luis grinned. “As long as her engines will allow her. If the waves keep at it—”

“Why don’t we go get a slice of Carolina’s famous *Tarta de Santiago*? She said she was about to take it out of the oven.” Arlo guided the ship-rider out of the tiny mess deck they all sat in, pointedly shooting Luis a scowl over his shoulder.

Emeline eyed the unfamiliar man, finding something off about him. He was dressed simply enough for a man who appeared to be in his late forties. Blue jeans and a white pull over sweater that hung on his thinner frame. Everything was neat except for the man’s hair, which looked too thick and bulky, as if it were a badly placed wig. If it was, then who was she to judge? However, why would everything about this Englishman be neat and well-groomed but his hair not be?

A flicker of movement caught the corner of her eye, but there was nothing there. The wall was barren except for a porthole and a first-aid kit. Was it a shadow? A trick of the light?

Luis nudged her with his elbow, causing her attention to shift back to him. “Think there will be any *Tarta* left?”

“How can you think of food with the sea like this?” Ana interrupted, a nervous glint still in her eyes. She’d cleaned her glasses twice now in the time since she’d first spoken. “The cabling on this damned ship needs an overhaul. I keep telling Gabriel that we need a proper maintenance break, but he always brushes me off.” As she spoke, the lights flickered. “And now the ship rocks a bit too hard, and the wires decide they don’t want to work anymore. The connections are rusting over.” She let out a huffed sigh,

ending her tirade with, “I swear, Gabe is going to end up sinking this damn boat.”

Will grimaced at the thought, running a hand over his shaved head. “Let’s hope not. There’s nothing more terrifying than drowning.”

“Did you forget about *los tiburones*?” Luis repressed a shudder, still holding onto his good nature, but there was a glimmer of fear in his eyes. “I’d rather drown than get eaten alive.” He peered over at Harlem. “What about you?”

Before the deckhand could answer, the movement of the ship had them suddenly lifting out of their seats, and then it was a messy pile of limbs hitting the deck. Ana cried out, landing on the side of her seat, the action making her chair fall over.

The legs of the chair broke under Will’s and Harlem’s weight as they had both reached for each other when the ship pitched forward.

Luis’s reflexes were good enough to hold onto the table, which was mounted to the floor, and quick enough to wrap an arm around Emeline’s waist. She held onto the table with all her might, feeling as if she was on the world’s worst rollercoaster.

“For fuck’s sake,” she growled, glancing up toward the bridge’s staircase, “What the fuck is Gabriel doing up there?”

No one said anything as the rest of them gingerly rearranged themselves back to their seats. Everyone except for Will and Harlem. Ana helped to collect the pieces of the broken chair when she suddenly stilled. Emeline heard shouting erupt toward the galley before Carolina stumbled out, looking oddly pale for a woman who spent all her free time outdoors.

“*Ay Dios*, what’s got you looking so…” Luis began when it became abundantly clear why she looked as if she’d seen a ghost.

There was a knife sticking out of her abdomen on her right side. Luis jumped out of his seat to assist the elder woman, while the other three were stunned. Emeline ignored her shock to run to the white box mounted to the bulkhead. Her eyes flicked in the direction of the big red cross symbol before unlatching the pin.

She opened the container, seeing a plethora of bandaids fall out in addition to sanitizing pads and heat and ice compresses. What it *didn’t* have was the dressing and compressed gauze that would have been convenient in this situation. Emeline asked as much out loud, rummaging through the pack.

Luis took a break from speaking to Carolina in Spanish to say, “Did that *cabrón* not replace it? Remember last underway, he spilled some champagne on himself, and he used some of the *gasa* to wipe everything up.”

“Apparently not.” Emeline turned to see that at some point, Carolina had been nestled on the floor.

Ana was sitting behind her, keeping her head up and distracting her from the knife sticking out of her body.

“Should we pull it out?” Will inquired, hesitation coloring his tone. “How did this happen?”

Luis frowned as Carolina began to spit up blood. Evidently, the older woman had relayed to him what happened in the galley before laying down. He answered, “When the ship pitched forward, Arlo had the knife in his hand. She said it went right into her before he knocked his head on something. When she left to get help, Robert was trying to wake up Arlo.”

Robert was the name of their esteemed guest who apparently thought a concussed dickhead needed more help than an accidental stabbing. Napkins were the only thing readily available and Will was trying to stop the bleeding by using the thin paper. It was safe to say that it wasn’t doing a damned thing, and if Carolina was spitting up blood, then she was bleeding internally.

A sense of dread filled Emeline, knowing the inevitable was about to happen. The weather was too bad to make it back in a reasonable time, and God knows how long it would take to get the Coasties out here. Maybe the Royal Navy could help, but the amount of time it took to get proper clearance on deviating from tasking was asinine.

“This was her worst fear,” Ana choked out, tears slipping down her face. “She always put away the sharp cutlery if there was a storm brewing. Didn’t want to risk cutting a finger off.”

“She’s not dead,” Harlem snapped, taking a step back.

Denial was loud, but reality was louder. It couldn’t drown out the harsh truths. The fact was that Carolina was slipping away fast, and there was nothing any of them could do about it. Ana was still crying, her tears falling on Carolina’s chest. Emeline could see her beginning to fade. Life was a fire in most people’s eyes, and Carolina’s was barely a dwindling flame.

Luis must have known it too, speaking softly to her in their native tongue. It sounded like a prayer, and with Emeline’s broken Spanish, she

recognized bits and pieces of *Our Father*.

Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos,
santificado sea tu Nombre;
Venga tu reino;
Hágase tu voluntad, así en la tierra como en el cielo;
danos hoy el pan nuestro de cada día;
Perdona nuestras ofensas, así como nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden;
No nos dejes caer en la tentación y líbranos de mal.
Amén.

With a final breath, Carolina was gone. Emeline's turmoiled hazel eyes met Luis's warm brown ones. They *had* to turn back now. There was no chance of them finishing whatever stupid cruise Gabriel had in mind. Faintly, she could hear Ana's breathing turn ragged. She was crying harder; an appropriate response for someone who had just watched someone die. Will and Harlem were holding hands, varying expressions on both of their faces. Will looked like he wanted to go to Carolina, but the state of the seas wouldn't let him. Plus, she suspected that Harlem's presence was a much needed comfort to him right now.

"I'm going to speak with Gabriel," Emeline announced, determination setting in.

While the others could mourn, her cold little heart was set on derailing this entire expedition.

"Allow me," Luis interjected, an apologetic look on his face. "You know he doesn't listen to…"

"Women." Emeline finished flatly, her jaw clenching with unbridled anger. "Fine. But if he says no to you, I'm going up there myself and throwing the world's biggest bitch fit. Carolina is dead. I don't care how much money Robert invested in this stupid boat ride—we're going back to Spain."

Luis nodded, and, with a lasting glance toward the dead woman, he climbed the stairs two at a time. Emeline cast a mournful glance at Ana but felt more uneasy than ever now.

It wasn't even because of the ship's rolls becoming more and more forceful.

Her anxiety was because of *why* they were here. Where they were going. Something about this entire thing had felt off the moment Gabriel said they had a well-paying job, but they'd be going into restricted waters. This wasn't something she'd wanted to do, but Luis had convinced her everything would be fine. Not wanting to be left alone with her depression to terrorize her, she'd agreed.

At the lights turning off and on again, Will closed his eyes tightly. His breathing was coming in staggered pants. "These lights better stay on. Harlem hates the dark." As if looking for a distraction, Will opened his eyes to look at Emeline. "You never told us what you're afraid of."

"Is now really the best time for this?" Ana hissed, her agitation almost tangible. "Where the fuck is Harlem with the rags?"

Speak of the devil, and the devil shall appear. Except this devil was not the devil at all. Instead, it was a sailor with sandy-colored hair and anger written clearly across his face. Whatever had transpired in the kitchen left Harlem's mind when he realized that Carolina was dead.

"Oh, my god." His hand flew to his mouth. "I tried to get a few rags, but Arlo's head was bleeding. So he wouldn't spare any. He's not even bleeding that badly."

"You're wrong about that." Arlo came into the room, followed by Robert. There was a small cut on his head, but the clotting had already stopped most of the blood from sliding down his face. At the sight of the dead woman, his lips pressed together in a flat line. Robert didn't flinch. "*Jesus*. Stay here, Mr. Calloway. I'll talk with the Captain, and please be assured, *this*"—he gestured to Carolina's dead body as if it were a slight inconvenience—"will not change our course."

Emeline's patience was a cord *snapping* under too much tension. She let go of the emergency first aid kit to take a menacing step toward Arlo. "You're out of your fucking mind. I don't care if I have to drive this boat back to port myself; we're not continuing whatever *this* is." She pointed at the Englishman. "I also don't care how much money you promised Gabriel or Arlo. You don't have enough money in the world to convince us."

She gestured toward her crewmates, feeling a spark of pride burst to life when they all nodded in agreement.

Robert sent her a cruel smile. He grabbed the fabric of his sweater, lifting it up to reveal a gun tucked into the band of his jeans. In one well-

practiced, fluid motion, he aimed the gun at Emeline and *clicked* the safety off.

“If money won’t sway you, then how about your life?” He swept his gaze to meet everyone’s eyes. Ana choked back a sob when he looked at her. Will looked distressed, while Harlem was downright murderous. “This boat will serve its purpose, and if you try to stop me, then I *will* kill you.”

Emeline stared back, lifting her chin in defiance. “I’m not afraid of you.”

There were worse things in life than death.

BANG!

More out of surprise than anything else, she flinched. The sound of a heavy *thud* had her looking over to see Harlem face down on the ground with a bullet hole visible on the back of his head. Blood seeped into the fake vinyl, coating Will’s shoes.

Pure, venomous rage had her glare shifting back to see Robert point his gun in her direction again. The cruel smile he wore grew into a twisted grin.

“How about now?”

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2

SEA OF TURMOIL

EMELINE



A wail filled with pain and horror ricocheted around the space. Emeline watched, stunned, as Will dropped to his knees. His hands were shaking as his eyes trailed over Harlem's unmoving body. There wasn't a whisper of hope in saving this man. He was already dead.

"Y-you killed him." Will bellowed, his voice becoming a defeated cry as he repeated it over and over. "You killed him. *You killed him.*"

Shakily, Ana walked over, collapsing onto her knees next to Harlem's other side. Will was turning over Harlem's body, but the sight of a gunshot between his eyes wasn't a better picture. Bile rose up in her throat.

The female engineer glared up at Robert, hate evident in her expression. "Why did you do that? To prove a point?!" Ana glanced down, flinching at the sight of Harlem's unseeing gaze. She slid her right hand gently down his eyes to close them, murmuring a low, "*Vaya con Dios.*"

Emeline lifted her gaze to see Robert had never stopped looking at her. She bit back another snarky comment, knowing that he wasn't afraid to shoot everyone here if he wanted to. Harlem was muscular and didn't try to hide his disdain earlier. If Robert was taking down people that looked like they would be a threat, then Luis would be next, no?

Quietly and without previous notice, the Spaniard had come back from the bridge and moved to her side. A protective stance that was barely jostled by the sea state. Besides Will's weeping and Ana's soft words of comfort, the only other sound came from the torrential rain hitting the boat, a soft roar that reminded them all of the worsening storm.

Arlo cleared his throat. "No need for any more of that, Mr. Calloway. We need the crew, if you remember."

Right—not because they were human beings but because they were *useful*. If Luis died, the engines couldn't be repaired. If Ana died, the damned boat might as well be a raft. Not having the electrical systems to help navigate would be catastrophic. Will was a simple deckhand. And to Gabriel's knowledge, Emeline was the same.

"You. Woman. You'll take over Carolina's job." Arlo pointed at Emeline, not giving her the respect to say her name. He gestured to Will. "You take the bodies and throw them overboard. No use in having them stink up the place once they start to rot."

Will let out a grievous sound, hearing the word "*rot*." Emeline's lip curled in anger, her mouth about to get her in a lot of trouble when Robert made a clicking noise with his tongue.

"I don't think so, Miss…"

"*Fuck* you."

BANG!

Luis sucked in a sharp breath, seeing the bullet hole left in the bulkhead between them. She could hear a whistle from the air passing over the small opening.

“Rivers. Last name is Rivers,” Emeline answered curtly. Her chest rose and fell with seething rage, her body almost *humming* with the need to kill this man.

Before her time with the *Serenity*, she’d enlisted in the United States Navy. She had an idea of how military-grade radars worked, but now she wished she’d enlisted as a Marine so she could kill this motherfucker with her bare hands.

“Well, Miss Rivers, I believe you’d find it in your best interest if you learned to *behave*,” Robert said placidly, turning his head to look at Arlo. “I need to speak with Captain Gabriel. I expect by the time I come back, your crew will be a lot more… understanding.”

Understanding?! Whatever came from this, Emeline was sure that she’d end up in a jail cell because Gabriel was getting a shiner the moment she spotted him. What the *fuck* had he gotten them into?

As Robert turned, Emeline thought she spotted something odd on the side of his face. His ear… It was… *pointed*. It peeked out through that bulky hair of his. A bit more elongated than a normal ear, he looked like someone who spent his weekends in tight pants and tunics, carrying swords and crossbows.

What was that called again?

Larking? Larping?

Once the man was gone from sight, everyone erupted.

“*Arlo*, what the hell is going on?!” Ana hissed.

Will’s outcry was more venomous. “You fucking bellend, I swear to God—the moment I can, I’m wringing your neck for this. Neither Harlem’s family nor mine will stop until you fucking pay for this.”

Happy-go-lucky Luis was stoic, getting straight to the point. “Where are we heading to? Now with the storm being this bad?”

“It’s on a need-to-know—”

“Two people are dead,” Emeline hissed, holding onto the bulkhead with a firmer grip as the boat took another harsh wave. “And at this rate, we’re all about to die in this weather. It’s getting cold as fuck. Where exactly *are* we?”

Arlo glowered at her, but he must have realized how close his entire crew was to mutiny because he relented. At least he wasn't completely fucking stupid. "We've passed the Faroe Islands, and we're close to Grímsey Island."

Grímsey Island? Where the fuck was that? Her eyes flashed to Luis's, looking for an answer, but he looked dumbfounded. Did he not—

"There's nothing for kilometers—" he began, but Arlo savagely cut him off.

"I thought that, too, but you're wrong. There's a land with riches that will give us more *oro* than we know what to do with. Gold that will have us all living like kings for the rest of our lives," he explained, gesturing toward the doorway, leading to the weather decks.

Luis's eyebrows furrowed. "If you're talking about the Nalunaq Gold Mine, we're sailing on the wrong side of Iceland to get there. It would have made more sense for us to sail from Malpica to Portmagee in Ireland, where we could have picked up our gracious *amigo*."

If they were looking for a gold mine, Robert Calloway should have invested in an airplane rather than a private charter. Something about this didn't make sense.

Once again, Emeline was relying on her fifth-grade geography class, but she didn't remember there being much landfall North of Iceland unless they were sailing for Greenland.

It's not as if this boat could handle the Norwegian, Barents, or Greenland seas. If they somehow made it to the Arctic Ocean, then they might as well offer themselves to the orcas on a silver platter.

"It's not Greenland we're sailing for. There's uncharted land around here that is easily accessible only once a year. Halloween. When the veil between the realms is thinnest, even humans can get through it. And what lies beyond is a realm of riches. Why do you think the waters here are restricted? It's because people higher up in the government have a lasting deal with these creatures… to either stay away or else death will take the land again."

Another trace of movement caught Emeline's attention. It was behind Arlo. A shadow came down the stairs from the bridge, but there was no body to cast the damned thing. It didn't make sense.

She looked to see if anyone had noticed. Ana was still busy comforting Will, but she was removing her glasses to wipe at her eyes. Will's focus had

moved back to his dead lover when he realized that the first mate only cared about gold. Not the crew. As for Luis, he was lost in thought. He must have been mulling over the first mate's words like the moron had anything intelligent to say in the first place.

"There are reports of a lot of shipwrecks out here and drownings. The sea state around this part of the world can be rougher than the Drake's passage," Luis reflected, doubt still riddled in his voice. "But who owns this island? The one you speak of. What country? I doubt we were given permission to pull into port if we have an armed man onboard."

"I didn't say it was an island," Arlo gritted out, "I said land. Another *realm*."

Emeline couldn't hold it in anymore, not that she did a good job of it to begin with. "The word *land* is *in* island, if you weren't aware."

A slight shake brought her attention back to the odd shadow. It was vibrating slightly. Luis still hadn't noticed it yet, but it was shaped like a human. Taller than Arlo, as it almost touched the ceiling. With a spine-chilling awareness, Emeline paled at the impossible realization.

It felt like the shadow was looking back at her.

But that was silly. The shadow was someone's. She just… hadn't figured out who or *what* was causing it to look so perfectly… *human*.

Thankfully or perhaps regretfully, Arlo ignored her. "The land is called Haven, where we intend to find the *Portus Somniorum*"

"Port of…? Dreams? Nightmares?" Ana baulked, looking horribly confused. "You mean *Puerto de Visión Nocturna?*"

"Latin, you stupid girl. It means the Haven of Dreams. A harbor village home to the Devil who guards these waters and is responsible for all the shipwrecks that happen here."

Emeline nodded, a beaming smile on her lips. Despite the sunshine smile on her face, her words were ice. "This Englishman has somehow convinced you that a fantasyland exists, and there are endless amounts of gold. Once we get to this place of dreams, the country is going to greet us with open arms and hand over all their money." She let out a low whistle. "I knew you were dumb, but truly—*this*—takes the cake."

"Not helping," Luis muttered with a panicky smile before shifting his attention back to Arlo. "Is there any way we can pull into port—an Icelandic one, not this *Somniorum* one? We need to properly offload C—these bodies. Humanely."

The first mate was shaking his head before the engineer had even finished speaking. “You don’t have a choice anymore, Luis. None of you do. If we don’t do what this *Señor* wants, then we’re all as good as dead. He’s not… human.”

“He’s an evil bastard for sure,” Ana grumbled but then let out a sharp yelp when the ship soared up.

It didn’t matter that the bookshelf was bound to the wall; several novels still flew out of the case. A booming *crack* seemed to perforate through the steel walls. Emeline noticed that a couple of the fiberglass portholes were cracked. Water was spitting through the webbed fissures.

Luis’s jaw clenched at the sight of it. “If we don’t turn to avoid the storm, we’re *dead*.”

“If we stop, we’re *dead* anyway!” Arlo shouted, pointing up the stairs. “He will see to it.”

Emeline’s fists clenched. The more time they spent here talking, the less chance they had of making it out of the storm. She wasn’t sure how bad the weather was projected to be, but if the vessel was starting to slam down against the sea surface, then the waves were even more out of control than she thought. Luis *had* to know that too. He was the most seasoned out of all them, except for Arlo and Gabriel.

Her eyes drifted back over to the shadow. What was—*wait*. Emeline blinked a few times before realizing what was happening.

It was…

It was fucking *waving* at her.

Not a ‘*hi, hello’* but almost a taunting twinkle of fingers before its arm fell by its side.

Swallowing her disbelief, Emeline focused back on Arlo. If words didn’t work, then here goes nothing. She waited for the next roll of the ship, using the momentum to fake staggering forward. Luis called out her name, but she pretended to stumble in front of Arlo.

Then when he wasn’t expecting it, she reared back her fist and threw it into the side of the first mate’s jaw. It was a knockout blow that had the man’s head snapping to the side. Emeline wouldn’t have been surprised if his brain rattled inside, but it had the desired effect.

Actually, *more* than the desired effect.

With his eyes rolling to the back of his head, Arlo slumped to the ground, unconscious. The ache spreading over her knuckles was dull

compared to the sharp one she'd felt since the pregnancy loss. Images of a doctor's office and negative results flashed in her mind without permission. No pain was comparable to that.

Emeline moved to head up the stairs when Luis grabbed her wrist. "You can't—"

"—I'm not afraid of him." She cut him off, pulling her wrist back.

Slowly, she stepped away until her back hit the staircase and she was out of reach. The wall should have felt cold at her back, but it was strangely warm.

Luis stared at her. "He's got a gun."

"I'm not afraid of him," Emeline repeated, her voice coming out more forceful and determined by the second. "I'm not afraid of his gun, Gabriel, or this so-called *Devil* that he's trying to avoid. We're turning this stupid boat around and going back to Spain."

With that, she grabbed onto the railing to steady herself as she darted up the steps. The farther she got from the boat's center of gravity, the worse the rocking was. Whatever active stabilizers this thing had as a safety feature, they were utter shit. On the bridge, she finally got a view of the massive storm.

Dark, menacing clouds swirled overhead. They moved too fast to be considered natural. The rain had lightened only enough so that she could see the waves crashing over the main foredeck. Earlier, there had been tables and chairs strapped down. Now it was completely bare.

Lights and small beeping noises were pinging throughout the bridge while Gabriel and Robert talked in low voices. At the sound of her footsteps, they both looked over.

"What are you doing up here?" Gabriel snubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray right before it fell to the ground, and the ship took a heavy roll. He lifted his cap, scratching his balding head, and turned his attention back to the sea. His hand was on the wheel, glancing down every so often, when a red warning splattered across the front of his interface system. "Fucking sensors. Offline."

Emeline scoffed, walking over to the radar that displayed the weather. "The sensors going down are the last thing you should be worried about. At this rate, we'll fucking capsize. No need for any of this shit when you're about to make us reenact the *Titanic*. For the record, if this boat goes down, you better go down, too, or else I'm drowning you."

“I’m telling you, you bloody git. It’s him.” Robert looked—not toward the storm nor the windows but rather the bridge itself. He looked at the walls, looked over at the stairs. Even the ceiling. “He’s here already. I know it. I can feel it.”

She was expecting to see lots of red and yellow on the screen. Squalls of green, bordering the outer edges where the storm was weakest. Instead, she saw a radar picture that depicted they should be having the *nicest* day.

Spoiler: It wasn’t fucking nice out.

“What’s wrong with the radar?” Her eyes shot toward Gabriel, a hefty accusation in her voice. “When did it break? Before we left? You cheap—”

“This isn’t a normal storm, girl,” Robert pointed out, opening his mouth to speak again when she interrupted.

“I heard you the first time. Santa Claus is out for us.” Emeline glowered at him, unsurprised when she saw his gun pointing her way. “This again?”

Robert directed his question to Gabriel. “Do we need this one? She’s awfully mouthy.”

“I quite *like* mouthy.”

It was a new voice that spoke. Robert’s gun swung from her toward the staircase where the sound originally came from. Emeline looked around herself, then the space, wondering who had spoken.

Luis’s voice wasn’t as deep as this one. Will wouldn’t have left Harlem’s side. And the accent was… Well, it sounded like an English drawl but varied a bit from the two left onboard. There was a dialect there that sounded hauntingly beautiful. A deep, soul-stirring voice drenched in honey and sin.

“Where are you—you—?!” Robert cried out, his hand beginning to shake. For as terrified as he appeared to be, there was also raw hatred present. He couldn’t finish his words as his eyes darted from left to right, then up and down. It was like he was worried that the stranger could appear anywhere. “My exile was not approved by the *king*. I have a right to contest a judgment made by—”

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

A bright flash of light blinded the entire bridge. What followed next was the ship tilting at such a degree that Emeline was thrown back against the

wall. She narrowly avoided Robert falling into her, but she used the distraction to try and disarm him.

He wasn't as easy as Arlo.

The butt of his gun cracked against her temple, making her gasp in pain. Her eyes burned with tears, and there was a nauseous feeling bubbling up inside her. Warm liquid dripped down the side of her face, and she realized with some horror that it was blood.

A scream echoed from the mess desks.

Ana.

Emeline registered too slowly that lightning had struck the boat, starting a fire on the main deck. It didn't matter that everything was wet and the waves were still crashing over the sides of the boat; the fires were unstoppable.

So much for that new, upgraded lightning protection system. The electrical boards were fried, dropping the rest of the boat into darkness. The sun hadn't set yet, but with the gloomy atmosphere of the storm, it might as well have been nightfall.

Robert stared out the window, his lips bared in a snarl. The ends of his teeth weren't *normal*. More specifically, his canines. They were slightly pointed, sharper than a typical human's. Emeline didn't have time to tally up everything that was wholly unnatural about this bastard.

"Fire?!" he roared, fear now creeping into his voice at the sight. "You think you're funny, don't you?"

No one said anything. Gabriel was muttering curses in Spanish, reaching for the handheld transceiver and trying to find the correct frequency. The sound of gunfire had Emeline whipping her head to see Robert's muzzle pointed at Gabriel.

"What the *hell* are you doing?!" Emeline shouted, feeling overwhelmed all at once.

There was a big fucking storm outside. Two crew members had been murdered. Arlo was likely still unconscious and no help in driving this godforsaken boat. Oh, and Robert was a murdery cosplayer who had just killed the fucking captain responsible for driving this stupid tin can.

In the military, there had been *plenty* of shit days.

Nothing could compare to this one.

Robert let out a crazed laugh. He was insane as he started offloading the weapon, shooting the walls, the radars—it was all Emeline could do to hide

behind one of the consoles and hope not to get shot. What was he even shooting at?! His own shadow?!

Wait. *Shadow*.

Emeline looked ahead of her as another burst of lightning flashed in the sky. She saw it then. The same shadow from before. It waved to her. No face, but it felt menacing enough. Almost like a goodbye.

And then came the wave.

She barely saw it from the window before it came crashing over the entire boat.

Emeline had wanted to die. Her depression from losing a pregnancy had made death something she'd found herself yearning for when her mind was quiet. But she didn't want everyone to die *with* her.

She closed her eyes as the ocean swallowed the boat whole.

A sweet ending to an otherwise bland life.

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3

LOSS TO THE ABYSS

EMELINE



Everything was muted. From the cool touch of the water, which had to be freezing this late into the season, to the salty, iron taste quickly filling her mouth. Seawater and blood, she registered dully. Even the screaming sounded like far-away whispers.

Wait.

The screaming.

Emeline’s eyes shot open. It took a few seconds for her vision to focus, but when she did—she realized why all her senses had dulled.

She was sinking.

Drowning.

The boat had capsized, and she saw Will’s face as he slammed against one of the portholes. Fear was etched into his expression. He could have been the inspiration for *The Scream* had it not been painted over a hundred of years ago. His fists slammed against the fiberglass to no avail. Her lungs burned, but her movements were stiff. She couldn’t swim to him in time, and what could she do to save a sinking boat?

“There’s nothing more terrifying than drowning.”

He’d admitted that to her less than an hour ago, and here she was, watching her friend desperately trying to escape. She saw the moment acceptance washed over his face. He gave her a teary smile. His lips moved. *“Goodbye.”*

It broke something inside of her.

The boat passed her, sinking to the depths below. *Ana*. *Luis*. *Will*. She didn’t give a shit about Arlo. But the rest, they were all—

A hand grabbed the collar of her blue long-sleeved shirt. She glanced up in surprise, bubbles passing through her lips as the last breath from her lungs got away. She could make out Luis’s frantic expression, trying to get ahold of her to pull her up.

Emeline ignored the ache in her body, kicking her feet and swimming up to the surface with him. The moment she emerged—greedily gulping the fresh air—the screaming was no longer muted.

A few meters away from her, Robert was thrashing around on his back. Flames lit up the inflatable boat he must have taken for himself, devouring him alive. His wails were agonized, the raft rocking so much that a life ring fell into the water.

Luis grabbed onto it when it came closer, his body shaking from the extreme cold and probably adrenaline. He encouraged her to hold onto it as a wave crashed against her face. She spluttered, blinking fast to clear her vision before her gaze fell back onto the fiery raft.

“Why doesn’t he get into the water?”

Luis flicked his attention to Robert, blatant concern in his eyes when she thought there should be none. “I don’t think he can. He must be caught on something.”

“But *what?*”

It didn’t make sense.

The raft wasn’t large by any means, but with how hard he was fighting to survive, she was sure the damned thing would have flipped over by now.

And yet it was unnaturally sturdy. Eventually, the fighting stopped. A sickening smell filtered in with the salty notes of the sea. Charred flesh and burned hair, threatening to make her vomit.

They both were silent as they took in the gravity of the situation. The *Serenity* was well on its way to the ocean floor, if it wasn’t there already. Ana, Will—they were all dead. Trapped in the very boat they’d spent the last year on all together. And not to forget that she and Luis were stranded in the middle of the ocean.

What had she said about shitty days in the military? This *definitely* took the cake.

“Do you think once the fire dies, the raft will still be usable? It doesn’t look like—”

As if the damned thing heard her, there was a loud *pop.* The inflatable boat became not so usable after all. She watched with morbid humor as it collapsed in on itself, sinking down. It wrapped around the charred body of Robert Calloway. Luis and Emeline watched it sink. It steadily fell into the depths below, still visible due to its bright coloring.

That is, until a dark shadow shot between them, driving the raft down until it disappeared into the Stygian fathoms. Emeline glanced up at Luis, wondering if he saw the same thing she did.

Fear exploded in his expression. “Shark.”

“It could have been a big fish. Not a shark.” Emeline tried to smile, but her face was beginning to feel stiff from the cold. Her cheeks hurt each time a wave licked against her skin and she knew without having to ask that her lips were turning blue. Touching her bracelet for consolation wouldn’t do a damned thing now. “Maybe a sea lion. Those are cuddly, no?”

Luis turned sharply in the water, his face pointed downward as he searched. “*¡Ay!* Something touched my leg.”

Emeline swallowed. “There’s a lot of fish—”

Before she could finish what she was saying, a fin glided through the water. It rose between them, surfacing for only seconds before it dove into the water again.

“—Dolphin?” She grimaced, but her hopes of calming Luis down were sinking faster than the raft.

The Spaniard shook his head, his dark curls flat against his face. He didn’t take his eyes off where the fin had disappeared into the water. “Dolphins have curved dorsal fins. That one had a straight edge.”

Maybe it was an outlier? She wanted to comfort him the way he always tried to for her, but in reality, what comfort could she provide when they were both stranded? In the middle of the sea? In—*evidently*—shark-infested waters. During a storm, no less.

Truly, they were fucked.

And not in a fun way.

“Do you know what sorts of sharks inhabit the area?” Emeline forced her voice to come out airy and nonchalant. Truthfully, she was a bit worried, as anyone in their right mind would be. Getting eaten alive wasn’t exactly at the top of her to-do list. At least it appeared like the storm was beginning to calm down. Even with the waves sloshing about, it was quiet enough for them to hear each other, but the sea state was still volatile. “Hopefully vegetarian ones.”

Luis let out a choked laugh that didn’t hold an ounce of warmth in it. “There’s the Greenland shark. A really slow-moving one that we can maybe fight off. They tend to be scavengers mostly and live incredibly long lives.” He paused, spitting out water as a wave crashed against his face. It was freezing, but she didn’t feel hypothermia setting in yet. They’d been in the water long enough that she should have succumbed by now. Not that she was *looking forward* to death, but she’d take freezing over being ripped apart. “There’s the spiny dogfish. Scrappy *cabrónes*, but they have a venomous spine at the front of their dorsal fin. The one we saw moments ago didn’t.”

“Yay for no venomous sharks, then,” Emeline replied, fake optimism teeming from her voice. Hell, if she was bound to die today, then she was at least going to make fate laugh at her. “Then it’s only the Greenland shark we have to fight off?”

Giving Luis something to focus on was calming him down. He was noticeably more cool-headed, no longer turning every which way to try to spot the shark. “No, porbeagles inhabit this area too. With *ojos grandes* to see prey easier. They’re related to the short-fin makos, but are not as big a danger to humans. A couple of attacks, but nonfatal.”

“Puppies with sharp teeth,” Emeline noted dryly, only going stiff when she felt something brush against her back. She wanted to turn, but she didn’t want to worry Luis. “Anything else I should know?”

“Basking sharks. Completely harmless. They eat plankton but are quite big.”

She liked their odds. “Wait, how do you know all this? You hate sharks.”

“I like to know what’s in the water,” Luis said simply, a note of panic in his voice. “Thalassophobia is a bitch when you sail for a living.”

Emeline's strangled laugh was cut short as she noticed the movement around Luis. Dark, shadowy shapes that shouldn’t have been possible to see with the intensity of the storm. The visibility was unnatural, as if the shark—or rather *sharks*—wanted to be seen. Was it intentional? With the odd pattern in which they swam and how they didn’t attack immediately? Already, she could see that raw terror in Luis’s eyes and a glassy sheen forming.

“Remember that one time when you took on three guys who were hitting on Ana? You got a bit scraped up, but they ended up in the hospital. A couple of scavenger sharks will be no big deal for us.”

God had to hate her.

Because the moment those words left her tongue, one of them surfaced. The top of the creature was dark gray. Right below its nose and underbelly, the coloring was white. Its mouth opened partially, revealing jagged rows of *hundreds* of teeth. Luis released a strangled shout, splashing backward as the creature began to circle them. It had to be over five meters and weigh an enormous amount. Not body-shaming a shark, but the fucking thing looked like it could swallow her *whole*.

“Great White.” Luis’s breath was coming in audible pants. “But how? This isn’t their normal migration pattern.”

Oh, that one was murderous for sure. Emeline saw its beady black eyes and wanted to laugh. Maybe she should have held onto the boat and drowned with her friends because this was going to *hurt*.

Still, she felt like she had an obligation to not give up since Luis was here. He was terrified, but hope still burned in his eyes. Though that, *too*, was dwindling as another dorsal fin rose.

“Short-fin mako,” He observed, a myriad of Spanish curses leaving his mouth. “Of course. The fastest shark in the seas, but they’re supposed to

swim in *warmer* waters.”

Cylindrical in shape, the shark was faster than the Great White. It completed two revolutions around them in the time it took for the other to do one. The teeth on this one were arguably more frightening. On its lower jaw, they jutted out and appeared infinitely sharper.

Both were terrifying demons of the sea.

And it seemed it wasn’t enough.

A third shark rose closer to the surface. While most of the shark appeared gray and bronze in color, its fins were all tipped in white. The shark opened its jaws wide, revealing thinner, serrated teeth. It didn’t have as many as the Great White nor the mako, but what it lacked in scary teeth, it made up for in size. The shark was over four meters and easily over one hundred kilograms.

“*¡Hostia!*” Luis was struggling to breathe. The anxiety which had been on the edges of his mind had clearly found its way into him, and was now was stealing every breath. “O-oceanic whitetip.”

She frowned at his response. “I’m guessing that one’s bad.”

“When the crew of the *USS Indianapolis* sank, it left hundreds of men stranded in the water. As many as one hundred and fifty of the survivors were suspected of being eaten alive. It’s considered the deadliest shark attack in history.”

Emeline stared at the sharks as they circled and swam between them like a never-ending figure eight. “Luis, you really need a better hobby. You couldn’t have been obsessed with—I don’t know—*anything* else?”

He didn’t bother replying, and she didn’t expect a response.

Thunder cracked overhead, and the more she gazed out at the ocean, the more unnerving it became. Would a shark leap out of the water? If she stared too closely, would she see something even more terrifying? Perhaps a set of jaws, open and wide, racing toward her? The unknown aspect of not knowing when one of them would attack was arguably more panic-inducing than the fact that they were stranded.

With a resounding clap of thunder, lightning streaked across the sky. It broke Luis out of his scared stupor and straight into panic mode. He began screaming. A blood-curdling noise that she’d never heard from him before. So full of distress and fear that it immediately brought her to tears.

“*No!* No, Luis, it’s going to be okay. They’re curious if they haven’t—” Another world-ending display of lightning crackled down, hitting the

surface of the ocean. She expected to feel the rush and pain of electrical energy charging into her body. She didn't. If anything, it was like the bolts of lightning were drawing her farther from Luis. "Oh, *fuck* this."

If the lightning hadn't killed her when saltwater was a good conductor, then she'd swim underwater to him. If she was below the surface, then the blasted weather couldn't push her away. Right? Taking a deep breath, she ducked underneath the water.

Only, she wished she hadn't.

The regret was *immediate*.

Another strike hit the surface of the water. It illuminated the depths of the water but only for a split-second. And yet that's all she needed to see the horrors that had been lurking below this entire time.

There weren't one, two, or three sharks.

There weren't five, ten, or twenty sharks.

There was an immeasurable number of creatures circling below. Some large, some small. Some gray, some white. All of them had teeth and black eyes that appeared to be searching for fresh meat. Emeline realized her mistake as soon as Luis dove beneath the surface.

He thought she was drowning.

At the next lightning strike, only bubbles covered his face as he screamed into the abyss. She couldn't hear him, but his fear was denser than the water.

It sank him lower and lower.

Oxygen continued to escape his lungs, and she made eye contact with him for one more second before all the tension *erupted*.

Fins smacked against her as they raced past. The wind was knocked out of her, escaping in a cloud of bubbles around her. Emeline tried to swim toward Luis, but she couldn't make it through the sea creatures barreling past her.

Straight. To. Luis.

If she could hear him, she was sure the screams would have been drenched in pain. Agony. Suffering. One shark grabbed his outstretched arm, clamping its jaws around it, and *ripping* it away from his body. Blood seeped into the water, nurturing the frenzy.

She saw the smaller sharks go for his open wound. Larger ones went for his legs, sinking their teeth into them as he tried to kick away.

Emeline screamed in the water, her heart breaking each time Luis opened his mouth. What was he shouting? For help? Nonsense as the pain gripped him by the throat? Whatever he was saying, it was another tortured scream. One that couldn't be heard over the rushing water nor the blood roaring in her ears. It didn't matter how hard she tried to swim toward him, scraping her nails against tough skin—none of the sharks allowed her to get close to the dying sailor. She beat her fists against one of them, *wanting* a reaction, but the damned thing was still in front of her.

Unmoving.

Like some sort of fucking *guard*.

If she ever survived this, she was going to eat her weight in shark sashimi, even if she hated seafood.

They tore into Luis like he was bait left for them. Emeline's mouth opened, inhaling sharply as a choked sob left her. Saltwater burned the back of her throat, and it was instinct to swim to the surface of the water.

When she did, she was crying. Emeline grabbed the damned life ring, slamming her fist into the water.

"You, motherfuckers!" she shouted. Her anger was more prevalent than her grief. "*Fuck* you. *Fuck* you. *Fuck all of you!"*

Maybe more curses left her mouth, but all she could think about now was that—selfishly—she'd never even told Luis about the pregnancy. He didn't know that, for the period of a couple weeks, he was almost a father.

Would he have wanted to know?

Did all of this even matter? Everyone was dead.

Luis had been eaten alive by sharks. *His worst fear.* Will had drowned. *His worst fear.* Carolina had been accidentally stabbed in rough seas. *Her worst fear.*

Ana? Had Ana said what her worst fear was?

Emeline lifted her head, looking around as dorsal fins sliced through the water. None of them came closer. They circled her, waiting.

Waiting for what?

This, *too*, was unnatural, and it left Emeline glaring as she tried to put together all the pieces of the puzzle when she didn't know what the picture was supposed to look like in the first place.

Robert.

He'd been talking about someone else being in the boat. He'd called him the *'Devil,'* no? And why was it that everyone had coincidentally died

in the worst way they thought imaginable? The bastard had seen the fire on the main foredeck and said what? *"You think you're funny, don't you?"*

Her eyebrows furrowed as she recalled the way the fire had looked eerie in the boat too. As if something had been holding him down while he burned alive.

Was that Robert's worst fear?

How was it that everyone conveniently died in the way they feared most? Unless the Devil really did exist, and he chose tonight of all nights to terrorize them. How fitting was it that it was Halloween? Did the date matter, and that's why they had to be at a waypoint at a specific time? This Devil—he's supposed to guard these waters, right?

That's what Arlo had said.

If that was the case, then what did Emeline have to lose? If she was crazy, then there was no one out here except for the sharks to think she was fucking insane.

Sniffling, she swallowed down the bile that had risen in her throat from seeing Luis's mutilated body.

Trauma *later*.

Facing off against the Devil *now*.

A girl always had to have her priorities in line.

"Where are you, you fucking bastard?!" She roared, hitting her hands against the water and kicking up a storm. "You killed them, didn't you?! Ana?! William?! Carolina?!" Her voice broke. "Luis?!"

Emeline waited for what felt like minutes, but was likely seconds. What greeted her wasn't the Devil, but silence. The waves calmed, as if they'd been sung to sleep. The lightning and thunder no longer joined together in the skies. She could see the clouds dissipating, and in their place was a sunset that was too beautiful for the day she'd had.

Rays of gold and amber streaked across the water. Dusk whispered from the horizon, hinting that it would arrive soon. Emeline realized a bit too late that the sharks were gone as well. No fins in sight. Nothing brushed against her. If she closed her eyes, maybe she could imagine that the boat was behind her, and she was out for a swim.

Except it was too fucking cold for that.

Ignoring the racing of her heart, Emeline spoke up again, her voice coated with determination and anger. "Who are you? I know you're out there. Stop being a fucking coward and face me. I'm *not* afraid of you."

A low chuckle danced in the breeze. Honey and sin, exactly like she remembered. “You really are quite mouthy, aren’t you?”

It came from behind her.

Emeline spun around in the life ring, trying to see who’d spoken. No one was there.

“Where are you?”

She didn’t have to wait long for his reply. “Does it matter?”

“It’s rude not to introduce yourself after murdering my entire crew,” Emeline replied blithely, hands clenching to form fists.

A quiet scoff echoed around her. “Your kind isn’t welcome here, little nightmare. They all deserved to die. As do you.”

She raised her chin, tone defiant and lethal at the same time. “Then do it. You don’t scare me.”

“Yes, that’s the problem, isn’t it?” His tone turned musing, and that unsettled her more than his idle threats. “I think I’ll keep you until I do find out what scares you. Time for a nap, *little nightmare.*”

She felt his presence before she saw him. Something dark and foreboding behind her. Before Emeline could turn around and confront him, she felt the sharp burst of pain at the back of her head. For a moment, she thought she heard the sound of wings beating, but the sound disappeared.

Light exploded behind her eyes, followed by darkness that quickly swallowed her whole. If this was Death again, she could only hope that he’d keep her this time.

Forever.

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4

WELCOME TO THE DRAGON'S DEN

EMELINE



The bed dipped.

Someone was next to her.

Emeline's eyes shot open, panic seizing her. She could barely take in the details of the room before her hazel eyes met golden ones. Luminous and blazing, she thought she saw fire dancing in those eyes. She stared, dumbstruck by the color alone. It wasn't the golden color of honey nor the

expensive metal. Instead, it was yellow topaz, as if the sun was constantly filtering through the gemstone. The pupils were slitted and reptilian in nature.

It was…

She couldn’t believe it.

Emeline was staring at a *dragon*.

The creature couldn’t have been any bigger than a Labrador puppy. As it sat on the bed, its wings tucked behind it, it looked up at her, barely reaching her chin. Most of its scales were black, but they were tipped in a brilliant, aureate hue. Golden scales flared at the back of its neck, transitioning to spikes that went down its spine. Two black horns protruded from the back of its head. Around its eyes, the scales were black, but there were distinctive gold markings that almost looked like freckles across the dragon’s face.

It wasn’t simply *a* dragon; it looked like a *baby* dragon.

It leaped at her, crashing into her chest. Emeline let out a surprised *oof*, startled to find out that the creature was heavy. No wonder the bed dipped when it landed; it had to be around fifteen to twenty kilograms.

“Warn a girl, will you?” Emeline groaned, shifting her weight so that the little dragon wasn’t entirely on her chest.

She could take drowning or being eaten alive by sharks, but she drew the line at her breasts being crushed by a magical creature. Tearing her stare from the dragon, she took the time to look around at the room she was in.

The walls were the color of sage, with painted pink flowers and green vines. The bed she was lying in was fancier than any hotel she’d ever stayed at. Sheer white fabrics fell from the canopy and were tied in neat ribbons to the bedposts. The headboard was upholstered with a dusty-rose fabric while the frame was a metallic gold. She was arranged around plush white sheets and a thick blanket that was surprisingly lightweight.

A large, double set of French-style doors was past the foot of her bed and off to the right. Sunlight fell into the room, draping the entire space in a warm, ambient glow. Emeline spotted a desk with a chair across the room. A glass vase of pink chrysanthemums matched the interior walls. On either side of the bed, there were mahogany nightstands and seven-candle crystal candelabras on each one.

Peeking over the edge as best she could with a dragon on her, Emeline spotted light wood flooring. Even the room smelled distinctly floral. This

was the sort of room that she imagined royalty stayed in. A princess even. She straightened herself up.

With a frown, Emeline shifted her attention to the dragon, who was still staring up at her. Those golden eyes appeared curious, and she got the distinct impression it was waiting for her to say or do something. Maybe freak out? “I don’t suppose you can talk and tell me where I am?”

The dragon shook its head.

Her eyes widened. “You can understand me?”

Now the sassy little thing glanced at her like she was stupid. God forbid she didn’t realize that, for one, dragons existed, and two, they could understand English. *Her* bad.

“Do you know who brought me here?” she inquired, watching as the dragon’s head nodded once, flaring out its wings. They flapped once, twice, and then thrice before flying into the center of the room. In midair, curiosity turned to expectation. “Do you want me to follow you?”

This time, she received an eye roll. As if to say, *Duh*.

“You sassy little shit,” Emeline muttered, but her smile betrayed her.

She was more entertained than annoyed. Albeit, that might change once she figured out who brought her here. As she slid off the bed, she realized someone had changed her into a white nightdress. It looked medieval with the way the fine fabric fell to the floor. The sleeves were a bit puffed. This all felt *weird*.

At least the naughty bits were covered.

And the cherry blossom bracelet on her wrist remained intact. Running her fingers over the pale-pink beads, her anxiety quelled.

With a shrug, she headed toward the door. There was an elegant mirror in the corner nearby, and Emeline decided she needed to see herself to make sure she hadn’t died and woken up as someone else. When she got to the mirror, she was relieved to see her dark-auburn hair. What she wasn’t happy to see was that her hair was a wavy, frizzy mess from the seawater. At least no one had bathed her while she was unconscious. But that meant she was in desperate need of a shower.

Her olive complexion was a bit paler than normal, but she didn’t feel sickly. Her almond-shaped eyes narrowed in on every feature, looking for something else amiss, but there was nothing. That frown she wore morphed into a scowl. The reflection of hazel eyes met hers.

Luis, Ana, Carolina, Will, and Harlem were dead. Emeline had been knocked unconscious, and now she stood in a room fit for a princess while she looked anything but. Though if the fabric around her breasts and ass were even the slightest bit tighter, she could pull off being a medieval prostitute.

The dragon behind her huffed, a small cloud of smoke escaping its nostrils. Emeline turned around, placing a hand on her hip as she cocked it to the side. “You’re an impatient little thing, aren’t you?”

It let out another cloud of smoke, blowing it in her direction. She coughed, her eyes burning a bit. Perfect. *Eau de Seawater* goes perfectly with smoke. If there was snot anywhere on her, she was going to have a fit.

The door handle was made of gold and cool to the touch when Emeline pushed down on it. She swung open the door, the little dragon flying ahead of her, pausing in the same spot while it waited for her to catch up with slow beats of its wings.

“Who lives here?” she muttered, aghast as she gazed in awe of the corridor.

The floors were made of gleaming white tiles, with a row of blood-red slabs in the center. Pillars lined the hall, with windows spaced evenly between each one. These weren’t small windows but grand ones that looked out to a large body of water. In the distance, she could make out terracotta roofs and white-bricked buildings. There was even a fortified stone wall that blocked part of the town from view. Emeline didn’t stop to stare too long. Something *else* had caught her attention. Glancing up, the ceiling was arched with detailed paintings that could rival the Sistine Chapel.

Emeline squinted, trying to understand what she was seeing. Before she could make anything out, she heard a gasp. Lowering her stare, she noticed an older woman standing in the hall with a wooden basket. A cloth napkin was placed over it, but she thought the smell was familiar. Rich and earthy.

Focusing on the woman, she noted dark hair blending with silver. Emeline guessed her to be at least fifty. She was dressed in a simple, light purplish-gray dress that almost reached the floor. The sleeves were long, and the collar sat under her chin. Over it, she wore a white apron.

“Good Havens. What are you doing out in your chemise?” The woman walked closer, practically shooing her back into the room. “Get back in there before the guard gets more of an eyeful.”

Guard? Huh?

Emeline turned, only realizing then that there was a smirking guard posted behind the open door. Wearing dark-gray pants made of a cloth material, the pant legs were tucked into brown boots that went up to his calves. The guard wore a matching gray top, with leather belts wrapped around his midsection. An array of daggers was tucked into the band.

Clothing aside, the guard was inhumanly beautiful. White-blond hair fell in waves to his shoulders. Eyes like lilacs stared back at her, and she noticed that the tips of his ears were pointed like Robert's.

Wait, both their ears were pointed like his. Was there a trend she missed? A new cosmetic surgery that took Europe by storm and she somehow missed it? Speaking of Europe, this had to be Iceland, right? Maybe Greenland?

"I don't know what you're smirking at when you look like someone who spends an atrocious amount of time on his hair and wears too-tight pants," Emeline pointed out in a flat tone.

His eyebrow raised. "And you look like you haven't spent enough time on yours. Were you trying to create a bird's nest with it? Because if so, I applaud you. Job well done."

"Wyll." The woman gritted out, "Why did you let her out? *You-know-who* has—"

"Don't blame me. That one there was about to roast me until I unlocked the door." Wyll tipped his chin toward the dragon, not looking apologetic at all. "If you think that I'm going to risk my neck for a human, then you're mad. Even madder than her and she's out in her nightdress with the sun well overhead."

Emeline flickered her gaze to the dragon. "Please. *Do it.* Roast him. Make my day."

The dragon made a trilling sound that might have been a laugh before launching itself at Emeline again. She was better prepared this time but still surprised when the dragon found itself content with being held. It turned in her arms so that its wings were pressed against her chest and it was looking between Wyll and the older woman. Despite it being a bit heavy, the dragon's body was warm, and the weight against her helped to ease the building anxiety. She hadn't realized her heart had been beating so quickly until the dragon leaned into her more and she'd registered it.

When Emeline glanced back up, she was more startled to see the expressions of the other two. The woman's hand was raised to her mouth,

fingertips pressed against her lips. Bewilderment pooled in her gaze, eyes wide. Wyll simply looked at her like she'd suggested he be roasted again—blatant incredulity.

"Dear gods. Madam Viera, have I gone and passed?"

"I hope not. It wasn't my intention to be stuck with you in the afterlife too."

Wyll scowled. "You know, that's really hurtful coming from someone who's like an adoptive mother to me."

"You've survived worse insults."

At the sound of footsteps coming closer, Madam Viera shooed her in the direction of the doorway again. "I doubt that's who I think it is and there's no need for them to see you with so few clothes on. In you go, Miss…"

Despite her reluctance to go back into a room that was now so clearly her cage, she listened to Madam Viera. "Emeline. My name is Emeline Rivers." Once the door closed, she started asking the real questions. "Where am I? How did I get here?"

"Right now, you're in Morningstar Manor," Madam Viera replied, heading toward a set of double doors next to the bed that Emeline hadn't paid attention to. "And you need a bath. You reek of seawater and blood."

Emeline scrunched up her nose at the thought, knowing it was likely Luis's. Horror and disgust bit into her, reminding her that he'd died a horrific death. She tucked the trauma away to deal with later as she always did. "Is this a manor in Iceland?"

"No."

"Greenland?"

"No." Emeline racked her mind, but Madam Viera spoke up again, gesturing to the bathing chambers. "If you're done asking questions…"

Emeline sent her a flat look, crossing her arms. "Not even close."

Despite her trepidation, she listened and entered the new room. Taking a moment to scan her surroundings, Emeline was quietly impressed by the bathing chambers. It was a spacious room with a stone bath built into the floor. The walls were a similar white stone, but there were open airways that revealed a stunning blue sky. Sunlight peered into this room, too, casting a decadent warm glow.

"This is the sort of place I feel like princesses in fantasy novels bathe in," she quipped, but then frowned when Madam Viera held out her hand expectantly.

“Your chemise.”

“You want me to strip?”

“Do humans bathe in their clothes?” the older woman inquired impatiently. “This chamber is hardly fit for a royal, and you are no princess. You’re a human.”

Good Lord. She said *human* the way one might say a *cockroach*.

Part of her wanted to refute the idea of bathing in front of this woman, but the thought of Luis’s blood on her made her feel sick. Plus, she’d been in the Navy. Getting naked in front of other women in close quarters wasn’t exactly a new concept for her. She fisted the light fabric, pulling it over her head before handing it over. Emeline glanced to her right, spotting the dragon sitting on the stonework, gazing at her.

Alright, bathing in front of another woman? Sure.

But a dragon?

“Do *you* need to be here?”

The creature lay down, its black-and-gold tail wrapping around its front. The dragon rolled its eyes again before seeming to give up its task of taking her somewhere for the time being.

“I don’t believe Samael wants to leave. He looks quite comfortable from what I can see,” Madam Viera replied wryly. The chemise she’d handed over was nowhere to be seen.

The last thing Emeline wanted to do was enter another pool of water. She wasn’t afraid or scared of getting into more water. There were no irrational fears that a shark was lying in the depths, waiting for her. It had more to do with the very real trauma that her close friend—the father of her unborn child—had just been viciously killed. Oh, and if that wasn’t enough, she was still struggling to process it all with magical creatures suddenly existing.

Eventually, it was the floral scent that drew her in. There was also the added bonus of no sharks while she cleaned herself off.

“I’ll get in the bath, but I still have a lot of questions.”

Nodding, the older woman sighed. “I’m sure you do. It’s not every day a human is allowed to cross the Veil.”

“The Veil?” Emeline repeated, stepping into the hot water. She hesitated before sinking deeper, but the promise of relaxed muscles and not reeking of death was too tempting to ignore. “What’s the Veil?”

“The border between Dragon’s Den, otherwise known as the outlands, and the human realm.”

A frown marred her expression. “You keep saying ‘human’ this, ‘human realm’ that. As if you’re not human too.”

“I’m not.”

“You’re crazy.”

Madam Viera scowled, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth in disapproval. “Rude girl. I’m *not* human. I’m fae. Descendant of the demon Amy.”

Emeline stared blankly at her. “Fae? As in faeries? Those don’t exist.”

“And I’m sure the dragon lying near you doesn’t exist either.” Madam Viera snapped her fingers, a cloth rag appearing in her hands. Emeline stared at it with surprise before her wide eyes met narrowed ones. “Listen to me well, Emeline. You are not in the human realm anymore. Not believing, or refusing to believe, doesn’t have any influence on what *is*. You—for some reason unbeknownst to me—were spared from the same fate as your human companions.”

Wow. Real nice. Did she expect a *thank you*? She was handing over the cloth rag, so that probably deserved a small one. “Thank you,” Emeline muttered, but added, “I didn’t ask to be spared.”

The woman shrugged. “Doesn’t change the fact that you were.”

It didn’t, but survivor’s guilt was heavy. She was naked, but the weight was unavoidable. Heavy on her heart and shoulders. They’d all had plans and wanted to live. Will and Harlem planned to elope after the holidays. Ana’s time on the *Serenity* was ending because she’d received a work visa to do electrical engineering for NASA. Carolina had recently become an *abuela.* And Luis?

His smile?

His happy-go-lucky attitude?

His dreams?

They’d all been ripped away from him. Torn apart and devoured by sharks. He must have been in so much pain, and still, he’d ducked under the water because he’d thought she’d gone under again.

A hot anger drenched into her bones.

“Who brought me here?” What had Robert called him? “The Devil?”

Madam Viera snorted inwardly, walking over to one of the open-aired windows. The sunlight danced across her speculative expression. “I suppose

that *is* what he may be to some people. But we're all devils to an extent."

That didn't make sense. "What do you mean?"

She returned her question with one of her own. Keeping her gaze outside, Madam Viera asked, "What do humans know about fae? What do *you* know?"

"Considering I dropped out of college to join the military, not a lot," Emeline drawled. She scrubbed hard at her skin like that could remove the guilt.

The woman shook her head, appearing a bit exasperated. "I don't know what you are saying, but I'm willing to bet my life that you don't know much." Emeline's scowl deepened, but she kept quiet, which prompted the fae to continue, "All fae are descendants of demons. The lineage is what defines our powers. Some are related to lesser demons, the blood drinkers. When fae and humans walked the Earth together, they used the term '*vampire*.' I'm not sure if they still do. There are lesser demons who have the ability to shape-shift. I think… I think the human term was '*lycanthrope*' or '*were*…wolf.' Something of that nature."

Emeline's eyebrows raised. Vampires and werewolves? They were fae all along? What else did humans supposedly get wrong? "Was your ancestor a bathing demon? Is that why you're able to summon cloth rags?"

Madam Viera smiled, but it wasn't nice as the woman turned to look at Emeline. She saw pointed canines like Robert had earlier, cementing the fact that he'd been fae as well. "Do not mistake my benevolence for weakness, human. I have lived far longer than you and have done nothing to deserve such a prickly attitude. You woke up in a room—"

"—That I was supposed to be *locked* in—"

"—And the one who saved you never specified where to put you. It is *I* that gave you the courtesy of a spare room. It is *I* that healed your wounds with herbs not meant for your kind and it is *I* who waits patiently for you to finish bathing. If it were up to Samael, he would have brought you to his master regardless of if you reeked or not and wore indecent clothing out in broad daylight. I'm confident if it were up to *any* lady-in-waiting, they'd have given you a room in the stables. Next to the pigs, no doubt."

Emeline glanced over at Samael, only to see his tail swishing and eyes hooded. It looked like the dragon version of a flat stare. She had the sneaking suspicion that he didn't like being questioned.

She swallowed, looking back at the woman. Emeline's lips pressed together for a brief moment, frustrated with all the different emotions swirling inside her. It was easier to go to that place in her head where nothing mattered. Where life passed her by and she could exist by going through the motions.

"Thank you," Emeline said again, but this time in a louder voice and more genuine. "For not sticking me in some disgusting room and affording me the opportunity to bathe. I *do* appreciate your kindness. I'm just… I'm upset that all my friends are dead—that they died in such cruel manners—and it makes it very hard for me to be appreciative. You say he saved me, but I would have happily drowned in those waters with my friends." She thought about it. "And if he hadn't attacked the boat, there wouldn't have been any saving needed. He caused the boat to sink, didn't he? Is he able to control the ocean?"

"He is able to manipulate many things. His ancestral demon is Leviathan. Quite convenient when you're tasked to guard the outlands surrounded by water." She muttered the last part, but the sound echoed in the bathing chamber. A small purse formed on her lips before she continued. "You might not agree or understand it, but after everything humans have done to try and steal magic from the fae, he has a duty to protect us."

"We wouldn't have harmed y—"

"You weren't alone," Madam Viera interrupted her, eyes burning into her. "You were with Robaire, a descendant of *Marchocias*. Someone he had banished from Dragon's Den and Haven. Robaire was stripped of his power and forced to live as a human."

Emeline stopped scrubbing her skin to mull over her words. Robert must not have been his real name. "Where is Haven? How big is Dragon's Den? Where is the Veil, and how can I go home?"

"Look up."

Without hesitating, she did. Like the one in the corridor, the bathing chamber's ceiling was painted too. It was a rustic, parchment-style drawing of the land. A large piece of land was curved like a dragon's tail. The tip of the land formed a small channel where she assumed ships could sail in and out of—if they had those here. The channel led into a larger water area with the inscription of *Devil's Harbor* etched into the stone.

On the other side of the channel, there was another piece of land with a different inscription. *Morningstar Manor*.

Emeline pointed to it. “Morning Star. That’s another name for the Devil, isn’t it?”

Madam Viera nodded approvingly. “You know your history.”

Or she happened to watch one too many episodes of *Lucifer* over the weekend. Who could blame her? Tall, dark, and handsome, *plus* an accent? She would have made any bargain with the Devil if he looked like Tom Ellis. Emeline—*for once*—kept her mouth shut.

Instead, she went to wash her hair, frowning when the water around her turned slightly red from the blood. Not her blood, but Luis’s. Was it insane for her to feel like she was losing him all over again? His blood was the last thing she had of him, but then it quickly dissipated. The water was self-cleansing. And here she thought that the hot springs in Hakone were magical.

North of Morningstar Manor, there was a mountain range with the word *Haven* written behind it. The mountains appeared to act like a boundary line. To the right of the mountains, there was the *Traitor’s Forest*. That sounded super inviting. A lake was depicted nearby it, given the name *Mercy.*

Directly below the forest was *New Haven.* Perhaps one of the towns or cities here? There were a few more labelled across the map. *Scaleridge. Ironclaw*. Only a few landscapes had noticeable titles. *Tail Cove* nestled by Ironclaw. The *Eastern Cliffs* to the north that looked like jagged rocks overlooking the sea. *The Veil* was written in the bottom right corner of the painting. And finally, a few spots over, there was *Dragon’s Den*, which must have been what this entire… *outland* was called.

“It doesn’t seem like a very large place.” It could have been the size of Europe for all she knew, but the land mass seemed comparable. Emeline lowered her gaze to look over at the dragon. “Is this your den? All these names like Scaleridge, Ironclaw, and Tail Cove—are they named for you?”

With a lift of his chin, the dragon looked at her from the corner of his eye. Pride twinkled in his golden eyes, lighting up his features. *Smug little bastard.* The dragon’s lip curled up to reveal a fang, as if he knew what the woman had thought.

Wait.

“Can you read minds?”

“Who?” Madam Viera frowned. “Samael? No. But you do a terrible job of hiding your expression. It’s not hard to guess.”

Oh. Oops.

Time to change the subject.

“Samael’s master. The one who can manipulate the sea and is tasked with protecting fae from humans. The one who banished Rober—Robaire… and… and the one who killed my friends. Who is he?”

Madam Viera snapped her fingers, a thick white towel appearing in her hands. “If you want to know, then finish bathing. Samael and I will bring you to him. He’s been waiting for you to wake up.”

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5

KILL ME NOW

EMELINE



The medieval prostitute was now a reputable lady. Or at least that's what Madam Viera had called her after dressing her. At the mention and explanation of jeans and a T-shirt, the fae had turned up her nose. Apparently, meeting the bastard who murdered her friends required a more formal attire.

Emeline glanced at the mirror, feeling silly in such a dress. The skirt was beige, with several layers of fabric to make the bottom section look full. It was ruffled toward the top, with a drawstring waist. A steel-boned corset was adorned with several painted, rustic flowers. Purple lilacs, blue chrysanthemums, yellow peonies, and a dusty-pink flower she didn't recognize. Greenery fell between the flowers, but there was a lighter caramel base color underneath the foliage. Tucked into the corset, there was a white chemise with sleeves designed to leave her shoulders bare. They ballooned and tightened around her elbow before flowing down her arms. The longest part of the white cloth reached her knee.

It was pretty, but she wasn't trying to look pretty for a monster.

At least she'd won the battle with her hair and keeping the bracelet on. Madam Viera had wanted something more elegant than leaving her hair to dry in soft waves, but once again—*she didn't fucking care*. The only thing she wanted to do this instant was to meet the mysterious fae who'd kidnapped her.

"What's his name?" Emeline inquired as they headed toward the door. She was holding Samael, who looked awfully bored, having to wait for her to dress. "This person that you're taking me to."

Opening the door, Madam Viera spoke with a placid smile on her face. "You don't have to worry what his name is, only that you will refer to him as *'Your Highness.'*"

Huh? "Is he royalty?"

The guard was still posted beside the door.

"He is."

That was… surprising. Why would royalty be out slaughtering humans? Wouldn't that be a job for the military? Did the fae have a military? It would make sense that they did. Any governing body had to have a way to defend themselves.

"Speaking of Ar" —Wyll was cut off as the other fae sent him a pointed look— "*His Highness*—It's about time you're ready." He sniffed in her direction. "And you no longer reek of blood."

Emeline gave him a fake smile. "Come a little closer, and you'll be smelling blood when I break your nose."

Wyll wrinkled his nose in distaste, giving her a sideways glance as Madam Viera walked ahead. "I think he brought back a feral one. There's something wrong with her."

Oh, you have no idea. Emeline wrapped her arms a bit tighter around Samael, feeling the dragon's stare on her as he lifted his head to peer up at her. It didn't make sense why she was already starting to become attached to this creature, but who wouldn't? Samael was a snarky little thing, and it always felt like winning the lottery to be an animal's favorite human. Even more so considering this "animal" was magical.

"Are there more dragons here?"

Samael let out a quiet huff, dark smoke fuming from his nostrils.

"Tired of him already?" Wyll quipped but then jumped away from her with startling speed. Emeline hadn't even registered the snapping of jaws and teeth before Samael was leaning back against her. Lilac eyes narrowed in on the dragon, but he stayed a purposeful distance away while they continued walking. "That wasn't very nice."

"I think you deserved it," she said simply, glancing down at the creature. "Good boy."

He let out a trill, the sound leaning more toward a purr.

Wyll glared at her. "I don't think you realize how lethal a dragon's bite is."

"No, but you're going to tell me anyway."

"Samael is venomous," Wyll told her plainly as they came to the first corner in the Manor. The corridor opened to a similar hall like the one before it, but this time instead of windows, there were painted portraits of different landscapes. Most of them were fields with flowers. Ones she could never hope to know the names of because they didn't look real. Night skies with glowing white flowers? If it weren't for the dragon, she'd think they were made-up possibilities. The only landscape that stuck out to her was a lagoon with a lavish castle in the background. It was the only one with a frame that differed from the others. A metallic silver rather than black wood. That had to mean something, right? But what?

Not hearing a response, Wyll must have taken her silence as shock. "He's the only one of his kind in existence. Behind his primary fangs, there's a set of hollow ones connected to a venom sac. The reservoir sits above his teeth on the sides of his face behind his scales. He's able to not only bite people but also spray his venom and ignite it as well. Depends really on how angry he is."

That was terrifying. Emeline addressed the creature, knowing he was intelligent enough to answer her in not so many words. "You have a temper,

don’t you?”

Another *huff* of smoke was her answer.

“He’s not the only one,” Madam Viera replied airily. Her quick glance over her shoulder sent a clear message to the human woman. “Remember what I said. When you meet him, you *will* address him as *‘Your Highness,’* and you will not speak out of turn.”

Right. And she was going to curtsy and kindly ask how it felt to kill her friends. In the cruelest ways, no less. Oh, and maybe she’d even invite him to tea after.

“Is *His Highness”*—Emeline emphasized the royal term with a firm coating of disdain in her voice— “a king? The king of this realm?”

Madam Viera shook her head, leading them toward a grand staircase. The gleaming tiles were spotless, and she wondered idly if, like the bath, this manor cleaned itself too. If that was the case, then no wonder humans wanted to steal magic away from the fae.

She hated laundry. And dishes. Definitely dishes.

“His Highness is the Second Prince of Haven.”

“What’s his *name*?” she pressed.

“Does it matter when you won’t be using it? Names can be a powerful thing. Even commoners aren’t allowed to speak the prince’s name.”

Emeline glanced over at Wyll, wondering if this was out of the ordinary. He’d almost said it, hadn’t he? “But you almost said his name.”

“I’m not a commoner.”

“Then all royal guards can say his name?”

Madam Viera interjected before Wyll could. “No. That’s a nasty habit of his. Wyll and the prince grew up together. He’s the prince’s personal guard.”

That puzzled her even more. “Then why were you playing watchdog outside the room I was staying in?”

Wyll’s tone soured at her question. “You aren’t the only one interested in knowing.”

The other woman let out a quiet, disapproving click of her tongue. Wyll’s gaze slid to Madam Viera for a moment, an unreadable expression on his face. Then he went back to looking forward as they all made their way down into the main foyer.

There was a giant stained-glass window at the top of the stairs. Emeline didn’t immediately follow them down the stairs, awestruck by the grandeur

of it all. Light danced across the tiles, kissing her skin with warmth as the sun shone through the glass. There was an angel depicted, soaring high above the flames. Great, Stygian black wings sprouted from the angel's back, splattered with flecks of red. Blood.

She'd always known about Lucifer's fall, but the artwork portrayed him rising above Hell as its new ruler. It showed him not as a fallen angel, but as a leader. *Someone whose light couldn't be extinguished.* The words came to her, as if they'd been whispered from the angel in the glass.

"Human," Wyll beckoned her from partway down the stairs. "It's not time to dawdle. Keep up."

Asshole.

Emeline's gaze shifted toward the rest of the grand entrance. There was a blood-red carpet adorned with a swirling gold pattern on either side of it. It went from the bottom of the stairs to the large double set of doors leading outside to the Manor. She'd barely taken in the portraits of what she assumed were important fae before the older fae spoke up.

"Come. This way." Madam Viera motioned for her to follow and took her down a corridor that resembled the one upstairs.

Pillar. Window. Pillar. Repeat.

But this time, there was a sense of foreboding at the end of the corridor, where a singular door stood with a knocker. The knocker itself was a black dragon. A familiar one that had the same horns and scale pattern as Samael.

If the magical creature in her arms was one of a kind, then it was no surprise that he was practically revered. Before Madam Viera or Wyll could open the door, Samael leaped forward, his wings unfurling from his back. He was less than a meter away from the door when it opened on its own. Neither fae was surprised to see it happen, meaning it must be normal.

Self-cleansing baths. Doors opening on their own.

What was next? A—

The words died on her tongue as her eyes met golden ones. Not Samael's. These eyes were sharp like a fox's. Unlike Samael's, his pupils weren't slitted, but they did appear slightly more narrowed than a typical human's—*or* fae's for that matter. He had a silver scar on the left side of his jaw that almost kissed the corner of his mouth. On the right side of his face, there was another silver scar, but this one wasn't as jagged. It started right above his eyebrow and extended down to the center of his cheek. He was

tall, leaning against a dark mahogany desk, while the dragon purred in his arms.

Behind the desk, there was a clear window that gave a view into the Manor's gardens. She saw flowers, so otherworldly, yet beautiful all the same. Lilies with faintly glowing centers that looked like starlight and glass. The window bathed the male in sunlight, highlighting his silhouette and the flecks of gold in his black hair. He looked like an angel who had already been cast out of Heaven. The sides of his hair were tapered, but his fringe tickled dark lashes. She caught sight of a dagger tattooed behind his right ear that went partially down his neck, but her gaze didn't linger. He was muscular, yet slim. A black linen tunic fell down to his hips, and he wore matching black trousers.

Enough staring. She needed to remember what was important. This was the fae who had murdered her friends in the most wicked ways. Ana. Luis. Carolina. Will. Harlem. Her friends.

People that hadn't deserved to die in such cruel ways. It hit her all at once, and she felt her cheeks splotch with anger. A saner woman would have held her tongue and waited for the perfect moment to strike.

Emeline wasn't sane.

She was a woman with a vendetta against the second prince of a realm she didn't give a fuck about.

"Samael, move," she bit out, surprised that the dragon lifted its head and listened to her. He flapped his wings twice, moving to the left toward the window. The moment he was—what she considered—a favorable distance, she reached for the closest thing next to her. A vase full of those iridescent lilies. *Poor flowers.* Her hand gripped the obsidian pearl vase as she stepped through the doorway, brushing past the two fae. Without hesitating, she launched the ornamental display directly at the dark-haired prince. "You fucking *BASTARD!"*

Emeline didn't have a chance to see if she'd hit him or not because her front was pressed against the wall. Shock rose to the surface more than pain. Or maybe one was hiding the other. One of Wyll's daggers was placed against the side of her throat, digging in slightly. She was certain that he was about to sever her head from her body when a single word stopped him.

"Wyll." It was only his name, but disapproval swam in the undertones of the prince's voice.

She hated that the sound of it made her stomach flutter. Emeline was aware of every breath she took, waiting for something to happen. Would Wyll kill her, or did he need permission? Would the fae prince kill her instead? She didn't particularly care *who* had the honor as long as it was quick.

"The human attacked you. It's the law that I put her down." Wyll's voice was rough with anger and disbelief, the blade digging deeper.

If she moved even the slightest, it would no doubt slice her.

Emeline's lip curled at his words. "I'm not a fucking dog."

"No, they're typically more well-behaved." The prince's humor incited her anger, pouring fuel on what was already a volatile temper. "Let her go, Wyll."

"But Ar—Your Highness—"

"He said let her go." Madam Viera's tone was flat, but her support of the prince was transparent. What he said, she supported, regardless of how she truly felt. It was clear without needing to see her that she disapproved of a lot right now.

The fact that a stray human had thrown a vase of flowers at the second prince of a realm made up entirely of non-humans? Probably.

Said prince stopping his own guard from killing her? Definitely.

Regardless of the reason, she was happy that Wyll released her. The moment he did, she stepped further into the room and looked precisely at where the prince was standing.

He held the vase, regarding it with very little interest. "It's rude to throw things at someone you've only just met." The corner of his lip raised in a crooked, wicked smirk. "Officially."

She looked for something else to throw at him. There was little chance of her stealing one of Wyll's daggers that were strapped to his side, and she wasn't dumb enough to try. That sliver of common sense didn't apply to her mouth.

"Fuck you. It's rude to murder people you've never met. Officially." Wyll's hand twitched, clearly wanting to silence her. She saw the movement in the corner of her eye and swung her gaze to glower at him. "Do it. I *dare* you."

Madam Viera pinched the bridge of her nose.

Wyll's lilac eyes darkened, and he reached for his blade again when the prince spoke."Don't. This little nightmare's more afraid of living than she is

of dying. Don’t give her what she wants.”

“And how the fuck would you know anything about me?” Emeline met his stare head-on, her body growing too warm. Was it anger or panic? Was it *both* because he was right? She took a step toward him, ignoring how Wyll’s body stiffened. “You brought me here because you don’t know what I’m afraid of. Whatever you are and whatever you did to my friends, it won’t work on me.”

There was a heavy silence in the room.

Her chest rose and fell with resentment flooding her. She watched as he languidly placed the vase on the edge of the desk. There was an ease and gracefulness to his movements that bothered her… as if this meeting wasn’t of any significance to him at all. The soft *thud* of the vase against the wood sounded louder in the absence of conversation. Madam Viera opened her mouth to speak, but she wasn’t fast enough.

“Leave us.” While his tone was light, his words were absolute. There was no hesitancy in them.

“Ar—Your Highness,” Wyll corrected himself, earning another disapproving look from Madam Viera. “As your personal guard, I can’t exactly do my job if I'm not at your side.”

The madam nodded her agreement. “I have to agree with Wyll. It’s improper for a prince of the realm to be alone with a human woman behind closed doors.”

The prince’s eyes sparked, that golden flame in his eyes growing the slightest bit brighter. “Thank you both for your unnecessary concern. But I wasn’t asking.”

Wyll still looked like he wanted to argue, but Madam Viera was evidently a stickler for royal customs. Though she disagreed with him, the words of a prince were absolute. She patted the blond fae on the shoulder, murmuring something too low for Emeline to hear. Emeline didn’t bother to meet Wyll’s warning gaze, keeping all of her attention on the bastard in front of her.

He wasn’t looking away from her either. The corners of his lips were faintly turned upward like this was entertainment for him. Her anger. Her rage. Her resentment. It was a fucking joke to him.

The eye contact was a blistering heat she would rather burn under than give in to. His words were also still running along the edges of her mind. *This little nightmare’s more afraid of living than she is of dying.* How true

was it? If she reflected on her time since the loss of her pregnancy, how much darkness would she find within herself? Emeline's thoughts were so loud that she almost missed the prince's dematerialization.

He was smoke around the edges. One second, he was leaning against the wooden desk and in the next, he was standing in front of her. The height difference was more apparent then. She saw the dip in his tunic below his neckline where gold ink was teasing her eyes. A flash of sea-green color was on the back of his left hand. Emeline caught the scent of something citrusy and slightly woody. He smelled like fresh rain on a gentle morning, but his presence was a tempest.

His hand lifted toward her while she was distracted and gripped her jaw in a way that wasn't painful, but it was forceful. She gave him a menacing glare that only appeared to amuse him. Gold speckled with lighter flecks of topaz, made his eyes appear to gleam. With the shadows around his silhouette, he looked downright demonic. The edges of his lips rose in a wicked smirk.

"You look like you want to kill me." It wasn't a question.

The prince didn't require validation, but she gave it to him. "No shit, Sherlock. Do you know how terrified Will—*my Will*—looked before he died? I saw his face in the porthole before he accepted that he was going to drown. And Luis…" Emeline had to take a deep breath as her throat seized up. Her hands were beginning to tremble as she realized the gravity of the situation. It was overwhelming how someone could hold so much power and stand before her with such nonchalance. "You were controlling those sharks, weren't you?" Never mind that—"And the water was freezing. We should have died quickly from hypothermia. Why didn't we?"

He didn't answer her immediately.

Instead, he took in the rise and fall of her chest, watching with anticipation. Like she was ready to break at any moment and he'd be there to destroy whatever was left of her. "I carry the blood of Leviathan in me. It gives me an affinity for the water and all those that dwell there." The prince saw understanding bleed into her expression, but he clarified her last question. "I controlled the temperature. Made it cold enough to where you both would suffer but still be able to feel *everything*."

He wanted a reaction, and she bit the inside of her cheek, refusing to give one to him. It didn't matter because it was like he could hear her heart racing faster as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. "You were listening

to their fears, weren't you? In the mess deck, I *saw* you. Or at least your shadow. How are you able to do that?"

His smirk grew, revealing a fang. "Curious about me, are you?"

Emeline's smile was sickly sweet. "*Know thy self; know thy enemy.*"

"Do you? Know yourself?" His grip on her jaw tightened slightly as he lifted her chin, so he could stare directly into her eyes. "I can read fears with a single glance. But if someone doesn't know what they're afraid of, then it's all dust and shadows."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "Of course I have fears. Have you never seen the 90's film *Arachnophobia*?" A scowl fell on her lips. "I'd guess you haven't because you're too busy killing innocent people in horrific ways."

"I know more about humans than most," the prince replied coolly. "And I'm not interested in trivial, irrational fears."

His smirk never faltered regardless of how biting her tone was. If anything, she was beginning to realize that her temper greatly entertained him. As did her mouth when it spewed venomous words.

"Spiders aren't triv—" Emeline was cut short as his thumb slid from the soft part of her cheek to press against her lips.

More hot anger swelled inside her. She opened her mouth, ready to bite the fucker, but then his pointer finger pushed her cheek in. If she bit down on him now, she'd bite the inside of her own cheek.

"I'm interested in the sort of fears that leave you trembling. A raw"—he brushed the pad of his thumb against her lower lip—"primitive fear that haunts you when you're awake and in your dreams. So tell me, little nightmare. What are you afraid of?"

His last question was more of a demand than a question. The words were imbued with a power, threatening to cave in her very existence. It was a soul-crushing weight that made her legs go weak. Made her heart race unnaturally fast. Emeline's entire body felt heavy under his stare. His fox-like eyes were burning so brightly that there was a golden hue reflected on his cheekbones.

But while his eyes were hard, his touch wasn't.

While he wanted to scare her, he didn't.

Emeline pushed back against the growing pressure on her mind, her resolve growing. He'd killed her friends. He wanted to know her fear, so he could undoubtedly kill her too.

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Emeline reached up, her hands gripping his wrist. Her words were ice compared to his flame, but she wouldn't melt. "I said it before, and I'll happily say it again. *Fuck. You. Your. Highness*. I am not afraid of you, this realm, or whatever else you have in store for me."

"And what if I want to torture you?" His head tilted slightly, eyes drifting down to her mouth. They lingered there before eyeing her throat. Did he know her pulse jumped up when his gaze stalled? Could he hear her breath hitch when he grabbed her? "Pretty words until the pain registers. Did you know that when fae and humans walked together, your kind was fond of the breaking wheel? Men and women alike were tied to a large wheel until all their limbs were broken in a methodical way. There was branding. Flogging. Mutilation that would make the most fearless humans cower."

"That sounds medieval."

The prince let go of her, and she ignored the fleeting sense of loss. "That's the last time humans and fae walked the same path. Before the Veil was created to keep them separate."

Emeline nodded, but then realized something. "You speak as if you were there."

He didn't give any indication whether he agreed or disagreed with her. Instead, he crossed his arms. Muscles coiled under the cotton fabric, and his expression turned speculative. She almost felt like a stray kitten that he was deciding what to do with. It left a sour taste on her tongue.

"If you're going to kill me, do it. I don't care to be your prisoner."

"That's the funny thing about being held prisoner, isn't it? You don't exactly have a choice," the prince mused coyly. "But you aren't a prisoner. You're free to walk around. Just don't come crying to me when some arbitrary fae decides to take you as a pet."

Emeline's fists clenched by her side. "You are *such* an asshole."

He lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug. "You can give me your fears, or you can stay here and rot in this manor. The choice is yours, little nightmare."

It wasn't much of a choice. None of her training in the Navy had taught her how to survive a sadistic fucking monarchy. Alright, maybe there were a couple of hostage trainings, but no monarchy was supposed to have powers that could affect the whole goddamn ocean. She didn't know the actual limits of his power—she didn't know much at all. Only that he could

threaten her all he wanted to, but she wasn't going to play by his rules. She would leave the realm somehow. He wouldn't get anywhere near her true fears.

And last but not least—"I have a name."

"Noted."

"It's not *little nightmare.*"

"How riveting."

She wanted to stomp her foot like a child. He was so *irritating*. Be that as it may, he was the prince of a fae realm. Emeline wasn't one of his subjects. She was his prisoner—or maybe not—but she might as well have been. A small huff to her left made her aware of Samael, sitting on a large, plush black pillow, that rested on a pedestal made of gold. Of course it was.

Samael had a brooding expression, like he was bored with them. He let out a yawn, revealing sharp teeth, which she now knew were venomous.

Everyone had a name here, and he had to have one as well. If she wasn't one of his subjects, then she wanted to know. "What's your name?"

He must have thought her question was odd because a glimmer of surprise rippled across those simmering eyes. "Why do you want to know?"

"I refuse to call you 'Your Highness.'"

"You could always use, *my prince*."

Gag. "Vetoed."

"By whose governing authority?"

"My own." Emeline didn't back down or lower her gaze.

His smile turned sinful, and she swore that there was a bit of approval in his voice. "I'm an opportunist, little nightmare. I'll tell you my name in return for one thing."

"And what would that be?"

Why was she even entertaining this? Was he going to ask for her fear again? If he was correct, then Emeline hadn't discovered what her own fears were. The true ones that she avoided even thinking about.

"You don't try to run or kill yourself."

That made her frown deepen. "Why would you care if I did either? You actively want me to die as soon as you get what you want."

The prince didn't deny it. He nodded his head toward the sleepy dragon. "That little traitor is quite fond of you. If you run, he'd follow. If you died, he'd be… upset to say the least."

This was ridiculous. He wanted to keep his dragon happy. Emeline wanted to refuse, but the sight of the dragon becoming more alert made her soften.

"Fine. I promise. But it's because I like him, *not* you," she clarified the latter, wanting to make things perfectly clear between them. "I can't stand you."

"You're welcome to get on your knees instead," the prince suggested without missing a beat, his smirk growing when her cheeks heated. "I would have fun with that vicious mouth of yours."

It was an angry flush, not a when-and-where sort of flush. At least that's what she told herself. Tall, dark, and handsome was no longer her type. Especially not someone with striking features and a body—*Enough Emeline*.

He. Murdered. Your. Friends.

"Arsen."

She blinked. "What? You want to light something on fire?"

Samael looked thrilled at the thought.

The prince rolled his eyes. "With an *-e*, not an *-o*, little nightmare. You asked me what my name is. It's Arsen Seaspire." His voice turned gravelly as his power imbued his tone once again. "The Second Prince of Haven. The Great Leviathan's descendant. And the devil that guards the Veil between the realms." His naughty smile made hidden, unwelcome desires pool in her lower abdomen. "And *your* prince, as you so eloquently stated earlier."

"Pain in my ass sounds better."

Arsen grinned at the mere thought. "Bend over then."

In response, Emeline simply glared. Prince or not, he'd killed people she cared about and wasn't apologetic in the slightest. Subject or not, she wasn't bowing to any of his whims. Especially not where her fears were concerned.

She'd fight him for as long as it took until she was in the human realm again.

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6

FLEETING EMOTIONS

EMELINE



Bend over?

Not even in his *dreams* was that a possibility.

Emeline was too stubborn to hand over her fears—or even acknowledge any of them for that matter—and she was sure that Arsen had too much time on his hands. Why was screwing with a human on the top of his to-do list? Didn’t he have anything better to do? Like run a kingdom?

“Don’t you have royal responsibilities to attend to?” she inquired, crossing her arms.

“Some would say I do,” Arsen replied in a dry tone, but evidently he had no intention of moving away from her. He stayed exactly where he was.

The difference in their height was beginning to piss her off. Everything about him annoyed her. His stupid dark hair that looked soft to the touch. His stupid, pretty eyes. His even stupider mouth that wouldn’t stop smirking at her. Emeline took a step back toward the door, both for her sanity and dignity.

“Then go do them, and let me go back to my world. Realm. Whatever.”

At that, Samael let out a quiet snort. They both glanced over to see the dragon looking between the two of them with bright eyes.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying this,” he drawled, eyes shining with mirth. There was a short pause before Arsen spoke up again, his gaze staying on Samael. “No, I already said I wasn’t going to, you damned traitor.”

Samael huffed this time, his slitted eyes narrowing. Smoke billowed from his nostrils while his gaze flickered from the prince to Emeline and then back to the prince. It almost looked *pointed*.

Arsen’s smirk finally left him as he gave a dramatic roll of his eyes. A frown tugged at his lips. “She’s clearly fine, you overgrown lizard. Physically, at least. Mentally, she’s all sorts of screwed up if she doesn’t even know what she’s afraid of.”

That was a fair assessment. Prick.

Confusion swiftly followed, pooling into Emeline’s chest, but it didn’t stay there for long. “Can you understand him?” The prince nodded as she asked her next question. “How?”

Arsen tapped his temple but didn’t say anything.

“Then *all* fae can hear him?”

Samael shook his head. He lay down on the plush cushion, as if the conversation was beginning to bore him.

“Not all fae can. Only I am able to hear him. A blessing and a curse, truly.” Arsen’s answer didn’t clarify anything. He must have seen the frustration on her face because his goddamn smirk was back. “Samael is like a… familiar.”

Emeline recalled something about witches and cats. Weren’t the cats supposed to be like servants to the witch? Or was it like a domestic companionship? Demons were involved, too, weren’t they?

“Then he’s your servant?” she guessed, still a bit confused. Samael growled low, the sound tearing through the tension that had previously flooded the room. She arched an eyebrow at the dragon, miffed. “Don’t be upset with me when he’s shit at explaining things. I’m trying to understand.”

Emeline turned back to Arsen only to realize that he was standing closer to her. Startled, she took another two steps back, but Arsen matched her step for step. Her scowl deepened as she tried to create more distance between them, but it only resulted in her back hitting the door and Arsen placing his right hand flat against it above her left shoulder. His head tilted down toward hers.

For a split second, she thought he was going to kiss her. But he didn’t. His eyes were searching hers, and she was confident he wouldn’t find anything. Something akin to frustration flashed before her, but it was replaced by wicked amusement.

“Careful, Samael has a tendency to bite if you make him mad enough,” the prince warned, but his tone was light. “You might wish for death, but the cheeky brat will have you rotting alive. His venom is very painful and quite fun to watch. Maybe I *should* let him bite you.”

“You’re a sadist,” Emeline snapped, anger staining her voice.

Arsen let out a low chuckle. “I’ve been called worse.” His free hand lifted, the one not caging her between him and the door. His forefinger tilted her chin up to look at him directly. “And those who did have all died *very* painful deaths. You should consider yourself lucky.”

“There are worse things than death.”

“That there are, little nightmare,” he agreed, eyes drifting down to her mouth. “Why don’t you tell me about what you’ve been through, and then I’ll be able to figure out your fears before you do?”

Emeline’s reply was instant. “I’d rather have Samael bite me.”

The corner of his lip turned up in a crooked smile, revealing a pointed canine. “I could bite you.”

“No thanks. I don’t think you have tetanus shots available here.”

Arsen’s hand dropped as his back straightened. His eyebrows furrowed together. “What is a tetanus shot?”

The word sounded foreign on his tongue. Maybe if the situation were different, she would have laughed. Instead, she placed a hand against his chest to push him back, but he didn’t budge. Emeline purposefully ignored

how firm his body felt beneath her hand. The tunic he was wearing was made of a thin cloth, allowing her to feel the hard muscles without effort.

“I thought you said you knew more about humans than most.”

Arsen nodded, his voice contemplative as he turned around to head back to his desk, rather than continue antagonizing her with his close presence. Idly, she noticed there was a large wooden mug filled with an almost steaming black liquid. The smell was familiar again. “I go to the human realm often.”

“You mean when you’re guarding the Veil?”

“No.”

Emeline watched as he sat back at his desk, reaching for a pile of handwritten documents on pieces of parchment. There was even a black quill and a bottle of ink seated to the right of him. That was another thing she found odd.

“If you visit humans often, then you must know we’re not medieval. Pens exist.”

Arsen exhaled sharply, humored. He lifted the cup to his lips, taking a sip before placing it down against the desk. “You humans still hunt to eat. You murder each other. Create war. Fuck.” He glanced up at her. “Don’t bother prattling to me about how humans aren’t chaotic and new inventions have set you apart from your primitive ancestors.” His answering smile was tight. “I regret—*not really*—to inform you that humans are as vile as they always have been. They’ve simply learned to hide it better. An entire species doesn’t change so quickly. I’ve been alive for hundreds of years. You lot were unpleasant then, and you’re unpleasant now. Especially you.”

Emeline opened her mouth to argue but then abruptly closed it. He wasn’t necessarily wrong—about humans in general, not *her*. Things were mass-produced now, but there were still people who hunted for new innovations when it came to the farming industry. Crime rates in major cities were still deplorable. Women inherently felt unsafe in isolated situations, and going for a run before the sun was up was considered risky behavior.

War was still rampant, but it was disguised in pricey tariffs and strict foreign policies. She remembered her time in the Navy as being one big game of provocation. Sail through these waters. Take a photo. Demonstrate how powerful the military is while provoking the other world powers. These days, war was a game of chess on how to make the general populace

suffer until their governments were on the brink of mutiny. Only then would deals be made. And it was so very *human* that the only people not affected in war were those that already had their pockets lined with money.

Humans were awful, but there were still good people out there. Her friends were some of them. Friends that he murdered.

“Why couldn’t you have killed Robert or Robaire—whatever the hell his name was—separately? Actually, Gabriel and Arlo deserved it too since they knew what was going on—but why the rest of the crew? Luis? Carolina? Ana? Will? Harlem? They didn’t deserve to die.”

Arsen reached for the ink quill, dipping the nib into the ink with an annoying amount of nonchalance. He truly did not give a single fuck about what she was getting at. Nor did he care to dignify her answer with a response as he started writing on the parchment. The soft scratches from the metal tip filled the air.

Infuriating prick.

She glanced over at Samael, whose eyes were closed. He’d become bored with the conversation as well. Emeline wasn’t a martyr for humanity by any means, but shouldn’t killing innocent people be against most ancient laws? There were religious references everywhere. The fae were descendants of demons for fuck’s sake.

Could they not understand the whole ‘*love thy neighbor’* bit? The silence was becoming more insufferable as it dragged on. Emeline had to fill it; otherwise, she was convinced it would suffocate her more than the seas had tried to.

“So I’m to stay here until I tell you what I’m afraid of, or you figure it out?”

“You could tell me now, and then I’ll gladly kill you, as it is my duty. Humans don’t belong in Dragon’s Den, nor do they need to have any knowledge about Haven,” Arsen replied seamlessly, not looking away from the parchment at which he now furrowed his brows. A tinge of something other than amusement finally flickered across his face. Wrath. He began crossing out lines as he continued, “It would save us both a lot of time.”

Her lips pressed together tightly. She was already suffering from several layers of guilt. Survivor’s being the freshest one. Emeline was saved from replying as Samael growled, but when she looked over, his eyes hadn’t opened. When her attention shifted back to Arsen, there was a vapid expression on his face as he gazed at the dragon.

“It’d be nice if I could understand Samael. I’m willing to bet he’s a lot more pleasant than you,” she noted in a sickly-sweet voice.

“Samael is far better than me,” Arsen revealed, surprising her. Was it because he wasn’t baited easily or because he was being sincere? “But I’m questioning his attachment to such a vexing human woman.”

Emeline’s returning smile was poison. “If you’re questioning it so much, then why don’t you finish the job?” She expected him to ignore her and go back to his work. She didn’t expect him to turn into smoke again and appear in front of her. Her eyes widened as she staggered back, but this time anger coated her tone. “You *really* need to stop doing that.”

“Why?” She stilled as she felt his hand wrap around her neck. “Your reactions are more honest when you’re caught off guard,” he purred, fingers digging into the sides of her throat. “I could kill you right now. Right here. Squeeze your neck until the bones break and your windpipe is crushed. And the memory of how you sound when you choke on your own blood will lull me to sleep tonight.”

He squeezed harder, but it wasn’t enough to hurt. Yet. It was uncomfortable, and her body was beginning to respond to the pressure. Emeline could feel her heart race as adrenaline flooded her. She blamed the rush of boldness on the slight lack of oxygen to her brain.

“Do you want my honest reactions, or do you want an excuse to touch me?” The sound was a bit strained and not as confident as she wanted, courtesy of the arrogant bastard holding her throat hostage. “As nonchalant and unaffected as you pretend to be, I think not knowing my fear is aggravating for you.”

That cracked a grin out of him. “Humans always think they know everything.” Emeline’s pulse jumped, and, as if being able to feel it, his grin turned feral. “Do you think your friends knew how they were going to die? Did you know that when your friend knew he was going to drown, he said goodb—”

SLAP!

The sound of her palm smacking against his cheek echoed in the quiet room. Her hand stung from the impact, and she hoped it hurt him too.

Unfortunately, he didn’t even flinch. It was like smacking a statue. Tears burned in her eyes, and as much as she didn’t want to cry in front of this

devil, they welled and fell down her cheeks.

“You don’t get to speak about them,” she gritted out, placing her hands against his chest and pushing away from him. Part of her knew that if he didn’t want to move, he wouldn’t have. But Arsen allowed it, releasing her and taking a few measured steps back. She was absently aware of Samael flying toward them. “They didn’t deserve to die.”

“They were helping to smuggle in someone who was banished—”

“But they didn’t know.”

“Negligence does not pardon the guilty. Nor does it equate to innocence, *Emeline*.” For the first time since they’d met, Arsen was serious. There was no humor to the curl of his smile. Instead, his lips were pressed together in a tight line. His golden eyes were more amber now, flat and devoid of any emotion. “Do you think I didn’t know what Robaire was scheming? He chartered a private boat out of Spain. Far away from the Veil, so that he didn’t think I’d notice, but I did. All of you failed to question why you were heading so far up north, needing to be at a specific point by a specific time. A reasonable person would have asked the questions and realized something was wrong.”

And she had, hadn’t she? She’d felt off about the trip the entire time, but Emeline had gone with the flow. The same thing she’d been doing since… *it* happened. “Gabriel—”

“I’m not interested in hearing excuses,” Arsen said bluntly, extending his arm as Samael landed on his forearm.

The dragon wasn’t light, and Emeline couldn’t help the surprise that flittered through her when Arsen didn’t struggle. He acted like Samael was as light as a feather, using his other hand to scratch underneath the dragon’s muzzle. It let out a small trill, but it wasn’t as loud as his others had been. It was more muted.

“They were good people.”

“I couldn’t care less about their character.” He frowned at Samael as the dragon whipped his head toward him. Arsen’s eyes narrowed, his lip curling in distaste. Whatever Samael had said to him, he didn’t like it. A moment later, he was meeting Emeline’s gaze again. “But they made a mistake, and they paid for it. As will you.”

There was no point in arguing with him. Arsen’s mind was made up, and he clearly wasn’t capable of empathy. Of understanding. Gabriel was their boss, and most of the people who worked on that boat had bills to pay.

Luis lived paycheck to paycheck. Carolina was saving for her grandchild. Will and Harlem were planning on getting married. Ana was still paying off student loans before she made the trip to America. The only one who didn't have an excuse was Emeline.

"You're a prince, so you were probably raised to get everything you want." Emeline reached back, her hand coming into contact with the door handle. It was cool to the touch, and it grounded her when the anger was threatening to consume her. "But you won't get what you want from me."

"That's what you believe."

"That's what I *know*."

Arsen's eyebrow arched. "Fears don't stay hidden forever, little nightmare. Now that you're aware you do have at least one, the seed has been planted, and I can't wait for the self-reflection you're about to do. The moment you figure out what scares you, I will know."

Emeline glared at him, turning the handle. "Fuck you."

She spun on her heel, thankful when he didn't stop her from leaving. Samael made a noise as she passed Wyll, who had been waiting next to the door.

Before he could say anything, she snapped. "Don't you dare follow me. Stay by his side because if I spend five more seconds in his presence, I'm throwing another vase at him."

Samael crashed against her back, almost sending her to the ground, but Wyll grabbed her upper arm to steady her. His grip made her wince.

"I don't take threats against the prince lightly," Wyll said brusquely, his lilac eyes darkening.

"Then kill me," Emeline retorted, gesturing with her other hand vaguely behind her, "because that sadist won't."

She lifted her chin to look at him, all while Samael was making short little huffing noises. Emeline eyed the dragon as he tried to perch onto her shoulder, but he was too heavy. She let out a harsh breath, ripping her other arm out of Wyll's grasp before murmuring to Samael. "For the record, I'm not annoyed with you. I'm pissed at Jekyll and his guard, who looks like a thrift store version of Legolas." Emeline bit the inside of her cheek. "That was very funny, but you're not going to understand it."

As she expected, he didn't. Samael gazed up at her, confused, while she adjusted her grip on him so that he was situated in her arms rather than on

her shoulder. With the way the chemise bared her shoulders, his talons could have done some real damage to her skin.

“Wyll. Get in here,” Arsen called out, sounding farther away now.

He must have gone back to his desk. Wyll sent her one last scathing glance before walking through the doorway and slamming it shut behind him. Both Samael and Emeline shared a look.

“You think he’s mad?”

Samael rolled his eyes, letting out a huff of smoke. It was as if to say, ‘*You know precisely why he’s upset*.’

Walking down the corridor, Emeline grumbled as her vision strayed toward the windows again. “I think I have every right to be upset. He killed my friends, actively wants to kill me, and is only keeping me alive to figure out what my fear is. I’m like a crossword puzzle he wants to finish before throwing it into the trash.” She paused. “Do you think I overreacted?”

Samael appeared to mull that over while she stopped to stare out one of the windows. Outside, there was a stone path where soldiers patrolled in silver armor. Two walked languidly, chatting with each other. On the other side of the soldiers, there were thick trees that didn’t give her any more insight into the landscape. If not for the map in the bathing chamber, she wouldn’t have known that they were so close to the sea.

The window she stared out of was the farthest one from the prince’s door, and it had a sill large enough to sit on. Emeline sat on the edge, contemplating what to do next. There was no point trying to rush around and figure out how to escape. Arsen had already mentioned that she could leave as she pleased but didn’t guarantee her safety. He only cared about keeping his dragon happy, and that meant not running off to danger’s welcoming embrace. If she wanted to die that badly, then shouldn’t she open the doors and wait for it to happen?

Wait for the first soldier to question her, mouth off, and then get stabbed?

Reluctance stirred in her chest, followed by a small, fleeting sense of dread. Did she…did she *not* want to die? Why? Because this was a new place to explore? Because dragons existed? What did all of that matter when grief was a shadow that chased her everywhere she went?

Samael crawling out of her lap stole her out of the depressing inner monologue. He sat back on his haunches, the sunlight hitting the scales on

his back. The sunlight glimmered when he shook his head. Why was he—*oh*.

“You don’t think I’m overreacting?”

He shook his head again.

“Even when I threw the vase?”

Samael kept shaking his head.

“What about when I slapped him?”

That made Samael trill, but he continued shaking his head.

“Good,” she said wryly. The validation from a sentient dragon was a pleasant surprise. “Because if you told me that I should be nice to him, I might be the next one to call you a traitor.”

Samael leaned forward, nudging his head against her forearm. He looked at her for a long moment. Then there was a pointed look toward the black door.

“You want me to go back?” When the dragon nodded his head, Emeline’s mood dampened. “I changed my mind. You *are* a traitor.”

He growled, the noise rumbling through his chest. She ignored it, her hand flying to her wrist, where the bracelet was. She rubbed her fingers over the smooth beads, hoping to find the peace it normally gave her. She didn’t. Samael’s eyes roamed over the bracelet. His head tilted, and it reminded her of a dog when it was confused. Did he want to know more about the bracelet she wore?

“You’re wondering about my bracelet?” A nod from him confirmed her suspicions. “I bought it when I was stationed in Japan. I was visiting Shinjuku Gyoen during Hanami. Everyone was sitting on blankets, enjoying the view of the flowers, and I saw this old woman selling these bracelets. My Japanese is terrible—and by terrible, I mean I can only count to three to tell the cashier how many chicken sticks I want at 7-Eleven—but she grabbed my palm, placed the bracelet in my hand, and said ‘*Ashita wa ashita no kaze ga fuku.*’ Thankfully, there was someone nearby who was bilingual and told me it means ‘*The winds of tomorrow will blow tomorrow.*’”

She thought back to how those words had made her feel at the time. She’d been stressed about an upcoming underway, unable to enjoy what was likely a once-in-a-lifetime experience. When would she ever come back to Japan after the military? Even then, she hadn’t planned on reenlisting. That old woman telling her not to be worried about a bad

situation because time moves on was eye-opening. Since having the bracelet, Emeline reminded herself constantly that everything in life was temporary.

Time was fleeting.

Emotions were fleeting.

Pregnancies could be fleeting.

She hadn't known how common early miscarriages were until she'd spent all hours of the night researching other women's experiences. People didn't talk about it often because the subject was taboo and depressing. With no one discussing it publicly, it made Emeline feel alone. That was until she discovered online groups that opened doorways for her. Allowed her to acknowledge that miscarriages were an unfortunate commonality.

Cherry blossoms were a reminder to appreciate the good and bad moments because they were slivers of time she wouldn't get back. Those slivers cut her in different ways, changing her. The loss of her pregnancy was still tormenting her mind, heart, and soul—and no online support group could effectively battle her grief. There was always a way to blame herself. The past few months had truly slipped by her, and it'd felt like she'd barely opened her eyes.

Until she lost everyone.

Until she met golden eyes.

Samael pawed at her forearm. Emeline sent him an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I get lost in my head easily these days. It feels like a fog is there sometimes, and I…"

I don't know if I want to pull myself out.

The admission was both unsurprising and melancholic. She focused her gaze on the bright-blue sky and the trees dancing in the wind. When was the last time she'd even stopped to look up? Appreciated the weather for what it was. A nice day despite the circumstances surrounding her physical arrangements.

"I…think it's better you don't get attached to me at all, Samael." A sad smile spread across her lips, but she didn't look at the dragon, whose gaze was as heavy as Arsen's. "If things go *his* way, I won't be alive much longer."

Emeline had felt that reluctance earlier. If she was hesitating, that meant that there was a small—*minuscule*—part of her that wanted to live.

And when someone wanted to live, there was always something to fear.

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7

THE COMPLETELY MAD PRINCE

ARSEN



The harsh slamming of the door had Arsen lifting his head. He sensed it was Wyll before he even looked up, but he still feigned surprise, hoping that it would annoy the other fae to no end.

It worked.

“Wyll.” He leaned back in his chair, looking at his close friend with an innocence he’d never had. “I called you in to talk financial affairs, but

you’re not normally this angry. Is something wrong? Caesaria not smile at you today? Pity.”

The blond fae regarded Arsen with a look of open hostility. “What are you doing?”

He gestured to the parchments scattered about his desk. “Denying all the official requests for higher taxes in New Haven. They want to—”

“—I don’t care about that.”

“Rude. Don’t you have a second cousin there? How is he going to feel knowing he’s got no representation when his relative serves the royal family? It’ll be the betrayal of the century. Mark my words, ballads will be written.”

Wyll sent him a fierce look.

Resignation bled into Arsen’s voice. “You want to talk about *her*?”

“I want to know why you decided to bring her *back*.” His voice was hard as he stepped up to the front of the desk. “What was the point of it? And why in Abaddon’s name is Samael attached to her? I’ve known the damn dragon since he hatched and he still tries to bite me when I’m not looking.”

The corner of Arsen’s lip rose at that. “Have you ever thought that maybe you have an unlikeable personality?”

“Ladies of the court would disagree,” Wyll remarked dryly, crossing his arms. “The same ladies that are visiting from New Haven, trying to do everything they can to please you. Except for Sari, but I truly think…”

Wyll carried on, but Arsen’s attention drifted. He didn’t give a fuck about the ladies his father had chosen for him. He’d deal with the king’s raging disappointment later and add it to his list of recent achievements.

Rather than that, he thought of his other half. Samael’s presence was like a warmth he couldn’t live without. It filled his chest, and there was a part of his mind, where if he prodded, he could speak with the dragon. He did so now, wondering where they were.

“*We haven’t gone far.”* A hint of annoyance wavered through their bond.

Arsen’s interest piqued, and he latched onto that cord of irritation, feeling himself enter Samael’s mind further. Like this, he could see what Samael saw. A woman in front of him, sitting on the sill of a window. The sunlight revealed that her dark hair was more of a deep auburn. Different hues of red peeked through, some reminding him of all the blood he’d

spilled, and the others, a deep crimson color. Or even a fine wine. Arsen's eyes caught on the clouded expression marring her features.

"How's our little nightmare faring?" Arsen inquired, taking in the slight purse of her lips. They'd been soft under his thumb, and he felt that slow desire rear its unwelcome head. That feeling had surprised him before, but he ignored it now. *"Any closer to revealing something that could help us?"*

"*There is no 'us' when it comes to your schemes regarding her,"* Samael noted flatly, a slight growl echoing over the bond. *"I told you this one is different."*

Arsen wanted to roll his eyes. *"She's human, Sam. Whatever she's been through, her trauma is hiding her fear. I brought her back because you asked, but I never said I'd keep her alive forever."*

Wyll calling out his name had his eyes flying open. The guard's hands were flat on the desk in front of him like he'd brought them down in a fit of anger. Arsen grinned at him, realizing that he'd been out of it longer than he'd intended.

"Are you done lecturing me?"

The fae glared down at him. "You're not taking this seriously."

"Perhaps you're taking it *too* seriously."

"You have a human in Dragon's Den. There are ladies present who would love to gossip back to the officiates that you're harboring a pest. Guess who's going to be the first person they tell?"

Arsen pretended to think. "My brother?"

"No. They're going to go over the crown prince's head and tell the king," Wyll pressed on, becoming more anxious. Turmoil saturated his tone. Arsen could see the distress in the tightening of his expression and the way his hands curled into fists on top of the desk. "You're not indestructible, Arsen. There's no logical reason for you to keep her. Especially not when it'll incite your father's wrath…" His voice lowered then. "You know he's always looking for a reason to finally kill you."

Samael's vicious growl roared in his mind.

A slow, equally vicious smile grew on the prince's face. "I would love for him to try. Riven was always destined to take the crown early. Or so *he* says."

"For Lucifer's sake, Arsen. Will you be serious? Viera and I don't want anything bad to happen to you. That *human*" —he spat the word like it was its own hellish curse—"is not worth it. If you can't kill her, then I'll do it."

“Good luck getting through Samael,” Arsen mused, beginning to flip through the parchments with well-practiced ease. Saying no to his father’s puppets was the highlight of his day. Other than antagonizing a certain woman. “You think he doesn’t like you now; he’ll hate you if you touch her.”

“He will or *you* will?” Wyll challenged, a sliver of understanding creeping into demeanor. “She’s not ugly—”

Arsen sat up straighter, looking at him with surprise. “Do you find her attractive?”

“I find her to be a thorn in my side. Especially when she throws a vase at my closest friend’s head and then proceeds to make threats against royalty.”

Mirth stained Arsen’s voice, and the memories of her temper humored him. “Interesting how she reacts only when her human companions are brought up, no?”

Wyll stared at him, looking unsure now of what he was getting at. “Any loyal friend would.”

“I don’t think she’s doing it out of loyalty.”

“You find her to be a fraud? Isn’t that more reason to kill her?”

Arsen shook his head once, resting his chin against his left palm. He toyed with the quill in his right hand, twirling it through his fingers as he tried to understand a woman he knew next to nothing about. “It’s guilt. She clearly feels guilty that she survived when her friends didn’t. But there’s something… don’t you think she’s taking everything in with a surprising amount of ease? Coming to find out more realms than just human ones exist? Throwing a vase and slapping me—”

“She slapped you?!”

He ignored the outburst. “—are rather tame reactions when she knows I have no plans of letting her live.” His lips formed a grin at Samael’s annoyed huff, flaring in his mind. “I want to know everything. How she’s rationalizing her circumstances. What she’s thinking and how she feels.”

Wyll leaned back, his hands falling to his sides. He stared at Arsen like he’d suggested inviting his father and the queen out for a round of drinks. “You’re insane.”

“I prefer the term ‘open to possibilities.’”

“Completely mad.”

“Open-minded?”

“Arsen, she’s going to get you killed.”

The thought made his grin broaden. His canines scratched against his bottom lip. His little nightmare wasn’t the only one unafraid of death. Like her, whether she realized it or not, sometimes he found himself wishing for it as well. To push his father’s hand and drive the sword through his heart himself. A low whine and raw sorrow filtered in from Samael’s emotions. Arsen wouldn’t allow himself to be killed.

Because if he did, then Sam would die.

“Give me a few days to think about what to do with her.” Arsen phrased it as a suggestion, but there was finality in his tone, letting Wyll know he was *done* talking about the human. “Send in the page. He needs to make a delivery to New Haven, and this time, have one of *my* guards go with him. If he comes back with another bruised cheek, I’m going to set fire to my father’s town myself.”

And he wouldn’t need Sam to do it. The veins in his forearms glowed for a moment, visible even underneath the tunic he wore. The light that blazed hinted at his other ancestry, the lineage that the king was too afraid to end should a very powerful being walk the realm again.

.——— ———.

“Where are you?”

“It’s been five minutes since the last time you asked,” Samael drawled. The overgrown lizard knew he was annoying Arsen because it was the same manner in which Arsen spoke to annoy Wyll. *“If you’re so curious, you have my permission to join us.”*

The fae prince didn’t answer and refused to fall for Sam’s baited trap. No, he didn’t care that Samael and the human had found themselves outside underneath a secluded tree. It was a spot that Arsen often found himself in when he wanted to be alone and needed a break from the duties required of him.

Outside the Manor, across from where they’d been sitting earlier, there was a small break in the tree line that would reveal a dirt path. Centuries of walking it had created a natural walkway. In the small woods, there was a wisteria tree he’d planted a very long time ago. It was large enough now that it made a good resting spot, and the purple flowers that draped down felt like a safe haven. A secluded space for him to decompress.

This realm was created as a sanctuary against humans, but Arsen found himself thinking—as he always did—that evil wasn't exclusive to a species.

Did he feel guilty about killing innocent people? Not in the slightest.

It was his duty. He'd long accepted becoming a necessary evil in order to protect Samael, along with the few who'd fled Haven for Dragon's Den, hoping for a better life. But he hadn't expected so many fae to trickle in over the years. The officiates wanted to tax them higher than if they'd lived in Haven, and Arsen wouldn't allow it. Punishing people for not conforming was something a human would do. They weren't humans. They had to be better.

Arsen hadn't realized he'd stopped by the same window Emeline was at earlier until movement in the corner of his eye stole his attention. His nonexistent heart plummeted in his stomach.

"Little help, old friend?"

Sam's voice sounded lofty as it travelled through the bond. *"I'm afraid I'm quite occupied at the moment. Emeline is very busy as my pillow, and the weather is nice. You'll have to fight this battle without me, oh powerful Second Prince of the Realm."*

"Little use you are. Stupid lizard."

Three ladies of the court walked toward him. He was willing to bet at least two of them had travelled in circles, waiting for an opportune time to run across him by 'accident.' Lucetta was the self-proposed leader. There was mischief in her dark eyes, but she wouldn't meet his gaze, only looking up as far as his cheekbones. She tucked a stray wisp of light-brown hair behind her ear, likely hoping that she came off as demure and delicate. Her blue velvet dress was intricate, with silver embellishments around the neckline and a tight bodice that teased a sizable bust. Her full skirt draped into several layers of woven fabric to emphasize a slim waist.

The one to Lucetta's left was new. He hadn't seen her around, but the greed in her eyes was familiar to him. She'd never met him in person, and that nervousness could be why her eyes wouldn't lift above his chest. With hair the color of champagne, Arsen was sure this was the Duchess Maerissa's youngest daughter. Her gown was similar to Lucetta's, but in red and decorated with rubies. She was the spitting image of her mother. Her elder sister had failed in tempting him and was promised to another suitor earlier this year, but it seemed that Maerissa hadn't given up.

Neither had Duke Osywn, seeing as Lucetta was present.

Walking on Lucetta’s right was the only one Arsen could tolerate. The only one out of the three who would look him in the eye. Caesaria was dressed in a simple green gown with a gold trim that decorated her neckline, the side lacings of her bodice, and the long bell sleeves almost reaching the ground. Her deep bronze skin made the turquoise-blue hues of her eyes stand out under her long lashes. Her midnight curls reached her shoulders, and she pretended to push a stray one out of her face. Discreetly, Caesaria was making fun of Lucetta by mimicking her, causing Arsen to smirk.

Unfortunately, the other two ladies took it as him welcoming their company.

“Your Highness.” Lucetta pinched the sides of her dress, pointing her slippered right foot behind her left, and gave a curtsy her father would be proud of. A waft of something too sweet hit his nose, and he had to resist the urge to sneeze. She dipped low, glancing up in a way that might have swooned lesser fae. “I was hoping that we’d cross paths today. Will you be in attendance for dinner?”

“If I have the time,” Arsen began noncommittally, “I will endeavor to join you.” He glanced over at Caesaria, giving her a cordial nod as she, too, greeted him with a proper curtsy. “Lady Grimwood.” Then his attention shifted to the last lady. “And you are?”

She bowed lower than the other two. “Lady Sabine Larkspur, Your Highness. Daughter of the Duchess Maerissa,” she introduced herself, straightening out. If Lucetta smelled too sweet, then Sabine smelled like pure sugar. He hated overly sweet scents. “This is my first time visiting Morningstar Manor. It’s stunning. I know it pales in comparison to Seaspire Castle. We had a brief stop in New Haven, and I must say, it’s much busier than I thought it would be.”

Arsen’s eyebrow rose, unimpressed. “Were you expecting a drab village with a small number of fae? New Haven has reached a population of nearly 15,000.”

“Lady Larkspur doesn’t leave her homeland often. She’s still young,” Lucetta butted in, her voice deceptively kind. “Under your supervision, I don’t find the surrounding areas thriving as a surprise. You have always been fair and just, my prince.”

Caesaria looked on in disbelief, leading Arsen to the notion that she wasn’t being truthful. A faint feeling of revulsion pulsed through him.

Hearing ‘my prince’ out of Lucetta’s mouth sounded all sorts of wrong in spite of the proper formality. He was, for all intents and purposes, her prince. One of them.

“Human traveling in the direction of the Manor. Do you want me to stop her?” Samael piped up unexpectedly. Concern flooded the bond between them so desperately that Arsen rubbed at his chest.

“Are you alright, Your Highness?” Lucetta frowned, her eyes narrowing at the action. “If you’re unwell, I could call for a servant. A healer?”

Where in Lucifer’s name was Wyll? He glanced around, unsure of where the fae had gone. Did he run off to sulk to Viera about their earlier conversation?

“Keep her out of sight for now. It’s inevitable that the ladies of the court will catch wind of her here, but I’m not certain now is the best—”

Samael interrupted him. *“Too late. She’s being escorted.”*

What was he talking about? Arsen ignored Lucetta and the other ladies, heading past them toward the entrance. The two metal doors opened to reveal Emeline being flanked by two of his father’s soldiers. Her nose wrinkled in dismay. She was holding the back of her right hand.

“Samael, what happened?”

The dragon appeared behind her, flying directly to him. Arsen stretched out his arm, while footsteps sounded behind him. There was a startled gasp from Sabine while Lucetta and Caesaria stayed silent.

“They thought she was an assassin and tried to detain her, but she punched the one to the left.” Samael replayed his memories, allowing Arsen to witness what had occurred.

He saw through Samael’s eyes as Emeline was chatting about feeling hungry when one of them had grabbed her without warning. It wasn’t a simple grab. The soldier saw that she was human and grabbed her arm with enough strength that Arsen knew there would be bruises. There was suspicion in the soldier’s eyes, but that’s not all he saw.

Lust.

The soldier had seen Emeline and figured because she was human, Arsen would sanctify her death. And then the soldier planned to… A muscle in Arsen’s jaw jumped. His canines ached to tear through flesh.

A surprising rage branched through Arsen’s body with lightning speed. Samael reacted to it, his body dropping to the ground as he grew. It wasn’t his full form, as he was still too weak from last night. Otherwise, they all

would have been crushed against the Manor's walls. Right now, he was the size of a full-grown stallion.

"Your Highness," both the soldiers greeted, dropping to one knee as they forced the human down. He saw her wincing from the brutality of it, but he ignored the stirring anger in his chest. It must have been Samael's feelings bleeding over the bond. "We found this trespasser coming out of the tree line on the left side of the Manor. Would you like for us to dispose of the vermin immediately or imprison her for questioning?"

Emeline's eyes widened as Arsen stalked forward. He realized that she wasn't even concerned about his presence or the soldiers. Her eyes were solely on Samael, who was no doubt baring his teeth at the soldiers his father had stationed at the Manor.

"You there. Rise," Arsen demanded, his voice low.

The soldier who'd grabbed Emeline rose on command. He was the same height as Arsen and appeared to be well decorated, judging by the insignia carved into his armor. The moment his eyes met Arsen's, the soldier froze. Arsen entered his mind with ease, drawing out his fear with little to no coaxing.

All at once, Arsen smiled wide. Flying. The fae was pitifully afraid of heights and falling. He saw Emeline's gaze land on him, and he knew both his canines were on full display. The prince reached forward, removing the fae's sword from its sheath. "Take him for a ride, Samael. It's time for lunch."

Samael let out a savage roar, his claws hitting the marble as he flew past Arsen. The soldier screamed as Samael's jaws snapped around his shoulder, piercing through armor the way a hot knife would slice through butter. Effortlessly. The sound of metal snapping and breaking had the other soldier flinching.

The dragon flew out of the entrance with the soldier screaming in agonizing pain. The double doors were large enough for him to get through, thankfully. However, there was blood on the marble now. Arsen raised the sword, leaning it on his shoulder with the blade pointed behind him.

"You. Clean up the mess." He sent the order toward the remaining soldier.

After seeing what had happened to his partner, the fae didn't hesitate to scramble toward a broom closet. Emeline stood up, no longer being forced

to kneel. Her hazel eyes met his without any hesitation. “Why did Samael attack him?”

Was she upset about it? He studied her, but he didn’t know her mannerisms well enough to tell. Her heart was surprisingly steady, as if someone hadn’t been carried off by a venomous dragon moments ago.

“He was hungry. Same reason why you came back, is it not?” Arsen kept his voice nonchalant, glancing at the wooden clock sitting in the far-right corner of the foyer.

The smaller hand was aiming toward one. The little nightmare in front of him hadn’t woken up until seven, and he wasn’t sure if Viera fed her. She must be hungry and had held out as long as she could.

“Your Highness,” Caesaria spoke for the first time, her voice soft as she came to his side. “Who is this?”

At the same time, Lucetta came forward. Her hostility was palpable. “Filthy human. What are you doing here at the prince’s residence?”

Emeline looked affronted. “Are you always this bitchy? I bet you’re fun at parties.”

Caesaria pressed her lips together tightly, trying to smother a laugh before it could come out. Arsen wanted to laugh, but pissing off Lucetta—and by default, her father—was too much of a headache.

“Lady Grimwood.” He gestured to the woman in front of him, hoping he sounded apathetic rather than entertained. “Will you please escort the human to the kitchens?”

Sabine inhaled sharply. “We’re going to *eat* her? I've heard of that practice, but I didn’t realize nobility still exercised it, Your Highness. Do you often eat humans?”

Emeline scrunched her nose in disgust, but he answered before she could. “We won’t be eating this one. She’s a bit too feral.” And then, because it was an afterthought, “Most fae no longer eat humans, but depending on their ancestry, there are some who consume their blood.”

“Screw you,” Emeline snarked, her eyes narrowing. “I bet I would taste delicious.”

Arsen’s lips curved wickedly as he leaned down slightly. “Are you offering?”

He watched as a charming flush spread across the tops of her cheeks. Now her heart was beating faster. *Interesting*.

Caesaria snorted inwardly, subtly delighted by everything that had happened. “You can trust me, Your Highness.” She took hold of Emeline’s elbow, her fingers curling around the inner crook of her arm. “If you have the time later, I think we have much catching up to do. Bring Sir Wyll as well. It’s been too long.”

Arsen nodded his head once, his eyes never leaving the two as they headed up the stairs. With his abilities, he could hear the conversation between them.

“You know how to make an entrance, don’t you?” Caesaria teased, her voice low.

Emeline huffed indignantly. “I was minding my own business until those two pricks detained me. I forgot the grabby one was wearing armor and punched him.”

“How did you forget he was wearing armor?!”

“I don’t know! I panicked, and now my hand fucking hurts,” Emeline whined, her voice pathetically sullen. “I might need to steal some ice and wrap my hand.”

Caesaria snickered. “Well, let’s not dawdle, then. We’re leaving Arsen with two vipers, and I’d rather not deal with either of them right now.”

“Fuck him. He can get bit for all I care.”

“You know, he’s probably listening.”

“He can’t—” At the top of the stairs, Emeline turned to meet his gaze. He allowed the corner of his lip to lift in acknowledgment. He winked. Her heart began racing again. She didn’t raise her voice, nor did she look away from him as she continued, “If Samael comes back with so much as a scratch because you decided to feed him a soldier for lunch, I’m going to throw another vase at your head. And this time, I won’t miss.”

Arsen couldn’t tell her that he was looking forward to it.

Not at his dragon getting hurt, but rather seeing that anger burn in her eyes. It was the only time she felt present to him. When she was caught off guard or upset with him, that’s when she looked like she was alive.

Caesaria stared at her, dumbfounded. “You threw a vase? At the prince?”

“He deserved it,” Emeline muttered before they walked down the corridor he knew would lead to the dining chambers and then down the stairwell to the kitchens.

Arsen became aware of the other two ladies staring at him. However, when he looked over, their gazes hastily lowered. It wasn't because of his title that they were averse to meeting his eyes. After all, Caesaria and Wyll did, along with Viera. Even Emeline. The two ladies of the court refused to meet his gaze because they were terrified of him.

Most people were.

And they had good reason to be.

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8

A LUNCH DATE FOR TWO

EMELINE



“Who were they?”

Lady Grimwood raised an eyebrow as they made their way down a wooden stairwell. “Who are you referring to? The other ladies of the court?”

The stairwell wasn’t as extravagant as the main one leading down to the foyer, but it was still breathtaking. This one was made from a dark, thick

wood, and there was a network of carving in the rails. The torchlight made it too dim to fully appreciate the craftsmanship, but she could at least make out a pattern of waves on the steps.

“Sure. Whoever the bitchy brunette was and the pale-blonde girl. They looked like they wanted to kill me,” Emeline grumbled, lifting her chin as the smell of roasted meat and herby vegetables hit her nose. Her stomach rumbled. It was an ache that had been growing since Samael had led her to the wisteria tree. “God, I could eat my weight in chicken paella right now.”

The woman beside her grinned at that. “The bitchy brunette would be Lady Lucetta Bloodstone, and the other is Lady Sabine Larkspur. Lucetta is the daughter of Duke Oswyn Bloodstone, and Sabine is the daughter of the Duchess Maerissa Larkspur.”

Arsen had said that he was a descendant of Leviathan, giving him an affinity for water. If all fae were descended from demons, then they had to be related to someone powerful. “Who are their demon daddies?”

“Demon daddies?” Lady Grimwood repeated with a laugh echoing down the stairwell. At the bottom, there was an open stone doorway, and a familiar head popped through it. “Wyll? Is that you?”

“Sari. I thought I—What are *you* doing down here?” Wyll narrowed his eyes at Emeline as they came to the bottom of the stairs. He lifted his head, looking behind them. “Where’s Samael? Is he with Arsen?”

Lady Grimwood, or *‘Sari,’* answered for her. “You missed a rather grand spectacle. Arsen fed Samael one of his father’s soldiers for lunch and then made the other one clean it up. All in front of the other ladies.”

Emeline realized Wyll was holding a mug filled to the brim with an opaque liquid. The same one that Arsen had been drinking in his office. Now that she wasn’t distracted, she could pay more attention to it. She knew exactly what it was, and now it made sense why the basket Madam Viera had been carrying smelled familiar. She hadn’t been able to see it with the cloth napkin placed over the top, but what Wyll held was the result of it.

“Is that *coffee?* Fae drink coffee*?*”

Should that be surprising? What was she expecting?

Wyll stared at the mug with his nose wrinkling. “I don’t, but His Highness is addicted to the damn thing. He’s always making trips for coffee beans and—” He stopped himself, muttering, “Why am I even telling you this?” Louder, he said, “I’m going to go rescue the damsel in distress and

surprise him with coffee from the latest beans he's procured. He's exceptionally annoying without a mug in his hands."

"I keep telling you to put him on rations," Lady Grimwood mused. Her blue eyes were bright with humor as if knowing what the other fae's reply would be.

Wyll was complaining as he started up the steps. "You try telling Arsen what to do. He doesn't fucking listen to anyone."

That wasn't surprising. He acted like a spoiled prince who got everything he wanted. Daddy and Mommy must be so proud of their little killer. Emeline stepped forward through the stone doorway into the kitchens. They were… enormous, to say the least. Multiple rooms trapped underneath one giant space.

The high-vaulted ceilings were made of stone with wooden support beams. There was no natural light. It was all either torchlight or wooden chandeliers lit by ceramic fire pots. The wood fire ovens provided ample light, with thick chimneys that carried all the smoke away. There were about seven fae running around who wore white tunics and black aprons. Another fae, this one older with thick red hair and an even thicker beard, was barking orders.

"Cliff, if you destroy those carrots again, I'm going to throw you off a cliff."

"Understood, Mr. Draven!"

Lady Grimwood's grin only grew at the sight of the fae. "Terrorizing the scullions again, are you?"

At her voice, Mr. Draven turned toward them quickly. His tunic was green, along with his breeches, but the apron he wore was black like the others. "Lady Grimwood! It's been too long. How have you been faring at Seaspire?"

Wasn't that Arsen's last name? Seeing her confusion, Lady Grimwood hastily explained, "He means Arsen's family's castle, where the rest of the royals stay occasionally. It's where the two dukes and duchess are lodged as they try to—once again—convince Arsen that he needs to wed one of their daughters to strengthen political ties."

Mr. Draven chuckled until he paid more attention to Emeline. "Lucifer's balls." His eyes widened, remembering he was in the company of a lady. "My apologies, Lady Grimwood. But *you*"—he gave pause, gesturing to her with a wave of his hand—"you're human."

Emeline smiled awkwardly. Her nerves were getting to her, causing her hands to feel clammy. “What gave it away? My round ears? The teeth?”

The cook looked at her in wonder. There didn’t seem to be anything negative about it—not like the other two ladies. He looked at her the way Lady Grimwood had when she was standing behind Arsen. Curious.

“Are you hungry? I’m assuming that’s why you’re both down here.”

This time, her smile was more sincere and bashful. “Please. I can make myself something—”

“*Bah.* Nonsense. I’ve always been curious about human dishes.” Mr. Draven gestured to a table far off to the right that was empty. “You both take a seat. Lady Grimwood, do you have any preferences?”

She appeared to think about it, tapping her chin. “Those tomato and cheese skewers you used to feed us with the green herb in between. I’ll take some of those, please.”

The cook turned to her. “And you…”

“Emeline.” She beamed, thankful that it seemed not everyone hated her simply because she was human. “And I’ll eat anything. I’m starving.”

“A woman with an appetite.” Mr. Draven grinned, rolling up his sleeves. “I’ve got an idea, and then you can tell me about your favorite foods back in the human realm. Maybe it’ll give me ideas for new dishes here.”

Emeline agreed easily before walking over to the table with Lady Grimwood. “So, Lady—”

“Please, call me Sari. My first name’s Caesaria, but Wyll came up with the nickname, which stuck. Oh, but don’t use Sari in front of the other ladies. It’s considered rude, and while I wouldn’t mind it, the others could see it as a loss of power. As it stands right now, Lucetta and I are the top candidates to marry the prince.”

Emeline wrinkled her nose in disgust, taking a seat at the table while the other lady sat across from her. “You’re going to marry Arsen? My condolences.”

Sari stared back at her in surprise. “You call him by his first name?”

“I’m not his subject.” Emeline shrugged one shoulder, offering one of the ‘*scullions’* a smile as he dropped off two goblets. The drink was a deep-red color, with berries floating at the top. “And I hate him. If it wasn’t for Samael, I’d be grabbing one of those big butcher knives and chasing after him.”

That surprise turned into bemusement. “I can’t tell if you’re brave or stupid.”

“Stupid.” Emeline reached for the goblet with a small smirk toying on her lips. “Definitely stupid.” She brought the drink up to her nose, sniffing it. It smelled delicious. Fruity, with hints of spice. “What is this?”

Sari looked uncertain, causing her to pause. “That’s fae wine. I’m not sure how it’ll affect a human. It might be best not to have it on an empty stomach. Or at all, to be honest.” She beckoned one of the kitchen servants, asking for water.

Emeline accepted the water, but her eyes lingered on the wine. With the berries, it reminded her of *tinto de verano*. A red wine mixed with a lemon-flavored carbonated beverage. She enjoyed during the summer months in Spain. If the fae wine wasn’t slightly bitter, maybe it tasted like *umeshu*, a plum wine from Japan.

“I know what you’re thinking, and I’m not facing Arsen’s bad temper because his human decided to get drunk on demonic wine not meant for human consumption,” Sari spoke up again, interrupting her thoughts.

Emeline grinned at that, resorting back to their earlier conversation. “So? Demon daddies? Arsen said his was Leviathan, so who’s yours?”

“Astaroth, a Great Duke of Hell.” Pride filled Sari’s voice as she spoke of the demon. Emeline had never considered that the fae would be proud of their demonic lineage, but it had to be important. “If Leviathan can control the seas, Astaroth excels at making deals in exchange for souls. But the trait he passed down to me is biological manipulation. Or biokinesis.”

Okay so… bio- as in biology. Kinesis as in telekinesis? Moving objects with the mind? Emeline tried to work it out, but then accepted her fate as a grade-A moron. “What does that mean? The biokinesis part.”

Sari smiled at her, as if she found her very amusing. “It means I can do *this*.”

She reached out, grabbing hold of her hand that still throbbed from punching the armored soldier. Almost immediately, a cooling sensation spread through her hand, completely getting rid of the pain.

Before her, the fae’s hair turned from a lovely shade of midnight to a deep-auburn color. Her skin paled, turning olive. Blue eyes morphed into hazel ones. Emeline watched as a copy of herself sat before her, but the only thing she realized hadn’t changed was the sliver of a red marking visible on the swell of Sari’s breast. Emeline could make out a circle and a

pentagram. She hadn't noticed it before—mostly because she'd never thought to stare at Lady Grimwood's breasts—but she pointed to them now.

"First: *wow*. Okay. You can heal people and look like them." Emeline saw herself laugh, but it was Sari's voice, not hers. So she wasn't a fully fae version of Mystique. Hoping it wasn't rude, she pointed to her own left breast. "You have a tattoo? I thought I saw that Arsen had one but couldn't really tell with his clothes."

"All fae have a unique mark that can't be replicated," Sari began to explain, only pausing to take a sip of her wine. She set it down, morphing back into her own features. "Well, only the really powerful ones. We can't choose where it's placed. We're born with it. The high-ranking fae… Has the prince explained anything to you?"

"No, there hasn't been much talking. Only a lot of insults and threats."

"And vase throwing."

"And vase throwing," Emeline agreed.

Sari smirked. "Then I'll do my best to explain. A fae's power is directly influenced by their ancestral demon. The more powerful the demon, the more powerful the fae. What's also important to take into account is how diluted that demonic blood is. Leviathan had one child. The First King. He was the reason why humans struggled to discover new lands in the very beginning, before recorded history. He ate them, too, which didn't help the whole fae-human relations. Anyway, getting off topic. The First King had three sons and one daughter. Levius, Eris, Llyris, and Keselia. Eris is Riven and Arsen's father."

Before Emeline could ask the question, Sari answered it. "Riven is the crown prince. He lives at Seaspire Castle and travels a lot with their father. Arsen and Riven are fourth-generation royalty. Leviathan's line is the only one which hasn't been diluted over time. As Astaroth's descendant, I'm part of the eleventh generation."

This led to another question that had been toying in her mind. "How old is everyone here?"

The question left her mouth as Mr. Draven placed a large tray of what looked like tomato and mozzarella skewers. If the fae had once mingled with humans, then it was no surprise that their food would be similar. Or was it Arsen's doing? He evidently already enjoyed bringing coffee back to the fae realm. What else was he bringing? Recipes? And how long was he staying in the human realm each time?

“Now, that’s quite the question.” Mr. Draven let out a full belly laugh. “Don’t let Madam Viera hear you. She still tries to tell me that she’s not a day over 600.”

Emeline choked on her water. Sari laughed.

“You never question her. She’s always right,” the fae lightly reprimanded the cook before thanking him for the food. Emeline thanked him as well, grabbing a skewer before looking at Sari like a child hungry for information. One of the servants called for Mr. Draven, forcing him to excuse himself before shouting something about carrots again. “If I remember correctly, Arsen was born right around the time this realm was created. That would make him… 530? 533? Somewhere around there.”

“And you?”

“Only 352. Wyll’s my age, but he met Arsen first. I think…” Sari tilted her head, placing her forefinger against her cheek. She tapped slowly. Once. Twice. Then said, “The years blend, but the prince came to Morningstar Manor one hundred years after his birth. That would be 1592. Then Wyll and I were born in the late 17th century. And if I'm correct, Wyll was hired as a kitchen servant by Draven in 1701 or ’02. I met Arsen here at the Manor in the mid-eighteenth century.”

Emeline did the math as best she could, but she struggled with numbers in her head. They blurred together most times and never made any sense until she could write them down on paper. “He’s been guarding the Veil for how long, then? You all still look so young.”

“That’s ancestral demon blood for you. Despite the prince being nearly 200 years older than us, we all appear to be in our mid-to-late twenties. Arsen’s blood stops him from aging faster than Wyll and I. Though in human years, we might as well be immortal. But I assure you, death will come naturally to us. Some of us, anyway.”

Sari mumbled the latter part, but Emeline had heard her. “What do you mean, *‘some of us’*?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.” She took a large bite of tomato and cheese, looking more like a chipmunk than a lady of the court.

If Sari was closing the door on that subject, then maybe Emeline should learn about the other two ladies. “What about—I think you said—Lucetta and Sabrina. Who are they related to?”

“Lucetta and Sabine.” It took Sari a minute to swallow the food after, which she washed down with fae wine. Her tongue slid across her bottom

lip, clearly delighted by the taste. It only fueled Emeline's curiosity. Maybe she could sneak a jug back to her room. "Lucetta and Duke Bloodstone are descended from Abaddon. A sower of mischief. Their powers are more chaotic. If their bloodline was stronger, they'd be what a human might consider…lucky. They'd be able to alter probability to their favor. Now, depending on how a situation might turn out, they'll have an inkling about the winning side. It was Eris who summoned Abaddon first to see if the fae would win against the humans in an all-out war, and if we were going to lose…"

"He wanted Abaddon to give him favor," Emeline finished, shaking her head. "What a cheater."

Sari grimaced, meeting her eyes, but then quickly averted her gaze in a surprisingly nervous gesture. "You don't know the half of it."

Hmm… To push or not to push? Considering that she was drinking more wine and glancing away again, Emeline was almost certain that the subject wasn't open to discussion. For now. Back to safe ground.

"And Sabine? The fae that gasped when she saw me. She looks younger than us, but now I know that could mean she's hundreds of years old."

"Sabine, the Duchess Maerissa's youngest daughter, is descended from Mammon. I can't remember what generation she is, but I know that she's either the same generation as me or closer. Mammon's line has always been excessively greedy, and they know that diluting their blood weakens their power."

Emeline frowned at the revelation. It sounded like Sabine could be more conniving and more powerful than Lucetta. She hadn't expected that. Lucetta had been more vocal. Sometimes, the villains aren't the most obvious ones.

Unless that someone was Arsen Seaspire, who murdered a whole fucking boat of *mostly* innocent people. Annoyance flashed across her face, and she knew it was visible because Sari raised an eyebrow.

The fae had told her plenty. It would only be fair for her to tell her why she was here and why Arsen hadn't killed her. "I was thinking about Arsen."

Sari leaned forward, her hands tucked underneath her chin. A mischievous smile formed on her lips. "Oh, do tell."

"Not like that," Emeline bit out, honesty lining her words. Genuine anger and bitterness filled her voice as she set down the skewer she'd

finished. “I was stationed—well, employed actually—on a private charter boat. We were sailing from Spain up to—what I thought—was Iceland. It turns out that the person who hired us was some banished fae. By the time things went sour, Arsen had already found us. He killed my friends and left me alive.”

Sari’s expression turned skeptic. “He wouldn’t have kept you alive unless he had a reason. Arsen is meticulous. No one lives.”

“He couldn’t figure out my fear,” Emeline said it easily, as if she were discussing the weather or how potatoes were an excellent side dish for any meal. No-brainers. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Sari, on the other hand, was looking at her like she’d stripped naked and was about to start doing an Irish jig on the table. A traumatizing visual. Maybe that could be a fear she could show Arsen.

Actually.

No.

Arsen and her nakedness in any capacity was off-limits. She still wanted to chase him around with a butcher knife.

“No one has ever been able to hide their fears from Arsen,” she said matter-of-factly. “Are you *sure* you’re human?”

“There’s quite literally a video of me coming out of my human mother’s vagina and my human dad refusing to hold me until they’d cleaned the blood off me. I can trace my family back to my great-grandparents. There is absolutely no way I’m not human. My life isn’t some cliché where a girl ends up in a realm she didn’t know existed and finds out about a family she never knew she had. I am—*very happily*—human. There is no contest about that. I’m exceedingly ordinary.”

The ‘*very happily’* was up for discussion, considering she spent about ninety-five percent of her time in a depressed state of mind, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. She was living. She could walk. She could talk. She was healthy, even after the loss of her pregnancy. What did she really have to complain about? Guilt prodded at the edges of her conscience, threatening to take her back into a dark place. She took a deep breath, hoping to evade the incoming fog. At least right now, she didn’t want to be in the dark. She was having a platonic lunch date with someone who might become a friend.

When was the last time she’d gone out with a friend? Actively participated in steady conversation?

Emeline asked another question to take her mind away from her depressing inner monologue. “You haven’t said what Sabine’s powers are.”

“Compulsion. She’s a temptress just like her sister and her mother.”

“That sounds dangerous.” Emeline felt her stomach turn over with anxiety. She glanced over at the kitchen staff. Draven was pointing at a cauldron while holding a ladle. It looked like someone had overboiled the carrots. Cliff, maybe? She turned her attention back to the lady. “How does that work? She tells me to go stab the prince? She wouldn’t have to compel me to do that.”

Sari’s features hardened, and in that exact moment, she knew she’d fucked up. “While I find your company entertaining, I have been friends with Arsen for a long time, Emeline. He has a reason for everything he does. I understand that him killing your friends—”

“Innocent people. And don’t forget to add that he did it in the cruelest ways possible. It wasn’t quick—he made them suffer.” She wasn’t going to let anyone rationalize the crew’s murders. So what, he was royalty with responsibilities? Duties?

Fuck. That.

It was the twenty-first century. Fuck the patriarchy. Arsen wasn’t getting away with murder because it was against the rules for humans to enter the Veil. He made the rules.

“I see your point,” Sari said shortly.

Surprise spread rapidly through Emeline. Was Sari not going to sit there and argue that Arsen had done the right thing?

Taking a longer sip of her wine, Sari continued after she’d swallowed, “He does terrible things. Sometimes. *Often*. But he is still my friend, and I would appreciate it if you didn’t threaten his life in front of me.”

“That’s fair,” Emeline replied tersely. “I won’t say it out loud, but keep in mind that I’m thinking of murdering him at a near constant rate.”

“If I thought you could, then I’d actually be worried,” she replied dryly.

Easy conversation continued after that while Emeline waited for lunch. It turned out that Sari didn’t care about becoming Arsen’s wife—she was happy to be at the Manor to see him as a friend. The courtship was a formality, and it bought Arsen time as he pretended to decide who to pick for his wife. Emeline wasn’t exactly surprised to know that he had no intention of marrying any of the daughters of the dukes or duchess.

What *did* surprise her was that Sari was fond of Wyll, but their classes were too different for there to be any chance of an arrangement. Wyll was lesser fae, and lesser fae had blood that was diluted so much that their ancestral markings were gone.

“That’s archaic.” Emeline scrunched up her nose, irritated for Sari that she couldn’t be with the person she cared for. Then again, she was sitting in a giant medieval kitchen, lit by torchlight and candles. It was archaic here. Which led to another question. “Do you ever get to visit the human realm? We’re more advanced than things are here. Like cell phones. Devices that are used to talk to people across the world. If I were home right now, I’d probably be doomscrolling and wondering why my food delivery was running late.”

Sari’s brows furrowed, likely confused by the foreign term. She shook her head. “Fae aren’t allowed to cross the Veil. Our numbers have grown since the realms split, but humans still grossly outnumber us. The king closed our borders, and no one’s allowed to come and go as they please.”

“Except for Arsen.”

“Precisely.” She nodded. Her fingers danced over the rim of the now empty goblet as a faraway look fell on her face. “Even then, it’s dangerous for Arsen to do so. Risking his father’s wrath is like a hobby for him at this point.”

“All kids like to push boundaries.” Sari said nothing, leading her to prod further. “You don’t agree?”

“I’m not saying this because I necessarily want to, but I’m worried you might say something insensitive. It’s not a secret among the nobility either. Even a few of the guards have heard the rumors, and everyone at New Haven talks about it openly.”

Emeline leaned forward slightly, intrigued by her warning tone. “Okay… What is it?”

“King Eris and Arsen are not on good terms. They haven’t been since before he was born.”

That didn’t make sense. “He didn’t like his son before he was born? How is that possible?”

Sari met her eyes, the intensity almost too much to look at. “Arsen isn’t Queen Liora’s son. I can’t tell you much, but there had to be a sacrifice for the fae realm to be created. Liora didn’t want to give up her only son—Riven—and so she allowed Eris to have a child with a concubine. A lesser

fae that had no markings. I told you before, Astaroth excels at making deals in exchange for souls. Arsen was supposed to be that sacrifice."

"They were going to kill Arsen for the creation of the realm?"

"To save the fae from being killed viciously by humans for power, yes."

Emeline sat back in her seat, stunned and horrified by the news. She still didn't like the prince, but being conceived only to be sacrificed was a shitty situation for anyone.

"But Arsen's still alive. Did Astaroth not take the deal?"

Sari shook her head as Mr. Draven came walking over with two bowls of stew. There was a toasted piece of sourdough on top of each, and she could feel her stomach rumbling with hunger. She was starving, and yet hearing Arsen's story had left her feeling a bit sick.

"No," the fae said quickly, aware that they were about to have company. "Someone much worse came. But that's all I can tell you."

Emeline smiled at Mr. Draven, looking and playing the part of a woman excited for food. She was grateful, truly. However, Sari's words kept playing over in her mind. *Someone much worse came.*

Who was worse than Astaroth?

Then it clicked.

There was one being in Hell that everyone feared. Humans especially. He was depicted in movies, spoken about in legends, and the reason why people repented in church every week.

Lucifer.

Eris had accidentally summoned Lucifer instead of Astaroth for the creation of the fae realm. And he'd gotten it, hadn't he?

But at what cost?

Emeline didn't know the Devil personally. Other than that he could strike fear into the hearts of anyone, she didn't think he was someone who enjoyed charity work.

Her spoon hovered over the stew as something she'd previously thought bothered her. *He could strike fear into the hearts of anyone.* Arsen wielded fear—everyone's fears—effortlessly.

Did… Did Arsen have more than one…

No.

Emeline dipped her spoon into the stew, forcing a smile. She pretended to be happy about the delicious food in front of her, while her mind was teeming with improbabilities.

Leviathan was Arsen’s ancestral demon. His mother was a lesser fae. There was no chance of Lucifer’s blood being inside him, too, right?

Living at Morningstar Manor had to be an awfully big coincidence.

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9

UNRAVELING THE PAST

EMELINE



The stew was delicious. Emeline had been too afraid to ask what kind of meat was in it lest Mr. Draven say it was unicorn or some other creature she thought only existed in legends. Thankfully, Sari assured her it wasn’t unicorn. Not that they didn’t exist, just that it wasn’t a unicorn she had eaten.

Guess it was time to add seeing one to her Haven bucket list.

After trying fae wine, of course.

Deciding that they needed to walk off a hearty meal, they decided to go on a walk. The sunlight was warm on her bare shoulders, and she smiled as the floral scent grew stronger the closer they got to a garden she'd spotted earlier.

"You know, it was the end of October in the human realm," Emeline began, kneeling in her dress to look down at a bed of flowers. The garden was entirely made up of lilies, reminding her of glass and starlight. The same ones she'd seen behind Arsen earlier in his office… which meant he might be close, if he wasn't busy dealing with the other ladies of the court. "But it feels like late summer here. Are the seasons off?"

Sari shrugged her shoulders, eyes roaming over the immaculate flower beds. "That would be a question for Arsen. I never cared to learn much about the human realm."

"Why not?"

"Never been interested." Sari's honesty carried in the soft wind, a sweet, floral scent lingering behind. Emeline glanced back toward the lilies, reaching her fingers out to graze against the petals. They looked like crystals and felt smooth, but they weren't hard. It was an odd paradox, but now she understood why they hadn't shattered earlier, when she'd thrown a full vase of them at Arsen.

When Emeline said nothing, Sari decided to give an explanation. "Many fae will feel that way, but there are some who are born naturally curious. Mr. Draven, for example, can't help but wonder what sort of dishes are in the human realm. His father moved here when Arsen was tasked with guarding the Veil."

Oh? "His father is a cook too?"

"Was."

"What happened to him?"

Seeing that this was going to be a longer conversation, Sari sat down beside her. She was effortlessly graceful in her movements, making Emeline a bit jealous. That kind of elegance had to be from years of proper training. Was it ingrained in her that she might become a princess one day? The green fabric fell around her, and she looked as pretty as one of the flowers surrounding them.

"He died protecting his wife," Sari said simply, but the avoidance of her gaze told Emeline there might be more to it. "I believe Draven was young

when he lost his parents—barely past juvenescence—and if the rumors are true, then he didn't know a single thing about cooking. Arsen was kind enough to keep him around so he didn't lose his family *and* his home all in one day."

'Arsen' and *'kind'* went together about as well as *'oil'* and *'water'* in her mind.

"Speaking of different worlds, so to speak…" Intrigue nestled in Sari's voice, reflecting in her expression as her brows drew together. "How are you adjusting to Dragon's Den? I'm sure it's not every day you wake up in a new place like this."

Emeline arched an eyebrow. "You mean, it's not every day that my friends are tragically murdered by—"

"—an exceedingly handsome prince who's chivalrous enough to keep you alive?"

Her attention snapped to the nearby window to see that at some point, Arsen had opened it. His eyes met hers briefly, the amusement glimmering back becoming more familiar to her. The same breeze dancing around her now made its way toward Arsen. She could see the soft movement of his hair, barely brushing against his dark lashes.

Though his stare didn't stay on her for too long, sliding to Sari with brief hesitation. "Your father sent a letter. He's headed back to Grimwood."

Anxiety had Sari quiet as she digested his words. Her expression pinched as she curled her left fist, holding it over her heart. "What caused this?"

"Missed home, where all the fun is," Arsen drawled in a vague, cryptic tone. His gaze found its way back over to Emeline. It brightened, and she knew that he was about to say some stupid, antagonistic bullshit. "Enjoying the flowers while you still can?"

Instead of giving him the reaction he wanted, she ignored him. Her attention landed on Sari and stayed there. "Is it odd for your father to go back home?"

"No, but…" The fae's lips pressed together. Worry had a firm grip on Sari. Emeline was going to drop it, but then the lady clarified, "…with Duke Bloodstone and the Duchess Larkspur still at Seaspire, going home early will be seen as weakness during these marriage trials. I'm concerned that—"

“There’s nothing to be concerned about,” Arsen interrupted abruptly, but his voice wasn’t hard. He was leaning against the frame of the window now, arms crossed. There was a deceptive calm to his mannerisms, but Emeline could see that his fingers were digging into his biceps slightly. “Unless it’s about Wyll because I’m certain he’s getting gray hairs.”

The corners of Sari’s lips curved. “Are you surprised? He has to deal with you on a near-constant basis.”

“You won’t win my hand with that—*Ow*.” Emeline had to cover her mouth when a book smacked the back of Arsen’s head. It had to be Wyll. He was the only one whom she had seen treat the prince more like a friend than a subject. Emeline clearly didn’t do a good enough job of smothering her laugh because Arsen sent her a flat stare before turning around. “What happened to *‘I don’t take threats against the prince lightly’*? I’ll call for the soldiers right now and have you hanged at the gallows before nightfall, you treacherous bastard.”

Emeline smirked, raising her voice over the gentle breeze. “Wyll’s going to have to take a number. I believe I’m at the top of the list of who wants to kill you.”

Arsen turned, glancing sideways at her. The corner of his mouth quirked up, but his voice was mocking, laced with sardonicism. “You’re not even on the first page, little nightmare.”

He shut the window then. The reflection from the sun stopped her from being able to see into his office. Emeline was about to turn back to the flowers when Sari’s gaze on her grew too heavy to ignore.

“What?”

“…You’re an odd human.”

Not entirely untrue. But a reason or two would be nice.

“Care to explain?”

“The prince of an enemy realm wants to kill you.”

Emeline’s eyebrows rose. “Really? Why didn’t someone tell me?”

“And you casually make threats against his life. *To* him.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’d make a great sports commentator?”

Did the fae even have sports? They had to, but hopefully it didn’t involve using a human skull as a soccer ball. The joke fell on deaf ears as Sari’s eyes narrowed. She was evidently trying to understand Emeline, and she wasn’t making it easy. The silence allowed for self-reflection to bleed

through the cracks in her walls. Was she thrilled about her situation? No. She'd sharpened her ability to adapt and become resourceful through the years. Extended deployments and volatile environments helped with that. Emeline had even prepared her mind for the day when war came knocking, and she was still in active service. Every deployment meant the threat of her and the rest of the crew being in harm's way. She'd expected that dreary possibility in the military, not in private chartering.

In a sort of fucked-up way, Emeline had prepared herself to die unexpectedly several times over. It was in the way she made sure her finances and Will were up-to-date before sailing off. Ensuring that her parents knew how much she loved them despite the toxic self-isolation habits she'd been pulling the last year. God, speaking of her parents—if they didn't hear from her in the next couple of weeks, they were bound to start calling the *policía*.

"Before I worked for a private charter, I was in the military," Emeline began in a steady voice, fingers dancing over the petals again. She needed something to busy her hands because of the anxiety steadily building in her chest. "I learned to shut down my emotions. Or use an excessive amount of dark humor to cope. Both went hand in hand most times… but I don't think I've ever been afraid of dying. Even before…" *Before the loss*… "I don't think I've ever felt present even when I was growing up. I joined sports. Different clubs in school. My parents bought me an instrument to play, but I gave that up after a year. I joined anything to give me a sense of belonging, but nothing ever did."

That last line made her stomach turn over, and she stared down at the flowers, refusing to look at Sari for the moment. If she did, then she wouldn't have the courage to continue.

"Wasn't the most popular girl in school, but I wasn't picked on. Smart enough to get by but not intelligent enough to soar high above my classmates. I was always just… *aware* that I didn't belong. Friend groups too—I bounced between many of them. None of them stayed in contact after school, and the same thing happened with the people I met in the military." Her lips rounded in a smile that was neither happy nor sad. It just *was*. "All this to say, dying doesn't scare me. It never has. Arsen doesn't scare me. Nothing about this place scares me. And I think it's because I've never really enjoyed living in the first place."

That last part was a lie, but Sari didn’t know her well enough to tell. There had been a time in her bathroom, staring at two lines when Emeline *had* felt alive. She’d looked back at the mirror, taking in her sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks. An electrifying excitement had her feeling grounded in that moment.

Strings of possibilities had flown all around her. How it would feel to go to the first ultrasound. To tell Luis that they were expecting. To find out what the sex of the baby was. To be able to count ten fingers and ten toes on the anatomy scan. There had been so much to look forward to, and in less than a few weeks, all those moments had unraveled.

They’d slipped between her fingertips, falling to the depths of her despair, knowing no bounds. That’s when the fog that had always been there finally decided to swallow her. And for months, she’d allowed it to become a solid fixture around her, until Arsen forced her out of it.

As she sat in the gardens, her depression whispered at the edges of her mind to accept the situation for what it was and wait for a slow death. It wanted her to give in again and allow life to pass her by.

“Hm…” Sari said after the quiet had drawn on too long. “You’re morbidly depressing, aren’t you? You’re almost as bad as him.”

Him? “Who?”

“The wicked devil in there.” Sari’s gaze flickered back toward the closed window, eyes narrowing for a moment. Emeline knew she meant Arsen, but was he looking at them? Emeline tried to see what Sari was looking at. She couldn’t tell with the glare hitting the glass. “I think he’d understand you better than I ever could about not belonging.”

“Because of the relationship with his father?”

“Among other things.” Clearly, Arsen wasn’t the only one capable of being cryptic. Sari plucked a blade of grass from the ground, twirling it between her fingers. “You strike me as the stubborn type, so I don’t see you giving him anything he wants. Do you intend to live at the Manor forever?”

“Is there a choice? If I wanted to leave and try to make a living elsewhere, what would happen? Wouldn’t the fae try to kill me?”

Sari tilted her head, mulling over her question. “If you crossed into Haven, undoubtedly yes. If you managed to survive crossing through the mountains, there are strongholds there armed to the brim with guards. If any of the fae were to catch you, they’d kill you. If you made it past them to the Woods of Wisteria, I’m willing to bet you’d probably get eaten by the

creatures lurking there. If you made it as far as Seaspire Castle to the east, someone would try to drown you in Leviathan Lagoon." Emeline's nose scrunched up, coming to the realization of how dangerous this realm was for her. "Honestly, do what you can to stay away from Haven entirely."

"Note to self. Haven is terrible."

The fae rolled her eyes. "It's actually quite lovely." She paused briefly, eyes sharpening. "You could try to make a living in one of the port towns. Stay away from New Haven since King Eris houses most of the political affiliates there. If Lucetta's reaction told you anything, she's very against humans, like the rest of King Eris's supporters."

"New Haven… That's where you stayed, right?"

"Unfortunately, but it's what was expected of me until Arsen was ready to house all the ladies. I wish we'd have been able to come straight here, but Dragon's Den has its own dangers." Sari's tone turned a bit somber, making Emeline wonder if the woman was a bird in a gilded cage. Being the daughter of a duke must come with its own strife if she couldn't be with the person she cared about. "Scaleridge is my favorite. It's not the busy town that New Haven is. Everyone is more personable and… open-minded."

Open-minded? Why did that feel oddly specific?

Before Emeline could call her out, Sari spoke up again. "You said you were in the military. You were a soldier?"

"No." Emeline shook her head, leaning back on her palms as she stretched out her legs. The flats Madam Viera had given her were beige in color. Now they were stained with grass marks. *Oops.* "Do I look like someone who enjoys hiking for miles while carrying a heavy backpack?"

"From what you've told me, you don't enjoy anything in life."

Staring at her, Emeline blinked slowly. Then she let out a quiet groan, closing her eyes. "Fuck, I *am* morbidly depressing." That earned her a laugh from the fae, and she smiled at the sound of it. At least she was funny. That had to count for something, right? "I was in the Navy. A sailor."

"What did you do in the Navy?"

"Worked with electronics. Nothing crazy." Emeline shrugged.

Sari's confused expression told her she didn't know what electronics were, but at least she didn't pry further. Emeline had no clue how to explain technology to people who relied on magic. "Did you like working with the human military?"

“It was a steady paycheck. The days were long, but the years went by fast. I got to visit countries I never would have otherwise.” She smiled at the memories, especially with her thoughts lingering on Japan. “When I was stationed in Japan, my favorite thing used to be getting on the train and getting off at random stops. I’d walk around with my camera, taking photos and exploring. Always managed to find myself in a café or two. I *love* sweets.”

Sari’s eyebrows furrowed. “Train?”

Fuck. How was she supposed to describe one? “You have carriages, no?” When Sari nodded, Emeline explained further. “Think of a long carriage that can transport people far distances. There are no horses. These carriages work without them.”

“Sounds almost like magic,” Sari noted, her eyes bright with curiosity. “You continued sailing after your time with the military. Do you enjoy it that much?”

“I don’t hate it, but it’s not something I wanted to do forever.” Her throat tightened at the idea of someone who did want to do it forever. “My friend, Luis. He was on the *Serenity* with me. The boat. He loved sailing, despite having a crippling fear of sharks.”

Sari grimaced, clearly unsure of what to say or how to navigate the conversation. Emeline could have changed the subject, but she didn’t want to. Luis died. Her friends died. Just because a subject was uncomfortable didn’t mean it needed to be avoided. It was the same way she felt about early loss.

The doctor had given his condolences and ended with *“At least it happened early, and you didn’t have a late-term miscarriage. You could have suffered from uterine scarring if you’d carried longer. Your body knew something was wrong about the pregnancy that you didn’t, so you should be happy about miscarrying when you did.”*

No, she hadn’t known what the sex of the baby was.

And in some ways, that was worse.

Emeline didn’t have the opportunity to shop for boy or girl clothes. She was robbed of so many moments that it would take a lifetime to explore each and every single one of them. At this point, she’d spent a longer time grieving the loss of her pregnancy than celebrating its existence. It was tragic.

“It won’t mean much, but I’m sorry that your friends died. Losing people that you care about is hard, regardless of whether you’re human or fae,” Sari murmured, offering her a kind, yet sad, smile.

“Thank you. I’m sorry too.”

“I’m not.”

At the sound of his voice, Emeline dug her fingers into the ground, upending a clump of dirt and grass. *That’s it.* She threw it at the window where Arsen was. Her aim was a bit off, but she was satisfied to see a few pieces of dirt bounce off his shoulder. The prince arched an eyebrow, glancing down at his tunic. He brushed a stray piece of grass off his shoulder.

Was it childish? Sure.

Did she feel better? Only a little.

“Not very nice. I’m inclined to think you don’t like me.”

Emeline’s voice was flat. “I hate you.”

“The feeling’s mutual, little nightmare. But this time, I didn’t open the window to antagonize you.” Arsen smirked, but his eyes flew upward moments before a dark shadow passed overhead. “He’s back.”

That same shadow was growing smaller, and by the time she looked up, Samael was back to his normal size—or at least what she considered normal for him. Afternoon light bounced off his black-and-gold scales, turning them more amber than topaz. Samael landed on the ground next to her, and she tried not to think about how she’d seen a larger version of him carry off a soldier like it was nothing.

“I didn’t know you could get so big,” Emeline warily reflected. “What else can you do?”

Samael’s gaze was on her until it wasn’t, and it swung toward Arsen expectantly.

The dark-haired bastard was already looking at the dragon. “No.” At Samael’s indignant *huff,* Arsen placed a hand on the window. “Burn me alive, then. Are you coming in or staying out there?”

Whatever Samael had said caused the fae to glare at him before slamming the window shut—hard enough for the glass to rattle. Sari snorted inwardly, reaching out to pet Samael, but the dragon bared his teeth at her.

“You are *so* finicky,” she grumbled, watching in blatant dismay as the dragon walked over to Emeline’s lap and promptly lay down like he

belonged there. “That’s not fair. I’ve known you for hundreds of years, and you adopt the human at first sight?”

A whisper of smoke drifted from his nose as the dragon closed his eyes. He was evidently unbothered by Sari’s words and Arsen’s annoyance. Emeline had no clue what she’d done to earn the dragon’s loyalty, but she wasn’t going to complain.

Who didn’t want a dragon to be friendly with them?

“Earlier, Arsen had said that your father missed home, where all the fun is. What did he mean by that?” Rather than think about how Samael was sleeping off eating a soldier, Emeline wanted to know more about Haven and the realm she’d found herself subjected to.

“Grimwood Estate is on the other side of the mountains that serve as the boundary between Dragon’s Den and Haven. There are three strongholds there that each house is responsible for overseeing, but my father routinely keeps them all in check. If there’s *‘fun’* happening, as Arsen said, then that means either more people are trying to leave Haven for Dragon’s Den, or there are fae looking to cause trouble for the sake of it.”

Sari’s explanation only opened the door for more questions. “Why would people want to leave Haven for Dragon’s Den? If you say that Haven’s quite lovely, what would cause people to leave?”

“Politics.” The fae’s response was simple but explained everything and nothing at the same time. “I’d rather not bore you with them. Look, Samael’s already snoring.”

Samael was snoring because his belly was full.

While the response felt like another deflection, Emeline wondered what was hiding in between the cryptic responses from Arsen and Sari. The reason behind Mr. Draven’s parents’ murders and why Scaleridge was considered *open-minded.*

“Can I ask you a question?” Emeline inquired, her hand pausing above Samael’s head as she stopped mid-pet.

“Haven’t you been asking questions this entire time?” came the light tease.

Fair. She had been. But this question felt more unsettling than the rest. “How long do you think I have before Arsen gets bored of this game? I mean, he’s bound to kill me rather than allow me to stay, right? Should I be gone before dinner? I think I’d feel very weird about eating, sleeping, and bathing in a place where I’m not welcome.”

Samael made a low growl in the back of his throat. Smoke left his nostrils. Emeline wrinkled her nose as the acrid scent hit her, making her sneeze. Sari waved her hand from right to left, clearing the air with little more than a grin on her face.

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that. As long as Samael wants you here, you’ll be a welcome guest.”

That was fine and all, but it didn’t make sense. “Why does he want me here? Why does Samael get to decide if I stay or not?”

“This part of the realm is called Dragon’s Den, not Arsen’s Den. Or Devil’s Den. Though to be fair, the harbor itself is called Devil’s Harbor.” Whatever Sari was rambling about was not helping to ease Emeline’s nerves. Nor had the fae answered her first question. “Samael is the only one Arsen listens to. Him and his father, of course. There’s no need to wonder *why*; it simply is what it is. Arsen respects Samael’s wishes like they were his own.”

Emeline couldn’t accept that answer.

It is what it is was something she’d told herself daily as a way to coexist with the loss. It was an answer that always satiated her temporarily.

This place had secrets. It was full of them.

And if Emeline was going to be staying here, then she was going to make it her mission to reveal each one of them. Even if it meant having to deal with the wicked devil himself.

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10

A DEVIL WITH THE DEVIL

EMELINE



The sun had already begun its descent when Sari had to leave. They'd spent the afternoon chatting mindlessly and learning more about each other, which was… *nice*. Emeline was good at pretenses. Smiling at the right moment, contributing to the conversation by adding a witty comment or two—enough to make people think she was engaged. There

weren’t any pretenses with Sari. It’d been a long time since Emeline felt like she’d made a friend.

Which was insane, right?

Sari wasn’t human, and there wasn’t anything she could do to help Emeline get back to the human realm. At least she didn’t think so, considering the fae had no interest in anything human.

“I have to go get dressed for dinner, but you shouldn’t stay out here alone. Dragon’s Den isn’t safe for anyone, especially in the dark,” Sari pointed out, gesturing for her to rise. “Especially a human.”

Emeline stood, letting out a small noise of relief once Samael was off her legs. She eyed the sleepy dragon, sending him a wry look. “You need to find yourself a new pillow or else I’m going to lose all feeling in my legs.”

Samael rolled his eyes, evidently uninterested in that idea. He flapped his wings to follow them to the entrance of the Manor.

Emeline shifted her attention back to the fae. “Why do you need to get dressed for dinner? You are dressed.”

“Arsen will be joining us, which means it’ll be a formal event,” Sari answered in a dry tone. She waved her hand toward the large doors, and they creaked open on their own. Servants were milling about, dressed in sea-green tunics and black breeches. Silver embellished their backs, and she could make out what looked like some sort of snake or sea creature wrapped around a sword. As they stepped over the doorway, she continued, “Would you believe me if I said that Lucetta and Sabine likely started picking out their gowns hours ago? I’m sure they’re getting ready to bathe in the finest oils from their region and are barking orders at the poor fae unlucky enough to be their attendants for the duration of their stay.”

Emeline frowned at her words, feeling a cord of mischief hit her. The fact that Sari was aware of the mistreatment of the servants and accepted it didn’t sit right with her. Just because they weren’t royalty or as powerful as the other fae didn’t mean that they weren’t deserving of respect or courtesy. She bit her bottom lip, mulling over ideas. If the ladies planned on bathing in the finest oils while being rude about it, then it was only right that they had something locally sourced to relax in.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

Emeline grinned impishly. “No reason.”

Sari didn’t believe her. The sideways glance she earned told her as much. “Right… Well, I don’t suppose I’ll see you at dinner, so if you don’t

have anything to do tomorrow, perhaps we could meet again?”

“I’ll check my schedule and let you know if I can squeeze in a social hour or two,” Emeline mused before bidding her goodbye.

Sari’s laugh echoed down the hall, and Emeline made a note that the fae went to the left at the top of the stairs, whereas she knew that her room was to the right. All the ladies of the court would have rooms close to each other, no? It made sense that they’d stay close together. Lucetta and Sabine’s rooms had to be to the left as well.

The sound of wings flapping lazily beside her reminded Emeline that she wasn’t alone. She narrowed her eyes at the dragon, watching as his head tilted in question. “You won’t snitch on me to that devil, will you?”

Samael kept staring at her, head still tilted. Apparently he wanted to know more before he made his decision. She could respect the clever creature.

“Follow me. I’ll tell you on the way.”

.—— ——.

Samael trilled. She stared, blatantly amused as she witnessed the dragon equivalent of chortled amusement.

“You’re ridiculous. It *will* work,” Emeline pointed out, heading down the intricate stairs. “All it’ll take is a few good berries that won’t even be missed.”

By the sidelong glance, Samael obviously wasn’t convinced, but he was going along with her shenanigans anyway. The wood creaked beneath her footsteps. There wasn’t any point in trying to be discreet about it. All she needed to do was obtain the ingredients she needed without anyone suspecting her.

Scullions raced past her as she entered the kitchens. Whatever Mr. Draven had concocted for today’s official dinner, it smelled incredible. She tried looking for the source, but there were so many people working at different stations on dishes that she hoped to try later. Especially the cake, a fae was icing with a long, serrated spatula.

The icing itself was a decadent shade of purple, and her lips formed a grin when she spotted the ingredient she was looking for. Blackberries. Someone calling out her name stopped her from heading to the pastry station.

“Emeline! Back so soon? Madam Viera requested your dinner be sent to your room.” Mr. Draven took a break from the cauldron he was stirring, handing off the wooden spoon to a shorter male. He brushed his hands against the apron he wore, leaving white hand streaks behind. “Or maybe you have more dishes to tell me about… Particularly the skewered chicken you mentioned during lunch. The ones you’d eat every time you went drinking.”

There was very little Emeline would live for, but one of them was *yakitori*. Finding stands in Japan that sold all types of skewered meats was what hopes and dreams were made of.

“Looking for a snack,” Emeline remarked, giving him a smile she hoped looked blasé. “Do you have any berries?”

He glanced over at the fae icing the cake. “I think our blackberries are spoken for.” He must have noticed Emeline’s shoulders sag because a wrinkle formed between his brows. He looked sullen for a moment until a lightbulb must have appeared in his mind. “But I do have mulberries. They were a bit too tart for the cake. Will those do?”

Emeline’s grin was nothing short of victorious. “That’s perfect. Thank you.”

Mr. Draven sent her a beaming grin that *almost* made her feel guilty. After all, these mulberries weren’t for her, nor was she planning on eating them. While the cook was gone, Emeline focused on trying to figure out what delicious smell wafted through the room. It didn’t take her long to find it was what Mr. Draven had been stirring in the large black cauldron.

The fae who’d taken over the job looked at her with a timid smile. His chocolate-brown hair was cropped, while his eyes reminded her of forest moss. “Do you like soup? Chef made this one from boiled potatoes. We’ll top it with sliced pork and green onions.”

The human realm equivalent of loaded baked potato soup. Emeline could have sat there and eaten her fill of it if it weren’t for the self-imposed mission she was busy with.

“It smells and looks delicious,” Emeline said cheerfully. “Really, I think my stomach’s rumbling simply from the smell of it.”

Elated, the fae offered her a shy grin. He looked around her age, if not a couple of years younger, but that meant nothing when she knew how long their lifespans could be. “I could—”

“Leon, keep stirring. If you stop, the soup is going to curdle at the bottom.”

“Yes, Chef!”

Mr. Draven handed her a woven basket of mulberries. The berries themselves varied in length and color. Some were completely dark, whereas others had hints of red and purple. What they all had in common was the fact that the juice from the berries could stain anything. Fabric, skin—mulberries were even more pigmented than blackberries.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?”

Emeline quickly shook her head, feeling excitement creep into her chest. “This is perfect, thank you!”

Mr. Draven looked caught off guard by her enthusiasm but smiled. She heard him muttering, comparing humans to the birds who loved to pick from the berry bushes outside. If she was the example for all of humanity, then the fae cook was going to be sorely disappointed.

Exiting the kitchen, she hurried up the stairs with Samael, almost colliding with someone in the process. She caught herself on the railing, but the dragon slamming into her back made her lose her balance. She catapulted forward.

Fresh rain enveloped her, tempting her to bury her face in the warm chest her cheek was pressed against. Only, understanding hit her like a freight train. Emeline pushed away, almost falling backward had it not been for the hand wrapping around her upper arm. Fingers dug into her. The thin fabric around her arms did nothing to hide the heat of his hand against her.

“Why are you in such a rush, little nightmare?”

The prince stood in front of her at the top of the stairs. He wasn’t wearing the plain tunic from earlier. Instead, he looked regal. The brocade upholstery fabric he wore was much thicker than a normal tunic. This looked similar to a vest with a stand-up collar. A line of silver buttons arranged themselves down the front. Decorated in floral greens and grays, she suspected that even the string woven into the vest was made with fine strands of real silver. His sleeves were white and cinched around his wrists. He wore black breeches, tucked into boots so shiny, the glare was almost blinding.

“I’m not in a rush. Now, get out of my way,” Emeline retorted, glancing down at the basket to make sure the berries hadn’t been completely crushed.

Some were bright with juice squished out of them, but the majority of them were fine. *Good*. She needed as many as she could if she was going to pull this off.

“Samael.” The dragon holding onto her shoulder now crashed against Arsen’s chest. The prince arched an eyebrow, not impressed. “Oh, now you’d like my attention, wouldn’t you?”

Or he was making a great distraction.

“Right. Well, I’ll let you two catch up.” Emeline went to brush past him, but Arsen, being the antagonistic asshole he was, sidestepped her. “Move.”

He nodded his head toward the mulberries. “Why the berries?”

“I was hungry.”

“Was?”

“Seeing you so closely made me nauseous.”

Arsen smirked at that, taking the basket from her hands. “Then you won’t be needing these, will you?”

Her eyes widened. Indignation burned hot. “Give that back.”

“Or what? What exactly are you going to do, little nightmare?” Her scowl deepened as he leaned down, tilting his head. His face was close enough for her to see every fleck of gold and amber in his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was lower. “Samael’s trying to hide his thoughts from me. He’d only do that if he was up to something he didn’t want me finding out about.”

Emeline wrinkled her nose in dismay. She reached for the basket, but he held it up. The bastard towered over her, and there wasn’t a chance of her grabbing it unless she wanted to jump and look like an idiot.

“What Samael does is none of my business. Maybe he likes me more than you.” As much as she shouldn’t, she enjoyed trying to push his buttons. Maybe it was because Arsen was a professional in making people fall apart that she wanted to see him unravel a bit. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like her goading was working because he chuckled. The low rasp sent a wave of unwanted heat pooling in her lower abdomen.

“Maybe he likes to play with his food.”

Samael made a quiet, indignant huff.

“That sounds like something a sadist would do. And Samael isn’t you,” Emeline bit out, glaring up at him. Her eyes flashed to the basket he was still holding up and thought about kneeing him in the balls. He’d have to hunch over, right? “Will you give me the damn berries back?”

A feral glint shone in his eyes. “Say ‘please.’”

“Fuck you.”

“If you ask me nicely, I’ll consider it.”

Heat blotched her cheeks. “You’re insufferable.”

“You’re adorable when you pretend you aren’t attracted to me.”

That pissed her off. Whether it was from the truth of it or the fact that he could tell, she wasn’t sure, but whatever it was—she was inconceivably upset. “I hate you.”

“I hate you too,” he purred, but then shook the basket in his hand slightly. “Now, tell me what these are for. Mulberries?”

Emeline crossed her arms, needing the barrier between them. “I’m hungry. Does someone really need a reason to have a basket of berries if not to eat them?”

“Samael,” Arsen began, straightening out his back to look at the dragon flying in place beside them. “While I appreciate the odd recital of Haven’s history, it’s not making you any less complicit in whatever you two are scheming.”

Whatever the dragon said next had his arm lowering. Emeline saw her opportunity and took it. Her elbow dug into Arsen’s side, but it was buffered by the thick fabric of his vest. She felt an arm wrap around the front of her waist the moment she went to run past him. With little warning, she was hauled against his front. The heat of him at her back was scalding.

“I don’t think so,” Arsen drawled, his voice faintly husky. “What are you planning?”

“*Nothing*. You’re delusional. I’m taking these back to my room and eating them.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Emeline struggled against his arm. “That sounds like a personal problem.”

“Samael,” Arsen called out, his back hitting the wall while she tried to squirm out of his grasp. His warning tone made alarm bells go off in her head. “Tell me. I’m not asking this time.”

She looked at the dragon when he released a growl. The sound echoed throughout the stairwell, but Arsen didn’t appear bothered in the slightest. The silence that followed—*dragging on*—told her everything.

Samael was absolutely snitching on her.

Emeline had planned to sneak into the ladies' rooms and find out where their bottles of perfume or expensive oils were. She only planned to mess with Lucetta and Sabine, deeming Sari a decent person. Mostly. Emeline was going to swap out the liquid with the berry juice and then laugh when their skin was painted in various shades of red.

Arsen's arm loosened around her, falling to his side while she stepped forward, determined to put space between them in the small stairwell. When she looked up at him, his eyebrows were both raised as if to ask, *'Really'?*

"What?" Her tone was a bit defensive, but she didn't like the look he was giving her.

"That never would have worked."

"You don't know that."

He pointed to his ears. "Do you really think you could have snuck around one of the ladies' chambers when we have far better hearing than you?"

"I can be quiet."

"If you could, then you wouldn't get on my nerves as often," Arsen noted with a crooked smirk. He handed the basket to Samael, who bit down on the handle. "Go give this back to Draven."

Samael flicked his gaze toward her but didn't hesitate to fly back down the stairs. Anger made her blood run hot. She looked back at Arsen, directing her frustration at him. "You can't mind your own business *ever*—can you?"

"Did you forget?" Arsen asked in a coy tone, his eyes taking in her frustrated demeanor. "You *are* my business, little nightmare." His forefinger tilted her chin up. "But I will admit, I didn't think you had it in you to scheme against two ladies. What brought this on?"

Emeline was about to say that it was none of his business again, but she already knew what his answer would be. Instead, she gritted her teeth. "Sari made a comment that the fae who are attending to Lucetta and Sabine are in a very unfortunate predicament. If they're not being treated well, I was going to get revenge for the servants."

"You think they're being mistreated?" Arsen's eyebrows furrowed, his hand releasing her chin. "Why would you care what's happening to someone that you don't know? Never mind the fact that they're fae."

"Everyone deserves to be treated with respect," Emeline responded in a flat tone, her eyes glaring daggers into him. "Plus, Lucetta called me a

filthy human, and I'd rather give her a reason to hate me more than simply because I'm not from here."

"Lucetta's not an enemy you want to make."

"No, Arsen." She pointed at him, her finger digging into his stupid fancy vest. "*I'm* not an enemy you want to make."

She didn't give him the opportunity to say anything else as she started up the stairs again. She could feel his gaze burning into her back and resisted the urge to turn around and flip him off.

"Emeline."

The use of her name had her pausing on the last step. She felt the tension leave her shoulders as she turned to look at him. With the darker ambience and Arsen's golden eyes, he looked like a nightmare staring up at her from the stairs. Elegant cheekbones, crescent shadows under his eyes. He looked like someone to be afraid of.

Arsen's lip curled at the obedience, and she regretted stopping as soon as his smile appeared. "I'll send someone to your chambers. You need to get dressed."

"I *am* dressed."

"Not for dinner." He waved up and down, eyeing her attire as if the dress explained itself without him needing to. This was one of the nicest things she'd ever worn—he could fuck right off. "You'll be joining us tonight."

"No, I won't."

"You will."

"I refuse."

Arsen cocked an eyebrow. "I wasn't asking."

"And I'm telling you. I'm. Not. Going."

"You don't have a say in the matter."

They locked eyes. Their wills were two roaring fires, refusing to be put out or overwhelmed by the other. She didn't want to join any of them for dinner because it would be an asinine experience. Lucetta would complain about her presence, Emeline would fire back, and then Sari would likely try to find a middle ground. Arsen would watch because it was all one big fucking game to him. She didn't know Sabine well enough to know how she would react, but Emeline was sure that the fae had her own tricks up her sleeve. No, she wasn't going to play his game or by his rules.

Unless…

“Let’s say I do have dinner with everyone. I want something in return.”

“You act as if I should reward you for following an order,” Arsen observed in a wry tone. As he was speaking, Samael was flying back up the stairs, landing his front claws on Arsen’s shoulder. He perched there like an overgrown parrot. His golden eyes, much like the prince’s, peered between the two. He made a noise in the back of his throat that was halfway between a growl and a hissy snort, to which Arsen answered aloud. “Samael’s curious. What do you want?”

Right. Emeline was almost positive that Samael wasn’t the only curious one. “I want to go to Scaleridge tomorrow.” She’d meant to end it there, but remembered she would need money to get around. “And I’ll need coins or —*whatever* the currency here is—so that I can buy food.”

Arsen scrutinized her. Wariness wove itself into his voice. “What are you up to now? Why would you want to go to that small town?”

Because it wasn’t New Haven and it wasn’t this goddamn manor.

“Is it odd that I want to explore?”

“It’s odd that you want to go to Scaleridge. Did Caesaria talk to you about this? She won’t be able to go with you. Her duties are here for the time being.”

What *‘duties’* were there besides spending time with her in the garden? Getting ready obnoxiously early for dinner? Emeline shrugged it off. “I can go alone.”

The stairs creaked as someone began walking up the steps.

“You can’t go to town alone. You’ll get yourself hurt.”

Her expression pinched, and she felt defiance adding an edge to her voice. “Why would you care? You want me dead, anyway.”

“Because if anyone’s going to hurt you, it’s going to be me,” he said plainly while Leon’s presence made itself known.

The fae servant bowed his head respectfully to the prince before walking past with a small tray littered with tiny hors d'oeuvres. She spotted slices of fresh sourdough. Each slice had different toppings. On one, she saw a thin sliver of meat with a single blueberry, a dollop of whipped cheese, and an herb she didn’t recognize. Another had a pecan, a blueberry, and half a raspberry with a drizzle of honey. That same whipped cheese had a sprig of mint nestled on top. The others varied from green vegetables to slices of—what she assumed—were salmon, but they all had a variation of whipped cheese beside it.

Emeline reached out, placing a hand on the servant's shoulder. "Leon can escort me." It was an impulsive thing to say, and she smiled apologetically at the timid fae. "If you're not busy tomorrow."

Leon peered at her curiously. "I'm not b—"

"He's busy."

"—very busy tomorrow. Sorry, miss." Leon looked back at Arsen, flinching, and proceeded to hurry up the stairs.

Emeline snapped her gaze to Arsen, but he looked bored.

Nothing worth *flinching* at.

"Send Wyll with me, then. You had him guard me earlier."

"Wyll is my personal guard." The prince's lips began to form a wicked grin. A sign that she was definitely not going to like what he would say next. "Which means if you want to take him on a trip to Scaleridge tomorrow, then I'll be joining you."

That sounded about as tempting as shoving her hand into a high-voltage piece of equipment while soaking wet. But staying in the Manor would make her stir-crazy, and she didn't want to worry about running into any of the other ladies. Especially when one had the power of compulsion, and the other was an utter bitch for the simple sake of it.

"All the snacks I want."

Arsen looked at her like she was an idiot. She probably was, but Emeline treasured the only brain cell she had left from this entire fucking ordeal. "Pardon?"

"I will allow you to come with me tomorrow to Scaleridge, but you have to buy me all the snacks I want. I don't care if I ask for six cakes, you have to buy me every single one while I'm out exploring."

He stared at her for what felt like an eternity. Samael nudged Arsen's cheek with his muzzle, a soft purring noise coming from him. The prince snapped out of whatever reverie he'd been stuck in and blinked slowly.

A lazy, sinful smile fell on his lips. "Very well. Whatever sweets you desire, little nightmare, I'll buy them."

Great.

She'd gotten what she'd wanted.

Now, why did it feel like she'd just traded her soul to the Devil for fucking cake?

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11

SUFFOCATING

EMELINE



Having to get ready for a formal dinner was like playing dress-up. Emeline couldn’t remember the last time she’d been amazed by so many different dresses at once. Shopping at major retailers couldn’t compare when you had a magical rack of clothes whisked in front of you.

Madam Viera was snapping her fingers, causing dresses to appear and disappear. Velvet, cotton, silk—they all blurred together as the caretaker

tried to find something suitable for Emeline to wear.

Feeling the tension, Emeline grimaced. “I’m not picky, Madam. Whatever’s available is fine.”

“That’s the thing, Miss Rivers.” Madam Viera clicked her tongue in annoyance. Her gray eyes roamed over every piece of fabric that adorned the rack. “You don’t understand the gravity of the situation.”

“…Of dinner?”

“Of a *royal* invitation.” Her eyes met stormy ones as Madam Viera took a seat on the edge of the bed. Emeline sat at the vanity situated across from her. “I don’t pretend to know what goes on in Arsen’s mind, but I do support him because he is a prince of this realm. He protects this land and its people with his every breath. However, inviting you to a royal dinner is something that I cannot understand. This wasn’t fair to you, and it serves no purpose.”

Dread began to seep into her skin, making her limbs feel heavier. Emeline brushed a lock of hair behind her ear as nervousness coursed through her. She didn’t want to ask the question, but she couldn’t go into all this completely blind. “What do you mean?”

“There are rules, Miss Rivers. Etiquette to follow. Where to sit. Which fork to use and when. There’s proper conduct regarding conversation and which topics to avoid. These ladies have spent years learning how to be a princess, and Arsen’s invited you on what appears to be a whim… This dinner may have devastating consequences if not properly executed.”

It almost sounded like Madam Viera was not only concerned for Arsen but Emeline, too. She found it strange and comforting, to say the least. Maybe she’d written the woman off too so—

“And let’s not forget about your deplorable lack of manners.”

—*Never mind*.

Emeline leaned her side against the back post of the chair, resting her arm along the top rail. Her manners were certainly deplorable, but she was a sailor, not a princess. She would drop the word “fuck” six times in a sentence before she knew which fucking fork to use during appetizers. Those hors d'oeuvres from earlier? Emeline would sooner grab them with her hands and shove them into her mouth like a gremlin than use a fork and knife. If not finger food, why call it that?

“He deserved it. But if that vase had broken, then I would have felt sorry,” she replied in a sour tone. Imagine if she knew Emeline slapped her

precious prince too. “If it’s going to be that much of an issue, I could…*not go*.”

It seemed like the better option, honestly.

Madam Viera shook her head, standing up briskly. She walked back over to the rack holding dresses Emeline could never afford and pulled one off. It was a pompous yellow color with a straight neckline. There were a few layers to it, but she wasn’t a fan. “What about this? It’s pretty, no?”

Sure… if she wanted to look like an ordained mustard bottle.

“Not my first choice…” Emeline let the sentence hang between them, thinking that it wouldn’t be her second or seventh choice. “Is there a color scheme that the other ladies are adhering to?”

Madam Viera looked surprised, yet pleased at her question. “No, but I assume they’ll cater to the prince’s tastes. Lady Grimwood tends to dress in her color preferences, which are different shades of blue.”

“And what tastes are those? The prince’s?”

“I believe he’s partial to the color purple. It reminds him of the woods he and Samael would go exploring in when Arsen was nothing but a babe. He took a few seed pods with him before he travelled to Dragon’s Den and moved into the Manor. Planted them in the woods nearby,” Madam Viera spoke thoughtfully, but there was a warm expression on her face, like memories of a younger Arsen were passing through her mind. “The ladies would be smart to choose the royal colors of the kingdom.”

Emeline tilted her head, the obvious question evident.

What colors would those be?

“Silver and green, like the color of sea-foam. They’re symbolic of Leviathan. The most obvious choice would be to choose a shade of green and have silver embroidered into the dress. To serve as a statement—they intend to stay by the prince’s side as his future wife.” Madam Viera’s eyes brightened. “You would look lovely in purple. If Lady Grimwood happens to choose a blue dress, it would still compliment everyone’s choices.”

Arsen would be wearing that fancy outfit she’d seen him in earlier. The base fabric of the vest had been a light green color, reminding her of the coastal waters around La Jolla Cove in California. Now what color would…

A mischievous smile crept onto Emeline’s face. “Red.”

Madam Viera stared at her. “Excuse me?”

“I want to wear a red dress. If you have one readily available.”

The woman snapped her fingers, transfiguring the fabrics to a range of deep reds. Emeline stood up, walking over to the rack where her eyes landed on a silk velvet dress. It was the color of mulled wine. A dark burgundy that would definitely clash with the green shades she had in mind. If there was a statement to be made that Emeline wasn't his subject nor would she bend at the knee to all of his *whims*, then this dress said as much.

Emeline took the soft fabric into her hands, eyeing the details. There was a sweetheart neckline designed to leave her shoulders bare again, but the sleeves would be tight around her arms all the way to her wrists. An extra piece of material around the elbows would give the appearance of long pendant sleeves. At the neckline and shoulders, gold lace flowers were stitched, no doubt intended to draw everyone's eyes to the bust line.

Looking at the skirt, she could tell there were more layers hidden underneath to make it look fuller. She'd be lucky if she didn't sweat her ass off in it, but it was so pretty, it'd almost be worth it.

"What about this one?"

"The color wouldn't match well with the others." Madam Viera had a permanent frown on her lips. "Is that what you're intending to convey? That you don't belong?"

"Do I?"

"No." Her voice was flat, leading Emeline to bite back a grin. "But antagonizing the situation won't help. Lady Larkspur and Lady Bloodstone aren't royals you want plotting against you. If you believe the prince will defend you, he won't."

The latter part pissed Emeline off. "I'm not delusional. I don't think that because I'm alive Arsen will—"

"You *mustn't* call him by his name at the table." The stern fae chastised her, sounding more serious than she had all evening. "If you could do this old madam a favor, Emeline—it would be this." She didn't want to hear her out, but Emeline was apparently weak for people using her name today, and to some degree, she did owe Madam Viera for not putting her in a dirty old cell. "Do not act like a caged animal at dinner and lash out at the prince. Do not use his first name or anyone else's. You will refer to everyone as Your Highness or Lady, followed by their house. Do not give the ladies any reason to think that… the prince could be… *fond* of you for any reason."

That was about the silliest thing she'd heard in her entire life. "Arsen wants to kill me. He's not fond of me. All he wants is to know what my fear

is, and when he finally figures it out, I'm Samael's next meal ticket."

Samael lifted his head up from where he lay against the pillows and squinted at her. Whispers of smoke curled around his nose, hinting at his displeasure. Emeline waited for him to growl or huff, but he laid his head back down. Clearly, he was still napping off his lunch. *Soldier á la mode.*

"Be that as it may, the other ladies of the court won't know that, considering you received an invitation to dinner from the prince himself." A deep exhale from Madam Viera drew her attention away from the dress. There were worry lines present on her forehead, reminding Emeline that she was far older than she appeared to be. Especially if she took care of Arsen and Wyll when they were younger. "Consider it a favor to me. I'll be in your debt. Do not be impulsive. Don't do anything that could put the prince's life at risk."

"That's not a fair request to make. You want me to *protect* the guy who wants to kill me?"

"I didn't say it was fair. Only that you do this as a favor for me."

Emeline had made a deal with the Devil earlier. Might as well make one with his nanny too. "Fine. I'll be on my best behavior tonight. But I do have something I want in return."

That made the fae stiffen slightly. "And what would that be?"

Emeline's smile was nothing less than diabolical.

.——— ———.

Her heart was beating fast. Her skin felt too hot. Unease had taken root inside her, and there wasn't a single part of her that didn't find this sort of hilarious. Emeline had braved deployments. Bad seas. Sharks. A lot of fucking sharks. But God forbid there were guests on the other side of the door, about to have dinner.

Grand entrances really weren't her thing.

The two closed doors felt like a barrier, and she knew she didn't belong in the world behind it. Samael gave her a look from where he flew at her side, making the decision for her. He neared the doors, coming within a few inches of the wood, when they opened inward.

An extravagant dining hall came into view. A rectangular room with tiled windows that made up the right side of the room. Large curtains of

jade-colored silk were drawn back with braided silver ropes to reveal a clear night sky.

She wanted to take in more of the space, but tunnel vision set in. There was a more pressing issue, and it involved a group of royalty staring at her.

All but one.

Her gaze shifted to the head of the table, where Arsen smiled coyly at the dragon now by his side. There was a stone pedestal next to Arsen's chair, appearing to be a permanent fixture. A plush black pillow greeted the sleepy dragon who lay down and lifted his chin expectantly. Arsen's coy smile grew into a smirk as he reached over, scratching the dragon underneath his jaw. He paid absolutely no attention to Emeline as she walked in, clad in a red dress that clashed with almost everyone there.

As Madam Viera had guessed, Lucetta and Sabine wore green, but Sari wore silver instead of blue. Lucetta's dress was a few shades darker, but Sabine could have blended in with the drapery. Each of the ladies complimented Arsen's outfit, wanting to secure their place by his side.

The table was set for eight people, but only four people were present, with Arsen at the head. What surprised Emeline was that one seat next to him was empty, while Samael lay at his other side. On the left side of the table, there was only Lucetta. Caesaria sat across from Lucetta with Sabine on her right side. The opposite end of the table was also empty.

Emeline's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. With the way they were all seated, it was like there was a barrier between the ladies and Arsen. Why wasn't anyone seated near him? Wyll stood a couple of paces behind Arsen, looking at Emeline with blatant hostility. She offered him a sickly sweet smile.

Lucetta and Sabine wore mixed expressions, but underneath the subtle shock was clear dislike. Only Sari truly acknowledged her with a small nod and a polite smile. That is, until her gaze fell to the red dress, and that courteous smile turned musing.

"What is the *human* doing here?" Lucetta inquired, reaching for her wine as Emeline walked closer to the table. "If you're looking for scraps, the kitchens might serve you a bone. Though, they normally wait until after the meal to serve the dogs."

Mr. Draven wouldn't mind serving Emeline, and she would have enjoyed dinner more in her room than in this insufferable dining hall. She eyed the seats, wondering which one to take. The one directly at the end

was the most tempting, but then she'd have to deal with Lucetta and Sabine on either side of her.

If she chose the seat to the right of Arsen, then at least she'd be close to Samael. The biggest downside was that she'd have to sit next to Arsen. Decisions, decisions. Sit next to bitchy females or hope that the prince would continue to ignore her existence?

Decision made, Emeline straightened her shoulders and at least pretended to be confident in her resolve. Several pairs of eyes followed her every step, but Arsen kept his attention on Samael.

However, the moment Emeline's hand came into contact with the seat to Arsen's right, Lucetta spoke in a terse voice. "You can't sit there."

Why did it almost sound like a *Mean Girls* knockoff reference?

Emeline met the brunette's eyes as she slid the chair in a purposeful way, making its legs *squeak* against the polished marble. Then she sat down, happy to have Sari on her right. There was no one seated across from her if she wanted to spend the whole night staring straight ahead. It was almost a win-win situation. Except taking a seat finally drew *his* gaze to her.

"And here I thought you weren't going to show up," he mused, sitting back against his chair while Samael drifted off to sleep.

Sabine looked over at the prince, but her eyes didn't appear to meet his. It was like she was looking at the wall behind him. Emeline found it to be both stupid and rude. Lucetta had done the same thing, though. "Your Highness, then it's true? You invited a human to dinner?"

"I did," Arsen said easily, pausing to take a drink of his wine. Emeline was a bit amused to see there were mulberries floating on top. Was that fruit choice intentional or a coincidence? "Is there a problem?"

"She's human." Lucetta's tone was not chastising, but there certainly wasn't any approval to it. "You never explained to us why there's a human in the Manor. Does His Majesty know? None of the officiates in Haven warned us of this…pest problem you have…"

Yeah, well, no one had told Emeline that some sadist hung out in the waters near Iceland, sinking ships and murdering people in the most ruthless ways possible.

Arsen smiled brightly, both of his sharp canines revealed in what was *not* a kind smile. "Are you questioning my judgment, Lady Bloodstone?"

Lucetta, not meeting Arsen's gaze, flinched at his tone alone. "Of course not, Your Highness."

Movement caught her eye, and she noticed that Samael was sitting back on his haunches. He'd abandoned the sleepy dragon attitude for something far more wicked. His eyes were on Lucetta, almost glowing gold. The scales around his mouth peeled back in a vicious snarl. Emeline could almost see the venom dripping down his teeth. Truthfully, she hadn't seen him act like this yet. Even when he'd attacked the guard, it'd happened fast enough that he'd been a blur to her.

"As a marriage candidate," Lucetta began. Her voice was hard, which might have been a deflection for the fear visible in her eyes. "I want to try to understand my prince's intentions, is all."

Sabine nodded her support. "Lady Bloodstone was brash in her questions, but she meant no harm, Your Highness."

The blonde fae received a brief flicker of resentment from Lucetta's gaze. Emeline watched it all as someone on the outside, looking in. They were clearly afraid of Arsen, but they wanted to be his wife?

No. They wanted the position of power that came with being a princess. Sari was only partaking to buy Arsen time from having to decide between Lucetta and Sabine. This almost felt like watching one of those period dramas.

As a casual viewer, she wasn't sure who she should be cheering for. Maybe Sari? But then what about her forbidden love with the prince's personal guard? Emeline was a sucker, always cheering for the underdog. Though, considering Wyll's dislike of her, he probably wouldn't appreciate her rooting for him.

"The human is here because it is my will," Arsen replied coolly. His thumb slowly stroked the thin stem of the glass. "Just as you are here because it is my will."

He didn't say more, but the hidden words fell silently across the table.

Until it's not.

In one sentence, he'd reduced *all* the ladies of the courts' presences to be equal with hers. They were all in attendance because it was what he wanted. For the moment.

Emeline stiffened for a second as a new presence appeared to her right. It was a servant pouring her wine. She relaxed, beginning to smile victoriously until Sari reached over and graciously took the drink away from her. The fae received a scowl for that one, but she was probably right. This wasn't the place for Emeline to discover how demonic wine affected

her. Maybe it'd give her super strength, and she could finally smack the smirk off Arsen's face.

The prince tilted his head slightly at the exchange between the two, working it out in his head. "You haven't tried it yet, have you?"

She shook her head once, biting her tongue from saying more. Arsen didn't look impressed at her silence, but he didn't question it.

"I imagine it would be quite strong," Sabine interjected, a perfectly manicured nail tapping against her cheek. "I think Father had books on humans. They would try to steal our wine for the taste they get addicted to."

Lucetta's lip curled in distaste. "Humans have always had a nasty habit of stealing from fae. It wasn't only our wine, but our blood as well. Eventually our lives—"

"Psst." Emeline waved over the male servant who'd poured the wine, watching as the older fae glanced nervously at the prince. She didn't see Arsen's expression, but he must have given the servant permission because he hesitated before walking forward.

"Yes, miss? Do you need something?"

Emeline nodded, her voice low. "When does dinner start?"

That pissed Lucetta off as she set her glass down with a small tremor that shook the table. "You interrupted me because you want to know when the meal will be served?"

"I'm hungry," Emeline said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world—and it was. Did Lucetta really expect her to entertain her bullshit on an empty stomach? "Feel free to carry on with your *'I hate humans'* speech. I assure you, you don't need to wait for me. I wasn't paying very much attention in the first place."

Samael trilled, the sound making the corner of Emeline's lip twitch. *No*. Bad Emeline. *We're here to be on our best behavior*. Not provoke the ladies of the court.

Lucetta's gaze darkened. Hate and spite interlaced in every small movement she made. The curl to her lip. The way her grip tightened on the glass—so tightly that Emeline thought it might shatter. Maybe she needed to tone the sass down, but it was almost too easy to rile up the brunette.

"You can't expect humans to have manners," Sabine noted. Every glance and mannerism of hers was diluted by ulterior motives. It all felt too rehearsed with the fae as she took a sip of her wine. Her thumb brushed

slowly against her bottom lip as she wiped away a drop. Where'd she learn that move? Prince Seduction 101? "They aren't very smart."

Wow. Lackluster.

Was that it?

All the insults in the world and she had elementary, backhanded comments to dish out. Emeline resisted the urge to roll her eyes, focusing on surviving the rest of dinner. She was about to take a sip of water the servant had given her when she saw someone enter the room.

She was pretty. Strawberry blonde hair that fell in thick waves. There was a glow in her face as she greeted the other servants. Her blue eyes were kind. She was dressed in the same uniform, which consisted of green tunics with black breeches, except for the fact that hers was oversized. It accommodated the round belly she set her hand on top of.

"Oh, lovely." Sabine had followed her gaze, but Emeline couldn't focus on the fact that she was rudely staring. "It's so rare that you see fae bearing children. You must ensure she's properly accommodated for, Your Highness. We can't have her failing the kingdom by losing a babe early."

Everything inside Emeline froze.

Blood rushed in her ears, and she could feel her heart beginning to race. Her skin prickled with anxiety. She didn't even realize she was holding her breath until her chest began to hurt. But even when she took staggered breaths, the pain didn't go away. A thick fog filled her lungs and then her mind as Sabine's words echoed throughout.

We can't have her failing the kingdom by losing a babe early.

Behind her eyelids, images of her bathroom back home came to mind. Pale-blue walls and white flooring. She'd gone to use the toilet, but something didn't feel right. She was cramping. The toilet bowl—there was red.

The water was red.

Blood.

She touched the spot between her legs. There was blood on her fingertips. Fear struck her core as she felt more blood trickling down.

Emeline's hands shook, digging her fingernails into the heels of her palms. Pain. Pain was grounding. But the fog—it felt too thick to process any other sensations. She went to look at Samael, needing to focus on *something*. Anything. But instead, she caught Arsen staring at her. His eyes were narrowed, taking in her chest rising and falling with uneven breaths.

Could he hear it? Her heart hammering away? It was beating so hard it felt like it'd give out.

Vaguely, she could hear Sabine talking to Lucetta and Sari about a fae who'd recently had her baby at Bloodstone Towers. Emeline didn't listen further because she couldn't look away from Arsen.

He cocked his head to the side, eyes narrowing. "What's got you tasting like fear, little nightmare?"

Fear? *No*.

She wasn't afraid. She didn't think so, anyway.

But it felt like anxiety was its own demon, dragging her away into the fog. It was grief, filling her mind as everything inside her didn't want to feel the pain anymore. Where nothing existed and she could watch life pass her by. She didn't want to see the pregnant fae. She didn't want to be in the same room as her. Thoughts were beginning to move too fast for her to think straight. They were clips of sentences and words that she couldn't make sense of.

Panic?

This was panic.

Pure, unadulterated agitation that threatened to send her spiraling. Emeline felt like she was back in the ocean. *Suffocating*.

She wanted to die.

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12

NO ONE'S FAVORITE

ARSEN



"*Which one do you think would have the better bones to pick my teeth with?*" Samael yawned, laying his head down on the pillow.

Arsen thought about it. "*Not counting the servants, the only ones with a backbone in here are Emeline and Caesaria. I don't think you'd care to eat either of them.*"

Samael did a huffing-growl combination that was his closest attempt at scoffing. *“If I still feel that piece behind my right fang tomorrow, I will eat Lady Grimwood.”*

“Wyll would be upset with you.”

“Wyll can eat my—”

Arsen’s attention caught on Emeline’s victory smile before Caesaria ruined it, taking the fae wine away from her. He tilted his head, confused as to why the lady would intervene. Unless…

“You haven’t tried it yet, have you?”

Emeline gave one shake of her head, but she didn’t say anything. Irritation bloomed in his chest. He wanted to bare his teeth in annoyance, but his every move was being watched. He could tell that Sabine was looking for any opportunity to make herself more appealing to him. She was doing it now, trying to show off that she had books on humans.

“Humans have always had a nasty habit of stealing from fae. It wasn’t only our wine, but our blood as well. Eventually our lives—”

Arsen’s focus came back as a soft whisper interrupted Lucetta. Emeline was turned in her seat, waving one of the servant boys over. If he was correct, this one’s name was Fern. Thank fucking Lucifer it wasn’t Leon again.

“My, my. It almost sounds like you’re jealous again, Sen.”

“Go back to sleeping. You’re more tolerable that way,” Arsen snapped back at the dragon, giving the servant boy a nod to approach.

He paused, and once he was certain his life wasn’t in danger from interrupting the dinner, Fern greeted Emeline. “Yes, miss?” He struggled, unsure how to address her properly. “Do you need something?”

Clearly, the human didn’t notice that detail. “When does dinner start?”

A *clang* hit the table, the wine glass almost cracking from the impact. “You interrupted me because you want to know when the meal will be served?”

“I’m hungry,” Emeline stated bluntly, looking back at the fae with displeasure written clearly across her face. “Feel free to carry on with your *‘I hate humans’* speech. I assure you, you don’t need to wait for me. I wasn’t paying attention in the first place.”

“Tell me she’s not a fascinating creature,” Samael trilled, encouraging a smile from Emeline.

Arsen resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *“If you become even a little more fascinated with her, I’ll slit her throat right now. Your attachment to her is annoying.”*

Conversation continued between the females, but Arsen couldn’t be fucked to pay attention. As long as he nodded at the right moments, this dinner would be over a lot faster. He’d expected Emeline to be the sassy little brat that she was, but for some reason her reactions were muted tonight.

Did Viera get to her? Ask her to be on her best behavior?

Because if so, that ruined the fun of his evening. Even if Lucetta or Sabine ended up killing her during the meal, it at least would have made for some decent entertainment.

“Oh, lovely.” Sabine’s voice raising had him listening in on the conversation while he took another drink of wine. The tart, berry taste soothed his throat and Arsen hoped it’d only take a few more glasses before he could return to his chambers drunk.

Lady Larkspur continued, “It’s so rare that you see fae bearing children. You must ensure that she’s properly accommodated for, Your Highness. We can’t have her failing the kingdom by losing a babe early.”

Annoyance thundered through Arsen. He didn’t even bother acknowledging the fae because Viera wouldn’t have someone working while pregnant. Gisela was Mr. Draven’s kin and likely didn’t realize that dinner tonight was a formal occasion. She wore a servant uniform, but the prince had given her permission to stay at the Manor as a guest throughout the duration of her pregnancy. The baby’s father was on a long trip to Haven. If Arsen was right—and he usually was—the family had ties—

“Something’s wrong.” Worry coated Samael’s voice, making it sound deeper.

Discreetly, Arsen scanned the room. Gisela looked embarrassed for interrupting. The ladies were making conversation about pregnancies… And his little nightmare looked like she wanted to disappear.

She was staring down at the empty plate, but he knew she wasn’t present. Something had captured her. He hastily stretched out his senses. There were no demons or spirits causing mischief. No old magic scented around her.

“No one came in. No one’s cursed her. I haven’t left her side.” Samael was growing impatient, his frustration flooding into Arsen’s own emotions.

“Her heart is going to give out at this rate. Do something.”

What the fuck did he want him to do? Emeline’s heart was beating fast. It was a wonder that the other ladies hadn’t noticed yet. Her eyes closed briefly, and then a new scent hit the air.

It was acidic, irritating his senses.

Whatever it was, it made him want to retch until his stomach was empty.

He flitted his eyes over to the dragon. *“What’s that mean, Sam? I’ve never smelled—fuck, it’s burning my nose.”*

“She’s afraid,” Samael pointed out. *“Something scared her.”*

“You’re delusional.” But Arsen could feel his heart beginning to race too. Why? *“Fear doesn’t smell like that. It’s savory. It makes my mouth water. That was not fear.”*

Samael’s gaze shot to him then, eyes glowing with anger. *“You don’t need to smell it to be sure—look at her, Sen.”*

Her hands were shaking, and the faint smell of blood hit him. Arsen’s eyes narrowed. Was she digging her nails into her skin? If he told her to lift her hands right now, would there be blood staining the bottoms of her palms?

Emeline shifted to look vacantly at Samael, but her gaze snagged on him. He scrutinized her, trying to find a reason for why she was acting like this. What triggered this sort of response? What could have possibly scared her when he couldn’t?

Arsen cocked his head to the side, eyes slitting into daggers. “What’s got you tasting like fear, little nightmare?”

Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn’t look afraid now. Only faint traces of that sharp, bitter smell hung in the air. Despite not being afraid, her heart was still racing quickly. Arsen didn’t understand the expression on her face, and he was agitated as fuck because of Samael’s low growling.

The others were beginning to notice the dragon’s odd behavior.

“This dinner is over.” Arsen’s voice held no amusement, nor did it hold any of his usual playfulness. “Get out.”

Sabine opened her mouth to ask a question, and his gaze shot to hers, forcing her with his will to *look* at him. The moment she did, Arsen infiltrated her mind. The eyes were windows to the soul, and he was ready to tear hers apart. Fear was such a primitive feeling that it left him with a high no fae wine could never reciprocate.

He saw Sabine in her mind, trapped in a dark room and huddled in the corner with her knees drawn to her chest. In that room, he unleashed them. Hundreds upon thousands of red-eyed, spider-like creatures. They were sleek little creatures with eight legs and a bulbous body, but they had a scorpion's tail. Sabine had been terrified of widow-makers since she was a child, and her elder sister played a prank by putting a dead one on her pillow. Arsen enjoyed her fear like it was a decadent spice.

The lady let out a scream, startling everyone in the room. Arsen cut the vision off, but he knew his eyes were still burning gold. His voice was seamless as he spoke. "When I give an order, the expectation is for everyone to follow it. Powerful demonic ancestry or not. Court lady or not. Get. The. *Fuck*. Out."

No one hesitated this time.

The servants disappeared in the blink of an eye. All fae were able to dematerialize for a few seconds, but most couldn't go too far. Sabine, Lucetta, and Caesaria all rose. The first two were heading toward the door, but Caesaria waited for Emeline, who looked like a shaky deer learning to walk. It wasn't because of him, and that pissed him off even more. Samael reacted to his anger, his growling becoming louder.

"Caesaria, leave. You, too, Wyll."

She nodded, worry clear on her face, but she listened to him. Even she knew he was not to be questioned right now. Wyll made a frustrated sound, but went to Caesaria's side. She glanced back at Emeline, her lips pressing together for a moment, but inevitably walked out with the blond guard.

"Go to her," Arsen ordered.

He watched as Samael leaped onto the table, plates and glasses spilling everywhere. Emeline's eyes widened as the dragon caught her sleeve, wrenching her back into her seat with a tug backward.

"Samael—*what the*—" She made a small *oof* as she fell down, gripping the arms of the chair. "What is your problem? I'm trying to listen to him for—"

"What was that? What were you thinking of moments ago?" Arsen cut her off, his elbows braced against the table as he leaned forward. It's not like he couldn't hear her perfectly well—his hearing could pick up her heartbeat from across the room. But still, he found himself feeling… *anxious* to know. "Tell me."

"I wasn't thinking of anything."

“Bullshit.”

She scowled at him. “I was thinking about how annoying you are.”

A muscle jumped in Arsen’s jaw as he wanted to take her into his arms and throttle her. “Tell me what scared you.”

“Fine, fine.” She sighed, giving him a serious, grave expression. He held his breath. “I thought about how I might die without being able to confess my undying love for Jensen Ackles.”

What in Lucifer’s name was a Jensen Ackles?

Emeline looked almost disappointed at the bafflement settling on his face. “I thought you knew more about humans than most? But you don’t know Jensen? I pity you. Really. You don’t know what you’re missing out on.”

Arsen bit back his annoyance. “Does this work for everyone? *You*, using humor to defuse what you perceive as a difficult situation and then pretending that everything is back to normal afterward?”

“Normally, yes. Most people are usually polite enough not to point it out so bluntly.” Her shoulders slouched as if a heavy burden was back on them. Any amusement in her eyes died, and he wondered if he was looking at the *real* version of his little nightmare. A hollow one. “Should have realized who I was speaking to.”

“Were you paying attention to her the entire time?” Arsen sent the thought to the dragon, making small, throaty sounds that reminded him of a whine he hadn’t heard since he was a child. *“When did this start, exactly?”*

Samael looked at him, cocking his head. *“When the servant walked in.”*

“That’s really specific. Thank you for your enlightening—”

“The pregnant one, you fool.” Fangs greeted him as Samael bared his sharp teeth.

Arsen wasn’t afraid in the slightest. *“Mine are bigger.”*

He mulled over what to do with the pesky human, who had been a thorn in his side ever since he saw her from the water. She’d looked as she did now, lost in thoughts and memories he wanted nothing more than to dissect and understand. Unfortunately, his gift didn’t work like that. He couldn’t search through minds for the fun of it—fear had to be present.

Right now, he couldn’t even understand what she was feeling.

It would be easy to force her hand. Pain was a great motivator. It didn’t matter how strong someone claimed to be. Fear and pain always won. He

was good at causing it too. He'd made a reputation for himself, instilling such fear into the kingdom that close to no one tested his patience anymore.

It would be easy, but Arsen found himself not wanting to force her to reveal everything. He struggled with the realization that he was willing to be patient with her. Never mind the fact that Samael might actually bite him if he tried to cause her harm. The prince reached for his wine, needing to get rid of the acrid taste at the back of his throat.

Emeline focused, becoming lucid again. "You're not usually this quiet. It's nice to know that you can shut the fuck up occasionally."

Arsen pretended to ignore her for the moment, taking a big gulp of wine. He slid his tongue over his canines, feeling more questionable urges hit him. Normally, he enjoyed provoking her, and he'd made flirty quips before. But those were to piss her off. Now that she knew what he was capable of, and still had an attitude with him, he couldn't deny that it aroused him. A sinful feeling curled low in his abdomen. Viera would need a raise if she kept dressing his little nightmare like this. Something about seeing her bare skin stirred a desperate need in him. Arsen wanted to drag his sharp teeth against her throat and feel her writhe—

"Could you focus on trying to fix the human instead of mating with her?" Samael asked dryly, eyes rolling.

Arsen leered at him. *"Did you forget who I am? I don't fix things, Sam. I only break them."*

Hearing that, Samael let out another low whine that had Emeline frowning. Her eyebrows furrowed, and she reached out to touch the clingy-as-fuck dragon. "Are you being mean to him? Stop being such a jack—"

His hand shot out, grabbing her wrist before she could touch Samael. Arsen could feel her sneer at him, but his focus was on her hand. He pulled her toward him, bringing her to what probably felt like an awkward angle, as she had to stand up and lean forward over the table. Samael backed up, his tail swishing anxiously. More glass hit the ground, shattering.

"What is wrong with you?" Emeline hissed, but he paid her no mind.

Arsen was too busy staring at her palm. He realized for the first time how small her hand was in his. His little nightmare was such a spitfire that he had to remember, for as tough and snarky as she acted, she was physically more delicate compared to a fae. He wanted to run his fingers over the imprints left behind. She'd dug her nails in hard enough that a few drops of blood had escaped.

Samael must have smelled the blood first and been perturbed.

“It’s not even bleeding anymore. You are such a worrywart for nothing,” Arsen cooed, his voice taunting. *“I wonder what you would do if I slit her throat right now and ended this insufferable attachment to her?”*

“Who are you trying to deceive?” Samael didn’t sound upset, but rather, his cooing echoed Arsen’s. Instead of Sam getting riled up, Arsen felt anger pulse hot in his chest. *“You’re the one lying to yourself. How’s that working out for you, old friend? Because from where I sit, you’re seconds away from healing that tiny flesh wound. Worrywart.”*

Emeline tugged on her hand. “Will you kindly fuck off? Let go of my hand.”

“I will. After this.”

Arsen didn’t give her any time to react once he bent his head. He brought her hand to his mouth, hearing her suck in a sharp breath when his tongue slid across her skin. The taste of her almost made him moan. Her blood was honeyed, making him wonder what it would be like if he ever drank from her. Would she be warm and rich, or would spicy notes come through? Would she taste like fae wine, fresh and addictive?

His tongue ran across her palm, ensuring the tip ran over every crescent-shaped mark. He didn’t intend to at first, but he glanced up at her from under his eyelashes. He saw the glassy look in her eyes. The warm blush on her cheeks. The slight part to her lips. His gaze lingered there before eyeing her throat, where the pulse was racing. He could feel it fluttering underneath his fingertips at her wrist. She was partially bent over the table, giving him a delicious view of the swells of her breasts. An unfamiliar thrill went through him at the sight of her chest flushing too.

What other parts of her were flushed?

What parts did he want to see? Why was he thinking of this human in a manner that made his cock twitch? Need pulsed through him.

His distraction loosened his hold, giving her the opportunity to rip her hand away from him. The first thing she did was reach for a napkin while cursing him to hell and high heaven, but she stopped—noticing what had happened.

“The marks—they’re gone.”

Arsen stared at her, the corner of his mouth quirking up. He’d gotten so used to fae magic, he forgot how wondrous it could be to someone who knew nothing about this realm. “Fae saliva has healing properties.”

“That is… *Why?*”

“Why?” he echoed, unsure of what she was asking. “Why does it have healing properties?” When his little nightmare nodded, Arsen explained, “Your legends of vampires spawned from lesser demons who were known to exclusively drink blood. Truly, all demons have a taste for blood, but the stronger ones aren’t controlled by bloodlust. To hide their bite marks on humans, demons have a restorative quality in their saliva so that they can continue to feed off the same human. That is something that was passed down to the fae.”

Emeline frowned, her bottom lip pursing slightly. “Thanks… I guess… But I’m drawing the line at non-consensual licking. I would have healed. Eventually.”

Arsen’s grin was feral. “I’ll wait until you’re begging me next time.”

“There won’t be a next time.” She glared before looking at the rest of the table. The damaged tablecloth, shattered glasses, and cracked plates. It was like the weight of the situation had finally hit her. “Oh fuck.”

Oh fuck was right.

He’d used his gift on Sabine, and the Duchess Larkspur was going to be quite upset to hear her youngest daughter was tormented by the Second Prince. She was still pissed at him for turning down her eldest daughter; exclaiming that he’d rather stick his cock into a wood fire than go anywhere near her.

Granted, he might have gotten away with it if he hadn’t said it in front of the entire court after his sixth glass of wine—but it was Riven’s fault for sneaking him two bottles before his investiture. His mouth always became a little naughty after a few glasses. More honest too.

Unexpectedly, Emeline sank into her chair, groaning. “Madam Viera’s going to be pissed at me.”

“Is she the reason why you were behaving earlier?” he prodded, thinking back to her comment with Lucetta and smirked. Emeline never behaved.

She sent him a heated look, her eyes full of indignation. “Yes. I’m surprised Samael didn’t tell you since he can’t hide his thoughts from you.”

Arsen arched an eyebrow at the dragon.

Samael cocked his head as if to mimic him. *“It was not your concern. I didn’t give it another thought.”*

“Everything about her concerns me.”

The dragon rolled his eyes, the sassy little shit. *“Viera agreed to get a letter to her parents, noting that she was okay and she’d be sailing for a few weeks where there wasn’t any service… if she behaved and dinner went smoothly.”*

Hmm… He could unsettle her.

Or he could use her dreadful situation to his benefit.

“Answer me this question, and I’ll make sure your parents receive the letter,” Arsen bargained, watching her closely.

Her stare was criticizing. She was evidently trying to work out how this could benefit him from one mere question. “I want to know your question before I agree.” She paused, adding as an afterthought, “Or disagree.”

Arsen resisted the urge to glower, but he was becoming more annoyed at himself than anyone else. He’d been patient when he wasn’t a patient person. He’d healed her when he was more familiar with causing pain. And now he was considering a compromise.

He didn’t come to agreements with humans; he murdered them.

In cold blood. Hot if their fear involved fire.

Arsen could still taste her blood on his tongue, and he was beginning to feel overwhelmed by her presence. He kept his gaze on the wine in front of him, trying to convince himself to take another drink.

“Sen.” Samael’s voice was small in his mind. *“What’s happening? You haven’t been this anxious for a long time.”*

He should have ignored Samael’s request and killed her. There was still the option. A shard of glass was lying in front of him. He could wrap his hands around it and sink it into the side of her pretty throat. It wasn’t too late. He could—

“Arsen.” Her voice was soft, surprising him. By the look on her face she was surprised too, but she still used that same gentle tone with him. “Are you alright? You’re staring at your wine like it personally offended you.”

The prince didn’t take his gaze off her when he spoke to Samael. *“It’s been one day, and I haven’t tried to seriously kill her, Sam. I healed her. It was such a simple wound and not like her life was in any danger.”*

Samael lowered his head. Claws scraped against the cloth as he stepped off the table, crawling into Arsen’s lap. His horns brushed against the underside of his jaw as the dragon nuzzled him. *“Maybe this means you don’t have to be someone who only breaks. No being has only ever known pain, Sen. Not even Lucifer himself.”*

But that’s always been the case, hasn’t it?

His mother was bred to give him up as a sacrifice.

His father was constantly scheming to have him murdered.

Lucifer was God’s favorite. Arsen had never been anyone’s favorite.

“You’re mine,” Samael whispered in his mind.

Sam. Sam was safe. They knew everything about each other. But the woman looking at him—with *worry*? It was too much for one night. His head was a fucking mess, and he needed to get away from everyone.

“Viera will send your letter. Go back to your room. I’ll have food sent,” he said with finality, in a tone that was weighed down by five hundred years of suffering.

Emeline stared at him for one long moment before nodding. He reached for his wine, drinking the rest of the glass before she’d even made it past the doorway. She hadn’t given him what he wanted. The answer to his question. He hadn’t even asked, and he’d made concessions for her. Fucking *concessions* for a human he’d planned on killing less than twenty-four hours ago.

Emeline Rivers was trouble.

And if he wasn’t careful, she might be his ruin.

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13

HATE AND SUGAR

EMELINE



She didn’t see him the next day.

Or the next.

Emeline was seconds away from storming into his chambers and asking what his problem was. Why did it feel like he was avoiding her? Why did she care? It also wasn’t any of her business, and she had to remind herself of that. Just because Arsen was the reason she was at the Manor, it

didn’t give her direct access to him. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, he *was* a prince.

Maybe the whole reason she was stewing in her anger wasn’t because she hadn’t seen him but because he’d taken Samael with him. Ever since the dinner a couple of days ago, Samael hadn’t left his side. She’d only spotted them once, heading into the woods yesterday evening.

Since then?

Not a whisper.

Sari had designated herself as Emeline’s personal guard during the day. Apparently, Lucetta and Sabine officially had it out for her. They didn’t know what her relationship with the prince was, but the fact that she’d been invited to a dinner with the top candidates for his future wife didn’t bode well for her.

Emeline glanced over at the empty tray of food where it sat on her vanity. Mr. Draven had cooked skewered meat for her after she’d told him about *yakitori* stands earlier. The corners of her lips rising in a small smile had her immediately frowning.

Should she feel guilty for enjoying her time here?

Ugh. Emeline lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling decorated with flowers she’d already spent hours looking at. A floral garth with apple trees and more of those glass lilies scattered about. Why were they so prevalent—decorating not only the gardens outside the Manor, but also the paintings inside?

Why was she contemplating life and flowers right now?

Easy answer. Because she didn’t have her phone to doom-scroll until she got tired or wanted to dissociate. Social media was such a toxic addiction, but at least it offered cute photos of otters.

Emeline rolled onto her stomach, feeling stir-crazy. A thought hit her. If she couldn’t sleep and she were home, what would she be doing right now?

The answer was flashing like neon lights in her mind. A grin fell on her lips, and she scrambled off the bed, slipping a soft blue robe over her white chemise. It was late enough now that no one should be awake. Time for a sweet treat.

·—— ——·

Emeline should have realized that she was in way over her head when she decided to scour a magical kitchen in the middle of the night. There wasn't a designated spot for anything and she couldn't make sense of Mr. Draven's pantry organization. There was also the fact that Dragon's Den had ingredients she'd never heard of. Some of them, she didn't want to stare at for too long.

Why in God's name did he have something called *'dried widow-makers'*? The damned things looked like molted tarantulas with freakishly odd tails, reminding her of a scorpion's. Her appetite shriveled at the thought of eating those. Not everything tasted like chicken—and she'd eaten *a lot* of questionable meat at different liberty ports.

Sighing loudly, Emeline grabbed a nearby stool, dragging it over to the right side of the closeted pantry. The space was the size of a generic walk-in closet, but the shelves were unnecessarily tall. She counted sixteen levels of shelving. Who was even tall enough to reach them? Or did Mr. Draven use magic? If she was right, there was a jar of chocolate that she might be able to reach if she stood on the balls of her feet. The issue was that the label was out of sight, but it at least looked like chocolate.

Her arm strained with the effort it took to brush her fingers against the side of the jar. The pads of her fingers barely scraped the smooth texture, and she let out a curse as the wood creaked beneath her weight.

"I thought I heard a mouse."

Emeline let out a startled yelp, slipping off the stool in her surprise. She hit the ground—*hard*. Pain radiated from her ass all the way along her right side. She bit out a pained groan, swearing endlessly. It was enough to make any nun blush. Her eyes sought out the culprit and found him leaning against the pantry's doorframe. This wasn't any nun or saint; it was the wicked Devil himself. It wasn't bright in the kitchen, but the glowing torchlight still gave him a soft silhouette, cloaking his features in shadows.

Arsen's bright, golden eyes were dancing with unholy amusement. He was wearing loose gray bottoms that might have been the medieval equivalent of joggers. The white shirt he wore was sleeveless, revealing corded muscles as he crossed his arms.

Emeline finally got a better view of his markings. A golden snake wove itself around his left bicep, with the tail ending at his elbow. Its head lay between the crook of his neck and his shoulder, but she couldn't see any more of its details due to the fabric there. The snake wasn't the only

marking present. The bottom of its tail intertwined with another creature, resembling a sea serpent. Brilliant scales of sea-foam green littered his forearm in a winding pattern. A vicious-looking sea monster wrapped around his wrist. The head of the creature—whom she now assumed was Leviathan—rested on the back of his hand.

"You know, it's considered rude to stare at someone's markings. Fae or human," Arsen drawled.

Emeline snapped her mouth shut and gingerly rose. "You know, in the movies, the guy always catches the girl before she gets hurt. You're sorely lacking."

"Never heard that one before," he replied with a lazy grin before it turned more sinister. "But the difference is that I enjoy your pain and suffering."

That earned him a scowl. "If that were true, I would have seen you the past two days."

His smile grew broader. A sharp canine caught the low light of the torch, glinting back at her. "Miss me?"

"As much as a bad UTI that won't go away."

"Ouch." Arsen held a hand over his heart, feigning hurt. "You wound me."

Emeline rolled her eyes, thankful that the painful throbbing from the fall had ceased. She'd definitely have a bruise by morning. "You'd need to have a heart first."

He blatantly ignored that remark, nodding his head toward the shelves. "What were you trying to grab?"

Should she tell him? Did it really matter? "The jar of chocolate. At least I think it's chocolate."

Arsen walked over, the scent of fresh rain tickling her nose. She realized now that his hair was damp. He must have bathed recently. She moved to the side when he came closer, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. One side of his mouth curled, highlighting the scar at the left corner of his lip. Anxiety pedaled, making her run her fingers over her beaded bracelet. Arsen didn't need the stool, nor did he strain in having to reach the glass jar. Not fair.

He handed it to her, fingertips brushing as their gazes met. "Sweet tooth?"

Did his voice sound deeper?

Huskier?

No. She was imagining it. Emeline swallowed visibly, looking away as she side-stepped him. “A terrible one. I can’t sleep, so I thought I’d make myself something to drink.”

Arsen’s eyebrows furrowed as her reply evidently confused him. “You’re having trouble sleeping, so you resort to sugar? Were you dropped on your head as a babe?”

“At this point, I think my parents threw me against the wall. Repeatedly. Probably for fun,” Emeline said without hesitating.

Her tone must have been too serious because Arsen looked genuinely caught off guard. His eyes were slightly wide, his lips parted the tiniest bit. “Your parents abused you too?”

Too. The air was forced out of her lungs. Something in her chest squeezed painfully as she looked back at him. Whatever he saw on her face, he realized then.

“You were making a joke.”

Arsen looked like he was about to say something else when his eyes darted toward the stairs. Emeline knew in that moment that if she didn’t say anything, he was going to disappear again. How long would he avoid her this time? Another two days? Two weeks? Why was her heart plummeting at the thought?

“Do you want some?” The question obviously caught him off guard again, so she clarified, “I wanted to make hot chocolate from scratch. Back home, whenever I was feeling anxious, I’d make it. Sometimes I felt too… cold. Empty inside, and I convinced myself that if I drank something hot, it’d make me feel more like I was whole. Like there wasn’t this emptiness gnawing inside me.” Emeline was rambling—a nervous habit that hadn’t appeared in a long time. “You know what? Go back to ignoring me. I’ll make sure that Mr. Draven doesn’t wake up to a mess.”

She turned from him, heading in the direction of the wood fire stove a few meters away. Setting down the jar of chocolate, Emeline realized she had no fucking clue where the milk was.

Or the sugar.

Or vanilla.

This was beginning to be a much larger operation than she’d originally thought.

“You do that when you’re anxious.” Emeline spun at the sound of his voice, watching as he closed in on her. He wasn’t looking at her, his gaze

focused on her bracelet.

“Do what? Vomit out a bunch of words at once?”

A flicker of amusement was back in his eyes, making things feel more normal between them. “You always touch that bracelet of yours. What does it mean to you?”

Emeline raised her eyebrows. Her tone dripped with satire and snark. A suitable blend for the person she was dealing with. “You’re curious about me? Are you *really* the Devil I know and hate? Maybe you’re… Sari—are you playing a prank on me?”

“Her gift can’t reproduce marks. No fae can fake these.” He held out his left arm. The ambience of the candlelight added a warm, intimate feel to the space. It also allowed for the golden and sea-green scales to glimmer in the light like they were moving. Maybe they *did* move because she saw the snake was now peeking through the fabric, closer to his neck. She blinked twice because she swore its tongue flickered. Her eyes fell to the sea serpent, only to realize that its tail was coiled tighter around his arm, but its head was still on the back of his hand. “Has she told you anything about demons and fae? About our markings?”

“Only that the marks allude to your demonic ancestry.” She eyed the snake, knowing now that her suspicions were confirmed if the prince had two different markings on him. “It’s not only Leviathan that you’re descended from, are you? It’s Lucifer too.”

Praise made his eyes darken with approval. “Mouthy and clever.”

No. *No*.

Emeline’s heart began to pound as heat spread across her cheeks. Now was not the time to discover that she had a praise kink.

“Was your mother descended—”

“No,” Arsen interrupted her, his voice flat enough to convey that any questions about his mother were off-limits.

Okay. *Well*. If she didn’t think of something quickly, then things were about to get really awkward.

“Help me with finding the last things I need for this hot chocolate, and I’ll answer your questions.” Seeing the gleam in his eyes, Emeline hastily added, “Within reason. If you’re allowed to have your secrets, then so am I.”

“Very well.” He relented more easily than she thought he would. “What all do you need?”

Emeline bit her lip, thinking out loud while she stared at the chocolate. “Milk. I doubt this place has vanilla extract, but maybe fresh vanilla? Salt.” Her eyes rose to meet his, but she found him staring at her lip. She stopped biting it, and he clenched his jaw, glancing away. “Er, sugar too.”

Arsen nodded and then began walking around the kitchen. He retrieved the ingredients in the order she’d said them, leading her to believe that he had a great memory. Good for him because hers was shit.

The fact that he was so well-versed around the kitchen had her asking, “Do you cook often?”

“There was a period of time where I had to learn, yes,” Arsen said cryptically.

Social awareness was scared of Emeline because her curiosity had her blurting out, “After Mr. Draven’s parents were murdered?”

He’d set the bottle of milk down with a louder-than-intentional *thud*. She’d caught him off guard again. “I see Caesaria has been telling you unnecessary things.”

Arsen’s response didn’t confirm nor deny any specifics.

“Am I wrong?”

“You are. Viera taught Draven how to cook.” Arsen’s voice was clipped, and there was only a brief moment of hesitation before he continued, “When I lived in Haven with my brother and the crown, I didn’t eat with them.”

“…You had to eat in your room? Like I do?”

“I had to make my own food,” he clarified with a solemn shake of his head. “And even then, I would take it to wherever I wanted to eat for the day. Most times, it was down by the lagoon, but after Samael hatched, we’d take bundles of food to the Woods of Wisteria.”

Emeline wanted to ask more questions, but she wasn’t sure if she was ready to hear the answers. Arsen had already revealed that he’d been abused as a child. That could mean physically. The scars on his face had to come from someone, but he would have gotten into a lot of fights if he was responsible for guarding the Veil. Those scars could have come from anything. But not all abuse was visible. From what he’d described, it sounded like it was emotional, scarring his soul rather than his face. But how would she know unless he told her outright?

How did a child feel having to make his own food or he didn’t eat?

Then having to eat all alone until he had Samael? That was incredibly lonely.

“Speaking of the little traitor, as you like to call him”—Emeline glanced around, scanning the room—“where is he? I’m surprised he’s not attached to your side right now.”

“Jealous?”

“Absolutely. Do you think it’s every day that I get to hold a cute dragon?”

“He’s not *cute*. He’s a ruthless creature.”

“He’s a *cute*, ruthless creature.”

Her clear adoration of Samael had Arsen grinning. “For what it’s worth, he’s missed your company. He’s tired of listening to me complain about my father’s officiates in New Haven.”

The prince ran a hand through his wet hair, disheveling it in a way that Emeline found attractive. *Er.* No, she didn’t. Sadistic, towering men were not hot. Arsen wasn’t even human—he wasn’t a man. Even so, sadistic, towering fae were not hot.

Ignorant to her inner turmoil, Arsen continued, “He said that since he suffered through another day of no fascinating human interactions, he deserved a few widow-makers to snack on before bed.”

Emeline’s stomach lurched as she opened the jar of chocolate. Without asking, Arsen provided her with a pot and lit the fire with a snap of his fingers. Seriously, it was uncool to be so *human*. Having *powers* or *gifts* would be so convenient.

“Please tell me you’re not talking about those disgusting alien-looking spiders? I told you about *Arachnophobia*.” She shivered, her nose wrinkling at the thought of them. “Fucking terrifying.”

Arsen snorted inwardly, leaning back against the wood counter as she started to pour milk and sugar into the pot. “You say that, but you’re not afraid of them.”

Of course he would know. Emeline hummed her acknowledgement, but didn’t say anything. He watched her for a few moments. She wouldn’t lie and say it wasn’t unsettling. There was also the issue that her mind kept wanting to replay the heated gaze he’d sent her when his tongue was on her palm. It reminded Emeline that she was only wearing a thin white chemise with a silk robe over it. *Please don’t have hard nipples. Please don’t have hard nipples.* God hadn’t answered any of her prayers before—she was

overdue for at least one miracle. He could manage this one, right? Emeline could feel the heat of Arsen's body from where his arm brushed her shoulder.

"The bracelet."

She paused in her stirring, adding the fresh vanilla. "What?"

"I brought you the ingredients you needed. Tell me about your bracelet. Unless you'd prefer to find widow-makers in your breakfast from now on. They make a delightful little garnish. All eight of their eyes, dried up and falling into your—"

Emeline shot him a quick glare before turning back to her stovetop concoction. "Do you always threaten people to get what you want?"

"Only the ones who give interesting responses when they're threatened." She almost flinched in surprise when his knuckle brushed against her cheek. Instead, she glanced at him sideways. Uncertainty was a late spring flower, blooming in her chest as its seeds of apprehension sank their roots deeper into her. He continued, his voice a soft, persuasive coo, "Tell me, little nightmare. Why is your heart beating so fast right now?"

"I'm fueled by hatred."

"And sugar."

She fought and failed against the reluctant smile that played on her lips. "And sugar," she agreed.

The chocolate was in small bricks, leading her to chop it into little chips that would allow it to melt more easily. While Arsen found her a cutting board and knife, she explained the bracelet to him as a way of deflecting his question. "I've always been fond of cherry blossoms. Ever since I saw them in person near the Washington Monument on a school trip to D.C. The place was swarming with people, and I couldn't understand at the time why people cared to take so many photos or travel so far to see them. It wasn't until I was older and went to Japan that their beauty was explained to me."

He didn't say anything as the sounds of the knife hitting the cutting board became a soothing symphony echoing between them.

"A woman I met in Japan said something that stuck with me. It's been nearly five years since then. She placed this bracelet in my hand and said, '*Ashita wa ashita no kaze ga fuku.*' It means—"

"The winds of tomorrow will blow tomorrow."

Emeline stilled, looking at him in surprise, until she recalled that he shared a mental bond with a *cute*, *ruthless* dragon. "Did Samael tell you?

He was wondering about my bracelet too.”

“He didn’t. When did you tell him?”

“After I slapped you.”

“Then no. I was busy getting scolded by Wyll.”

Emeline regarded him distrustfully, resuming her chopping. “If that’s true, then how did you…” The answer then was obvious. “Do you speak Japanese?”

Arsen smirked, eyes appearing to glow brighter in the dim light as he watched her closely. “Impressed?”

“Irritated.”

That infernal smirk of his grew. “When I was young, there was always a book in my hands. Languages. Culture. History. I wanted to know everything about humans and be able to talk with them. I learned several languages. Some dead ones, too.”

“Why did you want to know everything about humans?” If he spent the time learning so many different languages, then it had to run deeper than an idle curiosity.

“The crown wants me to slaughter them. Any that near the Veil; it’s my duty to protect the realm. If I was destined to be a killer, then I wanted to know why they deserved to die in the first place.”

Ah, yes. Emeline had almost forgotten that she was standing next to a prince who had slaughtered thousands of humans in his lifetime. The same fae who’d healed her wounds was also a mass murderer. A flirty mass murderer, who was too attractive for his own good.

And worst of all, he didn’t appear to be remotely sorry.

It was time to steer the conversation away from subjects that would only rile her up, or else she’d end up throwing a glass jar at him. “Answering your question about the bracelet again: the cherry blossoms taught me that everything is temporary. When life becomes overwhelming, and I feel like I can’t handle it anymore, I touch the bracelet to remind myself that what’s bothering me won’t last forever. Everything has a beginning and an end. Even if it feels like it’s slowly consuming me… it has to end one day. The bad can’t last forever.”

She laid the knife down, raising the cutting board to slide the chocolate into the pot. Emeline was grateful to have something to occupy her hands, even if it meant something as simple as stirring.

A sundry collection of heartbeats passed where Arsen said nothing. It was as if he was truly taking the time to listen to her, and to understand what she tried to convey. Emeline couldn't remember a time when anyone had taken what she said with such purposeful consideration.

With family, she was *deflective*.

With friends, she was *defective*.

Did she really have any genuine friends if she couldn't be sad around them? Everyone was supposed to have that one person who they felt they could tell anything to. And yet Emeline had always moved around too much to establish roots of any kind. All her friendships began with an expiration date.

"The human you were with until the end. The Spaniard. He was afraid of sharks."

Emeline grabbed the knife again, pointing it at him. She was holding it with her left hand, so the grip was awkward, but she refused to allow the hot chocolate to burn.

"Choose your next words very carefully, *Your Highness*," she said slowly, her voice coming out low. Thinly veiled anger coated her words. "Because I'm willing to bet that stabbing you in the heart will kill you—demonic spawn of Lucifer or not."

There was a brief pause.

"Am I not supposed to be aroused right now? Because *you* in an indecent nightgown, making hot chocolate, and threatening me with a knife in the middle of the night is what I'll be dreaming of for the next week. Maybe two if you take that robe off."

Emeline rolled her eyes, placing the knife down. "The only dreams you should be having of me are nightmares where I'm stabbing this knife through your heart, pervert."

"That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Focus, Arsen. You brought up Luis. What about him?"

There was a slight falter to his smirk. It was so quick, she wouldn't have noticed had she not been right beside him.

"He knew."

"Luis knew a lot of things. Shark facts in particular—"

"The human knew what came onboard the boat back in Southend. The fae who was banished. The smuggler. He played the part well, but your human companion knew everything. He was the one Robaire contacted and

promised enough gold that he would be able to buy his own boat. Your crew-mate was the one who convinced the captain that it was a brilliant opportunity."

As he spoke, Arsen didn't break eye contact with her. She didn't think she was breathing as she held onto his every word. His last words made the ladle fall from her hand, hitting the ground and splattering the edges of her chemise with hot chocolate.

"The human's greatest fear wasn't sharks. It was you finding out that he'd doomed everyone for money."

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14

MISTAKES

EMELINE



The kitchen was quiet except for the sound of the hot chocolate simmering in the pot. Oh, and Emeline’s heartbeat, which was hammering so loudly, she expected it to give out any moment. Panic had a tight grip on her, but she was able to loosen its hold with a powerful ally.

Denial.

“You’re lying.”

Arsen looked bored at her response. “What would I have to gain by lying to you?”

“What you always want. My pain and suffering,” she shot back, picking the ladle up off the ground and discarding it in the sink nearby. She hurried back to the pot, taking it off the heat. “That was a cruel joke, even for you.”

Even for you? Emeline cringed, silently chastising herself. She didn’t know Arsen. She might know a couple of things, but he was still a stranger. Luis *wasn’t*. Luis had welcomed her to the *Serenity*… He’d always been a resourceful, sociable guy. When he’d heard about someone on the docks looking for work, he’d brought her straight to the captain and first mate.

Could he have scouted Robaire too? Had it been odd that he wasn’t too worried about where they were going when he was such an experienced sailor? He should have known that a boat like Gabe’s wouldn’t have fared well in the icy waters to begin with. When he’d found her midships before Arsen had arrived, had he only been trying to quell her worries, so her anxiety didn’t affect the rest of the crew?

Why was she doubting someone she’d known intimately over someone who wanted to kill her?

Emeline’s question was straight to the point. “Why tell me this if you have nothing to gain?”

Arsen’s gaze tracked the slight tremor in her movements as she brought a hand to her wrist. It was annoying that he knew her nervous tic, but if the bracelet didn’t tell him she was seconds away from losing her shit, then her racing pulse would.

“He doesn’t deserve your mourning nor the way you continue to defend him,” Arsen stated simply. “He deserves to be remembered for what he was. A coward.”

The urge to defend Luis got stuck in her throat. If she was hesitating now, did that mean Arsen had accomplished what he wanted? Was this fair? Did one bad mistake mean that Luis was a bad person if he did plan to make money off Robaire?

Did *her* mistake mean that she was a bad person?

Granted, Emeline didn’t know what she’d done wrong to lose the pregnancy.

Was it the pineapple juice she had drunk the day before? There was little evidence to support pineapple juice as labor-inducing, but what else could it

have been? Was it the fact that she'd slept on her stomach rather than her left side like all the articles advised? Was it because she'd put too much pressure on her stomach trying to go to the bathroom? Was the mistake she assumed she'd made during the pregnancy—something unredeemable?

Emeline's spiral came to an abrupt halt when a hand wrapped around her throat. The grip was firm, demanding, and she was brought to the tips of her toes. Her hands wrapped around his wrist, but her airway wasn't cut off. Arsen bent his head, eyes burning gold. His lip curled in distaste. Nostrils flared like he'd caught a bad scent. The hot chocolate smelled sweet, but she didn't think that it smelled *bad*.

"What were you thinking about just now?"

She didn't hesitate. "Jensen Ackles."

The other side of his lip rose, baring his full canines now. Gold darkened to a smoky topaz. "You are the most infuriating human that I have ever met."

Emeline smiled sweetly, feeling his grip tighten the slightest bit. "I'm glad you think of me so often. I've barely given you a single thought." Her fingernails dug into his wrist, but he didn't so much as flinch. "I'm adding non-consensual throat grabbing to our list. Let me go."

"If you hate it so much, then why are your nipples hard, little nightmare?"

God fucking damn it.

Seriously? The big man couldn't help her out this *one time?* How many prayers was he going to ignore before he finally cut her a god-damn break? Emeline knew she was blushing madly, but she still stared at Arsen like she wanted to kill him.

Or fuck him.

It was confusing, really. Her body had already decided, and it took everything in her not to clench or rub her thighs together for the friction she found herself craving. At least her mind was still functioning, though it had to work harder than normal to form words.

"Will you let me *down?*" Emeline gritted out.

Clearly, her mind and body weren't on the same page. Or if they were, they were both leaning toward wanting to fuck Arsen, and after his little bombshell message—*no one was fucking anyone*.

"Will you tell me what you were thinking about?" he countered, unmoving.

“Not even if my life depended on it.” She flickered her gaze to the pot beside them. “If my hot chocolate gets cold, then it’s going to be *your* life at stake.”

“You would never kill me.”

“And how exactly do you know that?”

The cocky bastard smirked. “If I die, so does Samael. Our lives are bound.”

Is that right? “Remind me to pick some flowers for him.”

Arsen’s smirk fell. “Why in Lucifer’s name would he need flowers*?*”

“So that I can send my fucking condolences because his life is tied to such a smug, aggravating, sadistic—”

Glass and ceramics hit the floor, shattering around them after Arsen’s arm swept out to clear the items off the counter. He was fast. In the blink of an eye, Emeline’s back was on the counter, and she was staring up at him in disbelief. His body curved over hers, his knee sliding between her legs. The nightdress rose up, and she was far too cognizant of his thigh against her—

“Careful. You know I like it when you’re mouthy,” Arsen purred.

Emeline swallowed as the earthy scent of him clouded whatever brain cells had still been functioning. Now they short-circuited as heat flooded her body, resulting in her hips beginning to squirm.

It was a mistake.

His leg pushed more, brushing against her core and making her breath catch. Heart thudding against her chest, Emeline wasn’t sure how she hadn’t been diagnosed with heart palpitations yet. His proximity and the feel of his body over hers coaxed Emeline to abandon her morals and dive into sin. Arsen shifted his leg in a purposeful way that had her sex against his thigh, but she could also feel something hard forming against her.

His hand was still on her throat, and he looked like a fallen angel leaning over her. The torchlight made the brilliant strands of gold in his hair shine against his dark hair.

“You can lie to me all you want, Emeline.” Arsen’s voice was gravelly as the sensuality of the moment seeped into her skin. She wrestled with need—the ache that he’d created in her—while the tips of his fingers trailed up her calf. It was a bittersweet torture that had her thighs squeezing his leg. Emeline felt his touch grow bolder, cupping the back of her thigh right below her bottom, where the lace she wore grazed his fingers. “You can even live in your pathetic denial about that coward. But I think you know

there is some truth to what I said; otherwise, you wouldn't have such doubt in your mind. You infuriate me, but you are nothing short of cunning."

Emeline pressed her lips together in a tight line, aggravation washing over her. It did nothing to cool off the hot desire, and shame ignited in her veins. "You don't know anything about what's on my mind." Stronger now, her voice came out more unforgiving. "Because I'm not afraid of you."

"You believe I don't know that?" Arsen's head bent down, and she watched as a feral, starved grin spread across his lips.

The sight of it stirred a growing, physical need. He glanced down, and she followed his gaze to where her pert nipples beckoned for attention. Arsen's head lowered toward one, his breath ghosting over her breast. The slip was thin, and her robe had draped open sometime between when she'd been standing and when he'd lifted her onto the counter. Emeline watched, dazed, as his lips parted and wrapped around one of her hardened buds.

The fabric was so delicate, she was able to feel his soft lips and the very moment his tongue pressed against her nipple. It was like she wasn't wearing anything. Emeline pressed her lips tightly together, refusing to cry out at the jolt of pleasure streaking through her. It wasn't until his sharp canines pricked through the fabric, grazing her breast and the sensitive area around her nipple, that she let out a traitorous whimper.

Arsen smirked victoriously. It wasn't a mewl of pain; it was pleasure. She wanted more. He let her go completely, stepping away from her. His eyes were smoldering with a heady mix of sin and desire as he took in her appearance. Breath ragged, her thighs pressed together on top of the wooden counter. Robe untied and a damp spot above her left breast. Emeline hated the fact that he'd confirmed she was—*physically*—attracted to him.

But it was a double-edged sword because now she knew it was reciprocated.

The smug bastard was aroused. The outline of his cock strained against his bottoms, and she was upset to know that he was *not* sorely lacking. The only sore thing would be her if she was ever stupid enough to have sex with him.

They stared at each other unabashedly for a long moment. Emeline knew her head was still busy with indecision and doubt, but she had no clue as to what could be going through his. Did he regret touching her? His attention on her chest said otherwise.

Her eyes widened unexpectedly, remembering the hot chocolate. She slipped off the counter, turning her back to him, and barely managed not to cut her feet with all the broken glass on the floor. The thin slippers she'd put on wouldn't protect against the jagged edges. With her focus momentarily on the hot chocolate, Emeline was thankful to see steam rising from the pot.

"Do you want some?" she inquired, not turning around to face him.

Arsen didn't answer.

Emeline glanced over her shoulder to find he was gone. Her frown deepened. The sound of glass cracking underneath her slippers reminded her that the area around her was a mess.

And if he was… *Mother. Fucker.*

She was going to have to clean all this shit up alone.

Emeline glanced up at the ceiling, cursing God—not for the first time, and it sure as hell wouldn't be the last time. All she'd wanted was a cup of hot chocolate to comfort her and help her sleep. Instead, she was hot and bothered *and* had to clean up a mess she didn't make.

She didn't know how, but she was going to make him pay for this.

.——— ———.

Morning came too soon.

Sunlight streamed into her room, blinding her when she woke in a panic. Something had crashed into her and was now jumping on her chest. Emeline rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, opening them to see a familiar face. A grin spread across her lips as the dragon let out a throaty noise, sounding like he was happy to see her.

"Well, hello there." Emeline let out a genuine laugh, smiling widely as the dragon crawled into her lap. His scaly tail picked up speed as she scratched underneath his muzzle. "It's nice to see you too. If you're here, then I'm glad you won't have to listen to Arsen bitch all day again."

He trilled, and she almost let out a swear when a throat cleared by the entrance to her room. She turned her head to see Arsen leaning back against one of the doors, with the other cracked open. He wore a leather, short-sleeved doublet, the color of a raven's feather. Did this man only wear black? Was there not a smidge of color unless it was a shade of green he was forced into? Underneath the doublet, he wore a white long-sleeve shirt that cinched around his wrists. His dark hair was combed back, and he

looked… put together. Meanwhile, Emeline was tangled in the sheets, and her hair probably resembled a bird's nest.

"You snore in your sleep," Arsen noted unhelpfully from where he lingered. Emeline looked to Samael, only to spot him shaking his head. He must have said something to the prince because Arsen rolled his eyes. He carried on. "I have to take a trip to Scaleridge this afternoon. Samael wanted to see if you'd like to come along with us."

The dragon in question exhaled sharply in amusement. Smoke tickled Emeline's nose, causing her to sneeze. Then she asked, "Us?"

"Wyll goes where I go."

Great. "Can Sari come, too, then?" Excitement lightened her tone, and she looked at Arsen optimistically. If anyone could make Wyll tolerable, it was Sari.

The prince frowned, but he didn't say no. "The other ladies will want to come along if Caesaria is going."

"Tell them you'll have a meal or take a trip separately with them," she reasoned. "That should placate them."

"I'd rather take a fire iron and gouge both my eyes out," Arsen said flatly.

Her voice was equally as flat, if not more so. "I'd rather eat a widow-maker than deal with yours *and* Wyll's attitude by myself."

A shuffling noise came from outside the door, and she heard the royal guard call out, "I can hear you both."

Emeline smirked at that, matching Arsen unintentionally. There was another beat of silence as they stared at each other.

Wait.

She was pissed at him. She wanted to complain about how late she'd had to stay in the kitchens, but she didn't want Wyll to know about it.

"What time do I need to be ready?" Emeline wasn't giving in, and her unrelenting tone said as much. She'd already made up her mind. Sari was coming with them, regardless of whether Arsen wanted to stab his eyes out or not.

The scar on his mouth twitched as he clearly fought against a knowing leer. "High noon. Don't worry about a meal. We'll be eating at a tavern I frequent." He straightened, but paused before leaving.

He looked like he wanted to say something, but then his eyes fell to Samael. Something exchanged between the two. Emeline saw the dragon

nod, and then Arsen was gone without another word.

What was that about?

.—— ——.

“I haven’t been to Scaleridge in quite some time.” Sari was all smiles, grinning from the vanity, where she was adding a bit of shimmering silver dust to the tops of her cheekbones. She looked stunning in a silver-bodice dress with white long sleeves and lace decorating the neckline and cuffs. “Did Arsen say what he needed to go there for?”

“No, but I didn’t ask,” Emeline replied, clasping the black wool cloak at her own neckline. She was dressed in a simple ivory blouse with a matching underskirt. Over the white, she wore what Madam Viera had called a peasant’s dress. The skirt was a midnight-green color, while the bodice was an equally dark brown. “I look like I’m up to no good in this. Is a cloak really necessary?”

Sari shot her a coy smile. “I said Scaleridge was open-minded, but it can still be dangerous for humans. It’s simply… *not as* dangerous as New Haven. If you’re in any sort of Haven—you’re as good as dead. Scaleridge or Ironclaw means there’s a chance of survival.”

Emeline rolled her eyes. “Thank you. That makes me feel *so* much better.”

“Good, then my job as your friend is accomplished.” Seeing her dumbfounded expression, Sari looked at her like she was hopeless. “We are friends, aren’t we? I mean, if I ignore the fact that you want Arsen dead and Wyll doesn’t like you—we’d be the best of friends.”

Emeline choked out a laugh, coming to sit on the bed. She watched Sari continue to get ready. “If I ignore the fact that Arsen killed all my friends, and the fae you like hates my guts—then sure. Yeah. I think we’d be really great friends.” Then she paused. “Wait—Arsen wants me dead, too, so those cancel out. Really, all you have on me is that Wyll doesn’t like me, and he doesn’t have a reason to.”

“He has a reason.” Sari’s tone was slightly defensive but not in a way that conveyed she was upset. “Every day that you’re alive is more reason for the king to take up issue with Arsen and how he’s leading the people here.”

Before, she might have said that the king wouldn't hurt his own son. Now she knew better. The king had never loved Arsen. Never taken care of him as a father should and had basically left him alone until he was tasked with protecting the Veil. Part of her wondered if Sari would tell her how Arsen got his scars, but Emeline knew how protective Sari was of those two. It wasn't Sari's story to tell.

Glancing over at Samael, Emeline was pleased to see that the little bugger was knocked out cold. This was her only chance to ask.

"Do you think you'd be able to distract them?"

Sari set down the brush, turning to look at her. "Why would I do that?"

"You don't want the king to get upset with Arsen. Wyll would also get punished—so wouldn't the best thing be for me to escape? I could sneak onboard a boat—"

"How do you know which boats are entering and leaving the Veil? Because they very rarely do."

"I don't—"

"How do you know that the captain of the ship won't disembowel you while everyone watches?"

"Well, I don't—"

"And how do you expect me to distract Samael from where you're going?"

Emeline looked at the dragon. "He's asleep—" One eye popped open, leaving her mouth gaping. "You—were you *pretending* to be asleep*?*"

Sari didn't look surprised, turning back to the mirror. "Arsen probably kept him in here to see if you'd ask for my help in escaping."

"He wouldn't think so far ahead."

"You don't know him." The fae's voice wasn't unkind as she spoke, and Emeline could appreciate that Sari tended to speak rather bluntly and factually. "Arsen has been alive for—*for Astaroth's sake*—533 years? He was born in 1492. You'd think being a couple of centuries old, I'd be better at math. You would be very wrong." Sari grinned at her own joke before continuing, "In five centuries, he's been plotted against and maimed. Do you really think that he wouldn't guess that at the first opportunity, you'd try to leave Dragon's Den?"

You infuriate me, but you are nothing less than cunning.

Emeline didn't feel so *cunning* when he'd thought of something she'd do before she'd even actually tried to scheme. She glanced over at Samael.

“You’re going to tell him about this, aren’t you?”

His scales peeled back in what might have been the dragon equivalent of a snarky grin. His eyes shined with mirth. The little shit had already told Arsen.

Were her fears really that important to him? Did he have an insatiable curiosity? It was beginning to not make any sense to her why Arsen would risk the wrath of his father to keep her around. If no one else knew and she was a dirty little secret, then sure. Fine. She supposed he could do whatever he wanted because there were no repercussions. But the ladies of the court—Sari excluded—were going to complain to the officiates in New Haven about there being a human at Morningstar Manor. That news would get back to the king and queen.

What would happen then?

Worry settled in her chest, feeling like a block of ice in her stomach. A creeping sense of dread was building a home inside her. But there was also a bit of exasperation and self-hatred occupying her mind too. All of her thoughts came to the same conclusion.

She wasn’t worried for herself.

She was worried for Arsen.

The dragon beside her let out a rumble, drawing her attention. Emeline reached out, running her fingers along one of his horns. He seemed to enjoy it, leaning into her touch. Samael was tied to Arsen. If the crown killed Arsen, then that meant Samael would die too.

“You have to agree that it’d be better if I left,” she murmured, aware that Sari could hear her. Samael pulled back to look at her. Then he shook his head and crawled forward, laying his head on her lap. The dragon’s decision was final, and she wondered if Arsen’s decision had already been made too.

Would she live?

Or would he kill her before Samael’s life was put in danger?

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15

UNSPEAKABLE ACTS

EMELINE



Sulking.

Emeline was twenty-five years old and *sulking*.

Broodily staring out the window and wishing she had her phone so she could play *Complicated* by Avril Lavigne—all because she'd been told no.

They had to take a carriage to the coast, where a ferry would bring them across the channel to dock in Scaleridge. The *they* in question was Wyll, Sari, and her. Arsen had decided he was going to fly with Samael because they both hated tight spaces.

When she asked if she could ride the dragon—or at least see Samael at his full size—Arsen had looked at her and smirked. Then said no. He'd said if she wanted Sari to come along, then Emeline could ride with her down to the ferry.

Wyll wasn't allowed to ride in the carriage. He'd been tasked by Arsen to ensure the carriage made it safely to their next waypoint. The guard was riding a horse right next to the carriage, and Emeline had to bite back a smile every time she caught Sari staring. Wyll was grinning and chatting with a few of Arsen's guards, who were dressed in black leather armor.

Sari mentioned that there were two types of guards at the Manor. Armored ones, who tended to be crueler, belonged to King Eris. The ones who wore simple uniforms and leather jerkins on occasion were Arsen's sentries that he'd vetted personally.

"If it makes you feel better, Samael doesn't let anyone ride him. Except for Arsen, of course." Sari added the latter part as an afterthought, likely finding it too obvious to point out. She was seated across from Emeline, leaning back against the viridescent coach's cushions. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen Arsen ride in a carriage. Horses are rare, but he has ridden one before. If Samael doesn't try to eat it first."

That didn't make her feel better. Because there might be no chance of her riding a dragon now.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Do you want an honest answer?"

Emeline grimaced. Sari was brutally honest. "I'd ask for nothing less." At her encouraging nod, she only hesitated for a brief second before asking, "Arsen told me something that I find hard to believe."

"Did you experience a state of severe emotional turmoil immediately after?"

"…Yes…"

Sari grinned, looking satisfied with her answer. "Then it's probably true."

"How can you be so sure? His favorite hobby is either antagonizing people or murdering humans." Emeline paused, sitting back against the seat

as her eyes slid toward the window. “Sometimes at the same damn time.”

Sari laughed. “Often at the same damn time.”

Anxiety bubbled inside her, leading her to play absently with her bracelet. Emeline’s fingers ran over the smooth texture, encouraging herself to remember Luis was dead. Everyone was dead. Whether he did scheme to make money or not, did it really matter? What was done was done. But… She’d almost had a baby with someone whom she might not have known as well as she thought she did. What was the *correct* reaction to have?

She startled as Sari cleared her throat, offering her a kind smile. “Would you like to talk about it?”

Would she? Yes.

Emeline forced a smile like she’d done with Luis so many times before. “No, it’s not a big deal. It was something that was on my mind, but I’ll get over it.”

The darkness that was always there grew a bit, fissuring deeper with each lie. Arsen’s revelation had almost split her open, but she was still barely hanging on by a thread. How would Will, Harlem, Carolina, or Ana react to this news? Would they have stayed upset? At this point, the darkness was comfortable.

Emeline imagined herself isolated and safe.

Nothing could get to her if she stayed away from difficult conversations.

The complex emotions torturing her inside could stay cloaked in shadows.

“If it wasn’t a ‘big deal’ as you say, you wouldn’t have asked me about it.” Sari’s shrewd gaze felt like a light trying to shine down on Emeline. The light wanted to expose all her secrets and force her to face them. It made Emeline’s chest hurt as butterflies turned into bats in her stomach. Adrenaline surged, and she instinctively knew her body was going into a fight-or-flight response over a damn conversation. “If you don’t want to go into detail, I’ll respect your privacy. But I *am* here if you change your mind.”

Just like that, the pressure disappeared.

Emeline’s smile came a little easier. “Thank you.” She bit her lip, wondering what to say next. That brief light—while panic-inducing—had made the pressure on her chest a bit lighter after her nerves had settled. It made her wonder if talking about the Luis situation could bring her any relief with another perspective. A lick of frustration brushed against her.

“Fuck it.” Her posture straightened. “I was… involved with someone on the boat.”

Interest sparked in the fae’s eyes. “A lover?”

“Sort of? We had a one-night stand—we had sex once. That was it. He was seeing someone else before he, er, died, and I wasn’t jealous in the slightest. There weren’t any lasting feelings—it was an itch we both scratched,” Emeline messily explained, but she was dancing around the fact that she’d gotten pregnant from a one night. “Anyway, I thought I knew him. Happy-go-lucky and always had everyone’s best interest in mind. ‘Give the shirt off his back if someone needed it’ kind of guy. Well, Arsen told me last night that he actually knew about it all.”

“Knew about what?”

“The banished fae who came onboard.”

Sari’s eyebrows furrowed. “Banished? You mentioned it before. Sentences like that don’t happen very often. Did the fae have a name?”

Hm, had she never mentioned it? “His name was Robaire.”

Emeline watched blue eyes widened in horror. Sari’s hand slammed against the carriage door, opening it and barely missing one of the horses as a guard trotted next to the coach. The damned thing hadn’t even stopped when Sari disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Emeline’s eyes stung briefly, trying to search through the smoke to find her. She gripped the edges of the door, trying to steady herself as she saw Sari in the tree line, hunched over.

“Stop the carriage!” Wyll shouted, his voice bellowing over the scatter of hooves and the sound of the coach wheels screeching to a halt. “Guard the human! Lys, Oak—you’re with me.”

Fuck *that*. As soon as the carriage came to a stop, Emeline was picking up the skirt of her dress and running over to Sari. She was retching behind a tree, looking sickly. Did she eat something bad for breakfast? Wyll let out a growl of annoyance, redirecting orders for four guards to come with him and two to stay at the carriage.

Emeline reached out, rubbing her friend’s back in a soothing motion. She was terrible at bedside manners, so she did the only thing she was good at. Using humor to defuse a situation. “Come on. My sex life isn’t that disgusting to talk about.”

Having great hearing, Wyll dismounted nearby, but not before sending her a truly disgusted look. The gray horse whinnied as he shook his head.

His pale mane fell around him, and he promptly started sniffing the ground, looking for something to eat.

“I’m sorry,” Sari apologized, making a gagging noise.

Less than a second later, she was puking again. Emeline took a step back, trying not to focus on the sound of her throwing up. It was a hard life being a sympathetic puker because now she wanted nothing more than to start—*Stop thinking about it*.

Wyll took her spot as she staggered back, looking both annoyed and worried. “Are you unwell?”

No, Wyll. It’s perfectly normal to run out of a carriage and throw up. Emeline considered saying it, but quickly decided that Wyll disliked her enough. She wondered if she should give them privacy, but Sari made the decision for her.

“I’m alright. I apologize about this. It’s—Why didn’t you or Arsen tell me that Robaire was trying to come back?” There was a small break in Sari’s voice that made Emeline want to shrivel where she stood.

The woman who was naturally confident and always smiling now looked hurt.

Wyll shot Emeline a dirty look. She promptly flipped him off. “If that was supposed to be a secret, no one told me. And if you really care about her, you wouldn’t have hidden something that is clearly important to her.”

“You’re one to talk when you’re emotionally stunted. You don’t even know what you’re afraid of.”

Emeline bristled, her face heating up with barely contained rage. She didn’t even notice the trees swaying and the sound of footsteps approaching behind her—or she didn’t care because Wyll was going to get his ass handed to him. “You don’t know a fucking thing about me, you thrift store-looking Legolas, son of a—”

“Now, now. I thought we said we were going to play nicely with the other kids.” The fresh, woody scent hit her as Arsen walked past her, heading straight to Sari. He glanced down at the remnants of her breakfast. “That’s gross.” He pointed to it. “Why’d you do that?”

“Arsen,” Wyll greeted curtly. His lilac eyes were dark with worry and even a bit of regret forcing Emeline to wonder what exactly was going on. “She knows about Robaire.”

Understanding spread in his face, but Arsen arched an eyebrow. “It was going to happen sooner or later. If it weren’t for my father, he’d have left in

pieces the first time.” He took a step back from the tree, closer to Emeline’s side. “Should I thank you for not throwing up in the Manor? Lucifer forbid, you ruin one of the king’s priceless rugs.”

“You should thank me for not ripping your throat out, but I don’t want to ruin my nails,” Sari snapped, wiping her mouth. Wyll reached into the brown satchel he had at his side. He handed her a few leaves with a square stem and scalloped edges. Emeline caught the gentle note of mint in the air, realizing quickly that Wyll must favor chewing on mint leaves. “I can’t believe neither one of you told me he’d tried to come back.”

Wyll was the first to speak up. “It wouldn’t have changed things. He didn’t make it back. Arsen was keeping track of what he was doing in the human realm. There was no danger to you.”

Emeline frowned, shifting her weight and crossing her arms. If this was important for Sari to know, then it wasn’t Wyll’s decision to make. The guard had said that she was emotionally stunted, but his frontal lobe clearly wasn’t developed—pathetic considering he was over three hundred years old. Fae or human, males had to stop making decisions *for* women. A deep, feminine rage simmered inside her.

“I still had a right to know,” Sari pointed out, standing her ground. Emeline could have bowed at her feet. The lady murmured a thank you before grabbing the mint leaf and bringing it to her lips. She paused, her attention shifting to Arsen. “He’s dead? You’re sure?”

Arsen tipped his head in a nod. “Burned to death.”

“You made him suffer?”

The prince’s lip curled in a sharp grin. “Naturally.”

Emeline tilted her head. She wanted to know what Robaire did. Was it because she was nosy or because she wanted to know how to be there for her new friend? A little of both. However, if there was something that Emeline was good at, besides using dark humor to cope, it was knowing how to avoid difficult conversations.

She glanced around, eyeing the rest of the tree line and the woods surrounding the carriage. Twisted trees and ferns, but no snarky little dragon in sight. “Where’s Samael?”

“He found something he wanted,” Arsen replied shortly. “He’ll be back soon.”

Wyll frowned almost immediately, hearing that. “Is he terrorizing the spirits again?”

“No,” Arsen said with an innocent smile. If distrust was a bell, then Emeline was ringing the fuck out of it. The prince was many things, but innocent was never one of them. “The spirits terrorized *him*.”

Everyone stared at him, waiting for an explanation.

After allowing everyone to soak in a brief silence, he persisted. “He was flying when one of them launched a wooden arrow at him.”

Wyll squinted at Arsen. It was almost comical. “And what was Samael doing before that to incite such a response from *harmless* nature spirits?”

“Clearing his throat.”

Sari spoke up next. “He was burning trees, wasn’t he?”

Arsen smirked at that, but didn’t have anything to add as his head fell back, looking up at the sky. Emeline followed his gaze. There was nothing for a few heartbeats until she spotted a small shape with its wings tucked down, falling from the sky. Arsen spread his arms wide, but Emeline didn’t think there was a chance of him catching Samael. After all, it was like a baby dragon projectile coming out of the sky.

Faster than she realized, Samael was colliding with Arsen. She heard the air leave him, but the fae prince didn’t so much as take a step back. Instead, he was chastising the dragon out loud. “One of these days you’re going to break a wing. And I’m not going to listen to you complain about how much it hurts.”

Samael huffed, popping his head over Arsen’s shoulder to look at Emeline. His muzzle formed a serpentine smile. It might have been cute had his teeth not been coated in blood. Something pink and stringy was lodged between his sharp fangs.

“What in God’s name did you eat?” Emeline’s stomach acid was about to come up at this rate. “Please tell me that’s not an intestine.”

Wyll shook his head. “God has nothing to do with it. If we don’t want to meet him sooner than Lucifer intends—we need to get back on the road. Lady Grimwood, you should try to rest before we get to the ferry.”

They walked back to the carriage, and Sari was the first one to step inside. The breeze had his shoulder-length blond hair pushing against his jaw as Wyll looked back at her. “You too.”

Emeline’s annoyance sparked again.

“Go with Caesaria in the carriage,” Arsen said, standing next to Emeline. “I’ll ride Smoke. We need to pick up the pace; otherwise we’ll be in Scaleridge overnight.”

Wyll balked at the idea. “I’ll take the horse. I’m a *guard*.”

“I’m a prince.”

“You’re supposed to be in the carriage.”

Arsen nodded slowly, like the fae had difficulty understanding basic concepts. “And you’re supposed to be on the horse. If you’d like a reminder that I’m royalty, here’s an order. Get in the fucking carriage, Wyll, and stop wasting my time.”

Emeline bit the inside of her cheek, trying not to laugh at the blatant stupor on Wyll’s face. He nodded tersely, heading into the carriage, and that was when Emeline realized she was going to be stuck with the two lovebirds.

Gross.

Before she could head toward the carriage, Samael lifted his foreclaw, and one of his sharp claws caught hold of the wool cloak. She raised a brow at the petulant dragon. “You want to go into the carriage?”

“He wants you to ride the horse. Stay outside with him.”

Emeline looked up at Arsen, scowling while he called out orders for his guards to prepare to leave. “I don’t know how to ride a horse.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’ll be riding with me.”

“I’m in a dress.”

Arsen sighed, walking away from her. “Is it everyone’s mission today to announce the obvious? It’s dreadfully annoying. Get over here, little nightmare.”

He stood next to the gray horse, who looked far bigger than a normal horse. Smoke’s shoulder was taller than her. She was eye level with his flank. The creature was beautiful, but God, he was huge. She walked over, ready to argue. Arsen wasn’t having it. His hands were on her hips, hoisting her onto the beast before she could get a word out. Emeline froze, her heart beating faster when she saw how far away the ground was. Later, she’d realize she was gripping his wrists and would make the argument that she was worried about falling. Not that she’d felt safer with his hands on her.

Emeline wasn’t afraid, but unease fluttered away in her stomach.

“Arsen…”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared.” He smirked, glancing up at her. He pulled out of her grip, but one hand stayed on her leg. It was irritatingly distracting. He glanced over at a fae with long black hair twisted into a braid over his shoulder. “Lysander. Adjust the perimeter. There’s a band up

ahead. Once they see the royal insignia, they might steer clear, but if they don't—kill them."

Lysander placed a hand over his heart and bent his head. Then he turned to the other sentries. "You heard the prince. If they attack, no survivors."

Band? "Band of *thieves*?"

Arsen nodded once before hoisting himself onto Smoke behind her. Adding to her list of things to ignore about the prince was the fact that his movements were graceful. If she'd had to get on Smoke alone, she would have been swinging her legs and huffing like Samael when he got riled up.

Speaking of the dragon, she saw he'd flown onto the top of the carriage and was lying down. The surface was flat, with a few gold adornments that swooped around the borders of the structure. He lifted his head onto the gold railing, looking over at her as if to say, *'Are we ready to go yet?'*

"He seems mighty comfortable," she mused, going rigid when she felt Arsen's arms cage her in. Either he didn't notice her demeanor change, or he was ignoring it.

He reached for the horse's reins, making a clicking noise with his tongue. At the cue, Smoke started walking. A subtle wave of exhilaration came over her. This was a new experience, riding a horse.

She'd grown up in idealistic seaside towns, or wherever her father moved them for his work. Now she found herself wishing that she'd spent more time experiencing life rather than watching it pass her by.

"Your heart is beating fast, but I don't think you're afraid of thieves," Arsen reflected, humor an underlying current in his deep voice.

Emeline's eyes focused ahead on the dirt-worn path. The treeline on either side was clear, and it didn't look like there was anyone up ahead. As it stood, the thick, winding trees should have made it difficult for anyone to see the thieves if they'd wanted to stay hidden. Had Arsen really seen them from the sky?

"Did you come back because there were thieves? To warn Wyll?"

"No. I told you, Samael saw something he wanted."

She wanted to turn around and glare at him. But his arms were around her, and if she turned her head, their faces would be close. Well, more like her head and his jawline. He had a habit of towering over her, and she always had to crane her neck up to glare at him. Speaking of heated glances, Emeline was already all too aware of the heat at her back. Arsen's temperature ran hot. She wondered if it was because of all the demonic

blood in his veins. When it came to Lucifer's blood, what generation was he?

Could it be more potent than Leviathan's?

Was now really the time to wonder about his lineage when they could be attacked at any moment?

"Why did Samael have blood in his teeth?"

"Did he?"

"Arsen." This time she did turn her head partially, but it was to give him a sideways glare. Her eyes connected with a cocky grin, drifting upward until she met brilliant gold ones. "You know he did."

He tipped his head in a curt nod. "The thieves were split up into two groups. Sam and I scouted them overhead and saw the larger group was trying to harass other travelers out farther east, near the coastline. I left him to eat as he pleased, while I came to warn our group."

Emeline wrinkled her nose in disgust, facing forward again. "You called him Sam. I didn't realize he had a nickname. Does he call you anything? If not, I can think of a few choice names."

Prick. Sadist. Asshole.

Arsen didn't take the bait. "He does."

The comment was off-handed, inclining her to think that he was paying more attention to their surroundings than she was. They were next to the carriage in the same position Wyll had been in beside it. Four guards were arranged in a semi-circle out front, with two more guards behind them. Lysander was at the front, looking nonchalant and at ease. If she hadn't already known what Arsen had told him about the thieves, she'd have thought Lysander was completely relaxed.

But he had to be on guard, didn't he?

"Do you think they'll attack?" Emeline's eyebrows furrowed, more curious than worried. She knew what Samael and Arsen were capable of, never mind the sentries were hand-selected by the prince himself. Wyll was there, too, and Caesaria had to be powerful if she was descended from a duke of Hell. "Won't they know you're with us?"

"They know I don't travel by carriage. They're more likely to believe the ladies of the court are making a trip to Scaleridge and hope to rob them. Still foolish on their part because the ladies are all powerful fae."

"But won't they recognize you? Or is it common here for people to have golden eyes?"

“You ask a lot of questions for someone who won’t be alive for much longer,” Arsen noted, his voice deceptively light.

Emeline refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her annoyed. Instead, she gave him her silence and tried to see if she could spot anything amiss. She wasn’t sure who she expected to see. Someone hiding behind a tree? Lying by the roadside?

It was a move that was so gradual, Emeline should have missed it—but she felt it. Arsen’s strong arms ensnared her in a closer embrace, his grip tightening on the reins. Smoke’s ears flicked to the left, leading her gaze in the same direction.

Part of her expected to see nothing.

But hazel eyes connected with dark ones.

Emeline watched as figures stepped out from the trees. There was a mix of weapons borne by a group of about ten hardened fae males. They all wore leathers looked to be covered in char. If Arsen and Samael had burned the other half of their group, then they must have come from the ashes of who was left. While their physicalities differed, their expressions were all similar.

Hate.

Anger.

Resentment.

Emeline leaned back slightly, unnerved. “They’re angry, but they aren’t coming any closer.”

They simply stood there, staring.

The thieves only shifted their gaze, turning to match the carriage’s pace, when the royal entourage rode past them. All the guards kept their eyes locked on the thieves, but Arsen kept his gaze facing forward. She glanced over his arm, looking back at them. Her cheek brushed against his bicep, realizing that more than a few of their stares were on her now.

It made her skin crawl to see such visceral hate, and she hastily looked forward again.

“Why did you kill the other group?” she asked once they were out of sight.

Arsen was quiet for long enough that she didn’t think he’d answer. When he did, she felt his head bend to her ear. “Because I caught them trying to separate a mother from her daughters by the docks, with all the

males tied up. They were going to do to those daughters what Robaire tried to do to Caesaria when her guard was down in New Haven months ago.”

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16

WELCOME TO SCALERIDGE

EMELINE



Emeline staggered forward, barely catching herself from hitting the ground when she got off the horse. Arsen saw her stumble. Instead of reaching out a hand to steady her, he smirked and waited for her to fall. When she didn’t, he turned back to Smoke.

He was in the midst of loosening a strap to allow the horse to rest comfortably when Lysander approached him. Hand over heart, the guard

bowed his head. “Your Highness.”

“Lysander.” Arsen tipped his head, acknowledging him. “If there’s no word from us before the sun hits the trees, then I want you and the rest of the guard heading back to the Manor before nightfall.”

“What of an escort back?” Lysander’s brow furrowed in disbelief. “Are you not concerned about the thieves? They might seek retribution. Samael snacked on half of their party.”

“He did not. He burned most of them and only ate a few.” Arsen arched an eyebrow. “Do you believe I can’t handle them?”

The dark-haired guard shook his head briskly, trying another approach. “We swore an oath to protect you.”

“And you *will* by getting back to the Manor before sunset so that I don’t have to worry about any of you.” Arsen’s grin was surprisingly sincere. “We won’t be out late in town either. If we don’t see each other this evening, then meet us tomorrow. Midmorning. We can travel back together then.”

Lysander still didn’t look thrilled. “Are you sure you won’t need any guards while in Scaleridge? The town’s been hearing whispers of strange travelers. Fae from Haven.”

“We’re *all* fae from Haven. Plus, he’s got me,” Wyll called over from the carriage. His hand extended in the direction of the steps where Sari descended with his assistance. “Don’t be jealous. It’s not a good look on you.”

“Everything is a good look on me.”

Emeline shrugged her shoulders, nodding. “He’s got a point.”

Lysander *was* attractive. Point blank. It was actually unfair how everyone here was attractive. Maybe there was a balance. Pretty faces for ugly hearts. Robaire must have gotten the bad hand from fate if he was ugly and a deplorable creature.

Her thoughts shifted as she heard Samael growl. His wings took flight as he leaped off the carriage. Emeline’s gaze widened, the dragon’s name stuck in her throat as he used Lysander’s trapezius as a backboard, turning, and landing on his claws.

Wyll snickered, while Sari cleared her throat to hide a laugh. Emeline leered at the dragon, who jumped into Arsen’s arms. The prince didn’t look pleased either, but he didn’t scold the dragon. Or if he did, it wasn’t out loud.

“Charming,” Lysander said, looking positively miffed. He glanced toward Arsen, his voice noticeably more sullen. “We’ll stay here until later this afternoon and will be here to escort you in the morning should you not return tonight.” The guard paused, and then his eyes brightened with a question. “What of the thieves? If they attack us, is your order the same? To kill them?”

Arsen tilted his head as Samael glanced up at him. “There were fifteen fae. Are you confident the six of you can take more than two bastards each?”

“Would you have allowed us to swear an oath to you if you thought we were weak? Samael would have eaten us already like he did with those who failed.” Lysander’s eyes darkened with a trace of resentment, but it was mostly annoyance. “And even though we’ve sworn that oath, he still tries to bite us.”

Emeline watched with blatant amusement as Samael cocked his head, blinking a little too quickly. Her lips rose in a Cheshire smile. “Don’t even pretend to be innocent. You’re about as innocent as he is.”

In an unexpected turn of events, the prince ignored her. Not a glance. Not a smirk. Nothing. A line formed between her brows, but she wasn’t sure what his problem was. He’d been fine not even five minutes ago. Samael looked like he wanted to jump into her arms next, but Arsen wrapped his arms tighter around the grumbling beast. Then he headed toward the ferry without another word.

She glanced over at Sari with a question in her eyes. Sari shrugged. Wyll and Lysander were discussing how to approach the thieves on the way back, so they weren’t any help. Deciding it to be a lost cause, Emeline shifted her attention to the coastline.

The ferry ride over to Scaleridge wouldn’t be a long one. She could see the town in the far distance based upon a hill. The landscape varied, but she could make out pine forests, cove-lined beaches, and limestone rises. Anticipation rose inside her at the thought of seeing a medieval-adjacent seaside town.

“You look excited to ride the ferry.” Arsen’s voice was a couple of meters behind her, and she turned to see him staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face. “Does the boat bring back fond memories of all your friends dying?”

Emeline's anger sparked. "What's got you in such a pissy mood all of a sudden?"

"Pissy?" he echoed, looking affronted. "I am not pissy."

The sea breeze raked its invisible fingers through his hair, making it disheveled like it had been last night. *Huh.* That reminded her.

"I'm mad at you." At his questioning look, Emeline carried on, "You left me last night to clean up all the glass and everything else you swept off the counter."

"I don't remember you complaining."

Even the weather was on his side. That same sea breeze did nothing to cool her cheeks. "Not what we're talking about. You—you left."

"Did you want me to stay?"

Yes? No. *No*. Certainly not.

He didn't give her the opportunity to answer. "From the way it sounds, you'd much rather have Lysander around instead."

Emeline stared at him. "Why are you bringing Lysander into this?"

The prince didn't answer as Wyll and Sari walked over to join them. Samael finally pulled out of Arsen's arms, latching onto Emeline with his claws and holding onto her cloak until she could grab him. Thank God the wool was thick because if it'd been a chemise or a lighter dress underneath, he would have certainly scratched her by accident.

"Are we ready?" Sari inquired, pushing a lock of dark hair behind her ear. She pointed her finger at Emeline, and with a jolt of surprise, Emeline felt the hood of her cloak rise. "You need to hide those human features of yours." The fae's eyes slid to Wyll's. "The ferry should take about an hour, no?"

"Less, if that grumpy devil changes the current," Wyll noted, gesturing to the boat, where a fae stood waiting for them. "Let's not keep the ferryman waiting."

Emeline was the first to follow Wyll, more annoyed with Arsen than usual. If Wyll could sense he was in a bad mood after seconds of being in his company, then Emeline was right to think he was being pissy. She heard quiet conversation behind her, but didn't listen to them. She was more concerned with not slipping down the stone steps while Samael kept swiveling his head to look at everything they passed.

A bird overhead.

Arsen a few steps behind her.

The ferryman waiting to greet them.

It was like trying to wrangle a hyperactive puppy who wasn't sure if he wanted to be held or not. Both he and Arsen were acting strangely. Thankfully, she managed not to slip, meeting the ferryman halfway.

Emeline wasn't sure how old the fae was, but he appeared to be in his late forties. His hair was a reddish-brown color, streaked with gray. His beard was full and rounded, with the sides neatly trimmed. It was paired with a prominent mustache that hid his lips from sight. The ferryman's cotton tunic might have been white a long time ago, but now it appeared stained from years of wear. Around his hips, there was a leather belt and a satchel.

The moment they all stood before him, the fae placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head forward. "Your Highness. Nice weather for a sail, but I suspect any boat will sail exceptionally well with you onboard."

Emeline snorted inwardly. "I beg to differ."

The ferryman shifted his attention to her, peering at her curiously. "And who is this?"

"My attendant." Sari stepped forward, blocking her slightly from view.

Upon seeing the duke's daughter, the ferryman mimicked the same greeting he'd done with Arsen to Sari. A hand over the heart and a bow. "My lady. Does this mean His Highness has chosen a princess?"

Emeline winced inwardly. That would be awkward, considering the prince had his mouth on her breast last night. Thank God Sari wasn't interested in him, or she'd be a shit friend.

"I'm still considering my options," Arsen replied apathetically.

Emeline leered, her voice quieter, but it was useless when fae had heightened senses. "Women are not ice cream flavors."

The ferryman stepped to the side, having a better look at her. "What is your name? Who are *you* to speak to the Second Prince so disrespectfully?"

Ah. That was a great question. No one, really. But she had no intention of stopping her plans to antagonize Arsen. It was his fault for bringing her here. He should have left her as fish bait if he had a problem with her attitude.

Wyll answered for her, "His Highness has a schedule to keep, Mr. Laurel."

The ferryman had the decency to look embarrassed. "Right. This way, all."

Emeline glanced down at Samael, noticing that, while he looked relaxed, his golden eyes were narrowed. It was like the dragon equivalent of resting bitch face. She looked back at Arsen to see a similar expression on his face, but his eyes looked far away. They both looked caught up in their own thoughts.

Were they talking to each other?

It had to be about something that mutually annoyed both of them; otherwise, why would they be wearing such similar expressions? Emeline sighed deeply.

It would be nice if she could understand Samael.

What sort of things would a dragon have to say?

.——— ———.

It turned out that the hour boat ride would only take them twenty minutes. Emeline stood at the back of the boat, separated from the rest of the party. Sari and Wyll were chatting toward the forecastle, talking about God knows what. Samael had ditched her for flying overhead. That, or he enjoyed antagonizing the birds. Before his arrival, they'd been gliding in the early afternoon winds, but now they were busy squawking. She almost flinched when one came within a meter of Samael's snapping teeth. Poor things. He truly was a menace.

Emeline had hoped for some peace and quiet in the back, but then a familiar shadow joined hers. She didn't look his way, choosing to keep her eyes on the waves.

"If you're going to try to provoke me, could we reschedule? I'm busy today." She paused with an afterthought. "And the whole *'I murdered your friends'* thing you've got going on is starting to get really old."

Emeline could hear the weariness in her voice.

Traveling via carriage, then horseback, and now ferry was a lot to go into a seaside town. If she were back in the human realm, it'd have been a car ride and then—*sure*—a ferry. But she wouldn't have had to deal with the emotional turmoil of riding a horse with an attractive prince who made it his personal mission to provoke her about the death of her friends, and how she wasn't going to be alive much longer.

If Emeline wanted anything right now, it was a nap.

"You sound tired."

“I thought you were over everyone saying the obvious today?”

“And just think, you wanted to try to escape.” He kept on musing, clearly ignoring her busy schedule. “Samael said Sari enlightened you rather quickly on how difficult it’d be to leave. This is the only ferry, and I don’t allow ships to leave the realm very often.”

Emeline slid a cutting gaze over to him. “Can you blame me? You want me dead. Being here is only going to get me killed. Why would I *want* to stay?”

“I thought you’d made a friend in Caesaria.”

“Friends don’t let friends get needlessly killed. Besides, I invited her on this trip, and I’ve been stuck with you most of the time instead,” she said flatly, aware of the amusement gleaming in his eyes. Of course he was enjoying this. “At least she and Wyll are using this as an opportunity to talk.”

Arsen shrugged one shoulder. “No one said you had to come back here. You made the choice to isolate yourself away from the others. Having a pity party is pathetic.”

This time, Emeline did turn fully toward him. “Excuse me?”

He remained facing the sea, keeping his gaze on the water. “Who do you think you’re fooling, little nightmare? I heard Sari speaking to you about all the things to do in Scaleridge. The shopping. The eating. The culture shock it will be to see so many fae in one spot. You got this distant look on your face and made your way back here, instead of continuing to chat with her. So. What’s wrong?”

“Why would I tell you when you’re going to use it to aggravate me?”

“I’ll aggravate you regardless.” He looked at her now, the smirk on his face almost imperceptible. “Or maybe you’re upset that Lysander isn’t here to guard you.”

Lysander? “This is the second time you’ve brought him up out of nowhere.” Emeline squinted at him, suspicion beginning to stir in her chest. “Why?”

“Do you have an issue with me speaking about my guards? Wait, let me rephrase that. My *attractive* guards.”

Emeline’s gaze narrowed further. “Arsen Seaspire.” His head turned at the use of his full name, a stormy look in his eyes. “Are you jealous?”

“Jealous?” He scowled, glaring down at her like she’d suggested he go make flower crowns with his abusive father. “Of Lysander? Are you an

idiot? Don’t answer that; I’ve already known the answer for quite some time now.”

Immediately defensive? *Check*.

Looked like he wanted to kill her? *Check*.

Physically attracted to her? *Confirmed.*

Emeline smiled smugly. The stars were aligning, and whether Arsen wanted to admit it or not, to some degree—he did appear a little jealous. “Oh, good. Then you won’t mind me propositioning him for se—”

“Choose your next words very carefully,” Arsen cut her off, his body facing hers as well. They were both glaring at each other. If anger and spite followed the law of reflection, then it was bouncing between their gazes and steadily growing hotter. “You’re deluded if you think that you can have sex with my guards.”

The fucking audacity.

“I can have sex with whomever I damn well please.” Emeline was seconds away from throwing him overboard. “This realm might be stuck in the medieval ages, but I will not stand here and let you think you can tell me what to do with *my* body.”

His jaw clenched, annoyance licking at his pride because he didn’t argue with that fact. Instead, he shifted his stance. “You’ll have a hard time finding any takers when I say you’re off-limits.”

“You can’t do that.”

Arsen leaned in closer. “I’m royalty. If I want to make a decree that the grass is blue and the sky is fucking green, then it will be so. My orders are absolute.”

“If they were—” Emeline didn’t back down, lifting her chin in clear defiance. Her heart was beating fast from the proximity of his face, but she refused to give in. “—Then why did Robaire challenge you, saying that his exile was not approved by the king. He questioned your judgment then.”

Arsen’s eyes were mottled with flecks of gold, a mesmerizing inferno. Ire scorched his gaze. Oh, he was mad. Probably even more so because she’d used Robaire as evidence for her argument. “Have I ever told you that you are the most—”

“—charming, intelligent, cunning—” she offered, inciting his anger further.

“—infuriating human I have ever met,” Arsen practically snarled.

Emeline gave him a coy smile, fluttering her lashes in the same manner Samael had earlier. “You’ve never spent a full day with me, Your Highness. You don’t know how infuriating I can be.”

She walked away from Arsen, choosing Wyll and Sari’s company over his. The prince was obviously jealous over something she’d said about one of his guards. Honestly, it was ridiculous.

Sari was gorgeous.

Wyll was attractive for an overprotective, lovestruck asshole.

Arsen was a walking wet dream. The other two ladies of the court were stunning. There was nothing wrong with saying she found someone attractive when she’d meant it in a platonic way. She had no plans of having sex with *any* of them.

Since the loss of her pregnancy, Emeline hadn’t had sex with anyone. It wasn’t something she was ready for, and she still hadn’t processed that those feelings—that desire—had come back with Arsen, of all people. The last person she needed to have any sort of feelings about—purely sexual or not—was that devil.

Emeline sighed inwardly, but she faked a smile when she caught Sari’s grin. The boat ride shouldn’t be much longer. Then she could distract her busy mind with something else.

Something new.

.——— ———.

Scaleridge was the most breathtaking place she’d ever seen.

And she’d been to a lot of beautiful places.

Emeline had gotten lost on Mount Inari, surrounded by thousands of beautiful torii gates. She’d survived the Australian wilderness, accidentally swimming in a lake infested with freshwater crocodiles. Emeline had even explored the beautiful shopping districts in Miraflores, Peru, and she’d walked the streets of Busan, South Korea.

But nothing compared to this.

Romanesque architecture that Arsen said laid the groundwork for Gothic design in the human realm. The rounded arches, large towers, and decorative arcading were supposedly fae influence. Ancient limestone walls lined part of the city to protect it from attacks that would never happen. Not

as long as the prince was there to guard the Veil from humans and exiled fae.

Children laughed in the streets, pointing to vendors and stalls. There was magic all around, but none that was inherently dangerous. Brooms cleaned storefronts with no person standing beside them. Flowers bloomed underneath windows, releasing soft fragrances. The sun was warm against her cloak, and she was tempted to take it off. However, the moment she tried to, Sari cautioned her against it.

“Scaleridge is safer than most, but it’s still not safe. There’s been attacks lately against…” she hesitated, her eyes flickering to Arsen.

The bastard shook his head, earning a frown from both women.

“Against what?” Emeline prompted, placing a hand on her hip underneath her cloak. “What are you both not saying?”

“There’s no point in hiding it from her,” Wyll came to her defense, but he didn’t look particularly pleased about it.

His eyes were roaming the streets, clearly looking for any threats to royalty. From what Emeline could see, the only thing Arsen was in danger from was being run into by a child. A few darted past them—two nearly running into Arsen as an older fae chased after them.

She stopped beside the group, her embarrassed smile lighting up her murky-green eyes. Tawny colored hair fell around her shoulders. “I’m sorry about t—*Oh!*” Fear streaked across her face. She quickly looked away from Arsen’s gaze. “My apologies, Your Highness. I didn’t realize it was you from behind…” Emeline saw that the fae’s posture was tense. She wouldn’t look Arsen in the eyes. “Are His Highness, Lady Grimwood, and Sir Wyll heading to the Tav? Elara will be most pleased to have her favorite patrons back.”

“To line her coin purse?” Wyll inquired with a grin.

The newcomer sent him a quick glare. “To enjoy the company,” she corrected before noticing there was a fourth member in attendance. One who was holding the prince’s dragon. “Oh. And who might you be…er… I’m sorry, I don’t know how to address you, my lady.”

“Emeline is fine.” She smiled with a touch of nervousness settling in her.

What was the appropriate manner in which to act? Emeline wasn’t the right person to ask, considering she’d thrown a vase at their prince.

“She’s my attendant, Selene,” Sari answered with a kind smile. “She’s of no bloodline.” She changed the subject quickly to something easier. “As for the Devil’s Tav, are you sure Elara has enough wine? The last time His Highness and Sir Wyll ventured in, the barrels were empty by night’s end.”

Selene grinned at her, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. “That’s why we keep reserves in the back now.”

Wyll and Sari had a laugh at that, but Emeline’s attention snagged on that simple move. What Emeline saw was not round nor pointed. Her ears… They were somewhere in between.

Selene was half-human. Or at least, more human than fae. It clicked then. What Sari had said before in the kitchens. That’s why Scaleridge was considered *open-minded.*

Because at one point, fae and humans had co-existed in the seaside town.

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17

THE DEVIL'S TAV

EMELINE



"Ah, well, I need to go find the children before they get into even more trouble." Selene brought her hand over her heart, bowing her head toward the prince. "Your Highness"—then Sari—"Lady Grimwood"—and then Wyll—"Sir Wyll."

The half-fae offered a kind smile and wave to Emeline before disappearing in the same direction as the children.

Wyll leaned to the side slightly. His voice was a stage whisper. “Those are called manners. Seeing as you’ve never displayed any, I wasn’t sure if you knew what they were.”

Emeline shot the guard a dirty look. “I’ll show you manners when I shove one of those pretty daggers up your ass.” Then she redirected that anger with a bit of incredulousness at the prince. “Are you serious? You’re all *‘I hate humans’* blah blah blah, and then you’re protecting a town where fae and humans have been fucking, having little half-fae babies?”

Sari covered her mouth, but it was futile. A laugh was barely smothered. “If I knew you were going to say that, I’d have told you sooner. You truly have no regard for what you say, do you?”

“No manners,” commented Wyll.

Arsen arched a brow. “I told you that fae and humans once walked the realm together. Did you expect them not to procreate? Or *‘fuck’* as you so eloquently described it.”

Emeline didn’t want to think about how attractively the swear rolled off his tongue.

He nodded for Wyll and Sari to start walking while he stayed back a couple of paces to speak with Emeline. The royal guard looked annoyed, and she thought it was probably very difficult to guard someone when the person he was supposed to protect was behind him. *Oh well.*

Not her prince, not her problem.

Her eyebrows drew together as she tried to understand it all. “Fae and humans were together until the realms split, weren’t they?” When Arsen nodded, she continued, “Then why the anger? The prejudice?”

“There will always be hate and prejudice as long as people are created differently. It exists in humans, and it exists in fae.” The way he spoke reminded her that he’d been alive for a long time compared to her. It was easy to forget when she saw the other side of him more often and not this wise, reflective one. Arsen eyed a shopkeeper, who quickly ducked his head when they walked by, but said nothing to him. Only to her. “If it weren’t for Riven, the families would have been forced apart like the realm. The king might have allowed for the half-fae children to enter Haven, but I doubt he was the one who extended the offer.”

“Riven is the crown prince, right? Your brother?”

Arsen gave a subtle nod, but didn’t have anything to add to the conversation. It gave Emeline time to mull over his words while taking in

the scenery with a fresh perspective. There were half-humans here, or at the very least, fae with human blood in them.

How would that impact their life spans? Was Selene in her twenties or thirties, or did she only appear to be? Did they have heightened senses? What was life like in Dragon's Den if there were people like the ones in Haven who hated anything to do with humans?

The day was too bright and endless for such troubling thoughts. Emeline shifted her focus to the town. Shops and homes densely populated the area. Most were made from stone with terracotta roofs. The reddish-orange structures were vibrant, as were the flowers decorating the town.

"What sort of flowers are those?" Emeline pointed to a male fae who was walking out of a florist's shop with a bouquet, and wearing a broad grin on his face.

He looked to be in his forties and wore a medieval renaissance three-piece suit. Salt-and-pepper hair was swept back, and he looked like he was in for a great night. The flowers in his hand were clustered on tall, vertical spikes. The petals were tubular, with two of them almost reminding her of… Well, Samael.

The blue flowers on the vertical stem looked like the snout of a dragon.

Arsen confirmed her suspicions, a rare, fleeting smile on his lips. It left the moment the stranger looked at the prince, eyes wide, and quickly glanced down at the ground.

The fae bowed, hand over heart, offering a smile. "Your Highness. Lovely day for a stroll."

"It is. Gifting Samael's flower, are you?" Arsen stopped walking to greet the commoner. They had somewhere to be, and Arsen patiently stood there, waiting for the man to answer him like they had all the time in the world.

It was surprisingly genuine.

Wholesome, even.

Despite the man's refusal to meet Arsen's eyes, he looked happy at the prince's question. "Yes, Your Highness. I'm hoping he'll say yes."

Arsen smirked. "That's a rare shade for this time of year. Quite expensive. He's lucky to have you." The fae blushed and bowed, while the group began to walk again. Knowing she had questions, the prince answered them. "That flower only grows in Dragon's Den. The people here have named it Samael's flower and only gift it when they intend to… I

suppose the human equivalent is propose. All important milestones in a fae's life—at least here in Dragon's Den—are marked by Samael's flower."

She looked down at the black dragon, who now tipped his head back to look up at her. "You're a spoiled brat, aren't you?"

Samael squinted at her.

Emeline mimicked his expression. "Don't even pretend to act offended. You sleep on plush pillows, he lets you burn whatever you want, and I've been carrying you since we were pier side."

Arsen exhaled sharply, amused. He nodded politely at the people who saw him and offered a customary bow. Fae of all shapes and sizes appeared to respect him, but none met his gaze. It was really starting to bother her.

"Why won't any of them look you in the eye?" Emeline finally asked, a quiet anger simmering in her voice.

She didn't know why she was upset. It wasn't because it was rude… She was rude to Arsen at almost every turn. It was because… because…

Whatever the reason was, it evaded her.

"Because they're afraid."

"That you'll use your power on them?"

Arsen's lips pressed together like he was getting ready to speak. But then he didn't. He held himself back from clarifying further, and instead, gestured to a building they were approaching. Unlike the others, this one was made of wood painted a dark emerald color. The roof was made of terracotta, but it was black instead of reddish-orange. Hanging out front was a sign with '*Devil's Tav'* written across it in red. There was a symbol painted in gold underneath the red lettering. Emeline wasn't sure what it was supposed to represent, but it looked like a chalice with an 'X' and an inverted triangle over it. She sniffed.

Roasted meat and something sweet danced in the air. *Finally*.

"Thank God. I'm starving." Emeline's stomach chose that exact moment to rumble, causing Samael to shake with amusement.

Wyll reached for the door first, but it was flung open by someone stumbling out. Emeline wasn't fast enough, but Samael was—a vicious snarl tore from the dragon's throat, forcing the drunk fae to sober up and narrowly miss them.

Venomous fangs bared, Samael didn't calm down until Arsen's hand scratched under his jaw. "You're fine," he mused. "Put those teeth away before you scare the patrons. Elara will never welcome us here again."

“Says you,” Wyll piped up behind them. “Us lesser folk always have a tab open with her.”

Sari cleared her throat, her voice pointed and sharp. “Oh, then you come here more often than I thought? Seems like the sort of place one would come to find pleasure in company.”

“The only company he finds here is mine, and if you ask him, it’s no pleasure,” Arsen replied as they crossed the threshold into the tavern. Wyll made an indignant noise. There was clearly a story there, but she wasn’t enlightened. “We’ll have to find Elara and ask if the table is open.”

Emeline peeked around, noticing the tavern was quite large. There was an area to her left where the bar was. It spanned almost the length of the entire room, and there were several fae working behind it, preparing drinks and serving customers who sat on the stools provided. Tables littered the area mostly to the right of the tavern. The center of the room was kept clear. From the outside, Emeline had remembered there being windows on a higher level. This establishment had two floors, leading her to notice a staircase near the back wall.

Overhead was torchlight. What looked like a mix of black iron and wood hung down from the ceiling: a chandelier. Windows made up part of the wall to the far right, but they had crisscross iron situated in the glass, which might have been to protect the place.

“It always is.”

The new voice came from behind the wooden bar, closest to the entrance. A middle-aged fae stood there, drying a steel mug with a worn cloth. She grinned at Arsen. Her gaze was slightly off, like she was looking behind him. Perhaps it was better than not looking at him at all, but once again… Emeline was pissed off.

She had to be hangry.

That would explain the unnecessary emotional turmoil.

“Elara,” Wyll greeted, coming to the front of the high-top counter. “Nice to see you again. One Perry, a honey wine, and two ales please.”

The gray-eyed fae nodded, lifting her hand to gesture toward the seating area of the Tav. “That’s different. Will the usual table work for His Highness?”

The table in question was a bit isolated from the others, situated between the staircase and the windows. Four chairs were stationed at the rectangular table, with one of them hosting a cozy-looking pillow.

Emeline smirked, looking down at the small dragon in her arms. “What was that about you not being spoiled?”

Samael let out an amused snort. Thin wisps of smoke left his nostrils. He even looked like he was holding his muzzle slightly higher—as if to say, *‘So what?’*

“I can guess who the honey wine is for. One ale must be for Sir Wyll. And the Perry must be for you,” Elara noted, glancing at her speculatively. “Who are you?”

“I’m Sa—” Emeline began when she received what should have been a gentle nudge to her side. Clearly, Sari didn’t know her own strength because it felt like the wind was knocked out of her, and she wheezed, “*Jesus fucking Christ.* Lady Grimwood. I’m Lady Grimwood’s attendant, Emeline.”

Samael turned in her grasp with his foreclaws resting on her shoulder. He must have been looking back at Sari or Wyll, but he was growling. The sinister rumbles shook his body, leading Arsen to take back the dragon like a cantankerous toddler. Amusement and something else entirely slid into his features.

“I’ve never seen Samael taken with another fae before.” Elara sounded a bit awed at the sight. “Nor has Lady Grimwood ever brought an attendant. You must be a very special fae.”

Emeline gave her an awkward smile before turning away to head toward the table. She hadn’t even taken a step when the cloak’s hood was pulled down. An unnatural breeze swept her hair over her shoulder, causing her to glance back at Elara.

The woman behind the bar continued, “Or a very special human. No fae says *‘Jesus fucking Christ’* in normal conversation.”

“She’s not normal.” Arsen brought her cloak back up with his hand instead of magic and tugged on the fabric—bringing her closer to his side. “And I would appreciate your discretion unless you’d prefer Samael to claw the eyes out from your patrons. They’re staring a little too long for his liking.”

Emeline met the prince’s gaze, annoyed at being shoved around and having someone answer for her. It also could have been that she was hangry, her side ached, and Elara was—yet again—not meeting his eyes.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Elara murmured, clearing the air with a chagrined smile. “Today’s special is roast chicken, fresh vegetables from

the fields near the Eastern Cliffs, and bread that Selene baked first thing this morning."

Wyll spoke up next, his posture straightening. "She's still working here? I thought she had her hands full at the orphanage."

"You know her." Elara grinned. "She's a hard worker, that one."

"That she is…" There was affection or fondness in Wyll's voice.

Emeline sneaked a glance at Sari. What she saw was a tightness around her mouth and a brief flicker of annoyance. Humor replaced starvation but only for a brief second.

That brought the count to two jealous royals today.

Thankfully, they started to make their way over to the table. Arsen sat closest to the window, with Samael draped over one of the cushions. His back was to the wall, and he faced the rest of the Tav. Emeline sat across from him, with Sari next to her. Wyll dragged over a chair.

Drinks were placed in front of them. The scent of pears rose from her wooden beer mug. She took a tentative sip, allowing the refreshing notes of poached pears and honey to slide down her throat.

It was tasty.

Hot chocolate was still better.

But this would do. For now.

Her tongue slid across her bottom lip, savoring the taste. Emeline drew her gaze up, feeling eyes on her, only to find Arsen staring.

Specifically, at her mouth.

It was a moment caught in time that muffled the background noise of the Tavern. She watched as he ripped his gaze away, choosing to stare out the window with a slight furrow between his eyebrows.

The noise of the tavern came back.

And Emeline chose violence.

"How do you know Selene?" She placed her chin in her left palm, a sly grin beginning to rise. "Sounds like you know her well from what Elara was alluding to."

Wyll's attention moved between Emeline and Sari before settling on the human. The corners of Emeline's smile had a wicked touch.

Payback for the forest comments, motherfucker. She was perfectly in tune with her emotions. She knew exactly what she'd feel if she allowed herself to. In fact, Emeline was so good at emotions that she was able to

pick up on others' too. Like forbidden love between a lady and a royal guard.

Granted, Sari had already confirmed it in the kitchens—so it made sense that Wyll was the one holding back.

"Her family has always taken care of the orphanage. I knew one of her ancestors. It's where I was before I found work as a kitchen servant at the Manor," Wyll said curtly, "I don't know her *well*."

"You must know her well enough if you're so certain that she's a hard worker." Sari's gaze cut to Wyll's with a subtle accusation.

Emeline wasn't the only one to choose violence.

The Prince of Antagonization reared his devilish head. "The Lord Dyer's son is equally hardworking, but it's more in regard to his frequent letters about courting you, should I not take your hand in marriage."

Not only did he throw gasoline on the metaphorical fire, but he contained it. Sari didn't have a right to get upset with Wyll when there were other people in Sari's life also trying to court her.

It made Emeline wonder how often Arsen had to defuse the situation between the two lovebirds without acknowledging the feelings present. Did Wyll ever talk about his feelings with him? The idea of Arsen being Wyll's therapist was almost comical. If it weren't for the fact that they'd had… somewhat… of a heart-to-heart in the kitchen last night, then she would have been sure Arsen was heartless.

Instead, she'd found out that he'd been abused as a child.

Glancing out the window, Emeline thought about his scars. The ones on his face. How did he get them? He couldn't have done that to himself, right? Someone had to have inflicted those.

"Emeline, did you explore the human world often?"

It was Sari who'd asked her. The fae brought her honey wine to her lips, taking a long sip. Emeline could barely taste the alcohol in her Perry, and she wondered if Elara catered to each species; fae wine for the magical beings and lesser concentrations for those who were partially human.

Remembering she'd been asked a question, Emeline met Sari's gaze and nodded. "When I was in the military, I went all over. Japan. Singapore. Australia. Panama. Peru. Chile. There were still a lot of places I wanted to visit, but I didn't do a full twenty years. Decided to get out after one enlistment."

Wyll gave her a theatrical once-over. "You? *You* were in the military?"

If Emeline had hackles, they'd have been raised by now. "Yes. What of it?"

"You don't look like you could fight anyone off." He pointed to her arm, as if that explained everything. "Any fae could break your limbs like a tree branch."

She sat back in her seat, giving him a dull look. "Yeah, well, in my realm, I didn't have to worry about murderous non-humans. There were no monsters."

"Monsters exist in every realm," Arsen interjected, the usual spark of amusement gone from his eyes. "They might be harder to identify in the human realm, but they're there. Biding their time until something they want is in front of them."

A morose shiver ran down her spine.

He wasn't wrong.

How many serial killers in history had lured their victims in with gentle smiles? How many people were still missing, and their families had no clue what had happened to them? Wasn't that what was happening to her?

Did Arsen get that letter sent off to her parents? The vague "*Hey, we're heading into open water, and I won't have cell service for a bit*" was not going to pacify them for long. Luis's and Ana's parents would wonder where their children were. Emeline's parents would catch wind of reports being made, and then they'd be worried about her. And even if she did pacify her parents—the others would want to know about their children.

Ugh. Emeline reached for her Perry, taking a longer drink.

There wasn't enough alcohol in it to deal with the fallout of the human realm. What if everyone thought Emeline had murdered the entire crew because she was the only one still alive and in contact with her parents?

Again.

Not enough alcohol for any of it.

"What made you quit?" Wyll was surprisingly curious about her life, and even Sari appeared a bit taken aback. It was a nice change from being all anti-human. Barely.

Emeline tilted her head a bit, thinking. "It didn't make me happy. Exploring new countries was interesting, but there was an absence that I couldn't ignore. Changing commands every few years… It was a new place with new people, whom I barely got to know before it was time to move again. Even when I was younger—with my dad's job—I never stayed in

one place for long. So instead of adventures… I wanted to look for a place where I belonged."

"Did you?" Sari inquired, her voice teeming with curiosity. "Find a place to belong?"

Emeline's sad smile was almost imperceptible as she shook her head, bringing the beer mug to her lips. "No. Not really."

Without any warning, Arsen's grip around his glass tightened. She heard the soft crack before his hand let go. A sharper smile spread across his lips. "Wyll, I'll be leaving early. Stay here with them, and if you decide to go shopping, stay away from the Southern Ward."

"You're speaking as if you're going alone. You—"

Arsen cut him off briskly. "Samael will be with me. You're not to leave these two."

From the way the prince spoke, there wasn't any room for discussion. The guard's jaw clenched in anger, but it appeared he understood. "Lysander should have come with us. He could have stayed with them, so you didn't have to do this alone."

What did *that* mean?

"What are you about to do?" Emeline was the one who asked the question, but it looked like Sari was also quite curious, if not worried. Her expression pinched, tinged with concern. "Is it dangerous?"

"Worried about me?" Arsen asked slyly, looking at her in a way that made a flush want to creep onto her cheeks.

She rolled her eyes, feigning indifference. "Just want to make sure that Samael will come back alive."

The dragon lifted his head, peeking over the table. He rested his head on the wooden surface, looking exceptionally pleased.

"He'll be fine. He's looking forward to it."

At that, the dragon shook his head.

Samael earned a glare from Arsen. "Don't lie and say you'd rather stay here. You wanted to leave earlier, before we even came to the Tav."

Emeline raised her eyebrows. "Is that true?" The dragon shook his head again. Arsen's glare flattened. She resisted the urge to smile smugly. "You know, maybe I would believe you if I was able to hear Samael."

Sari scoffed quietly. "There's not a flower's chance in hell of that happening."

"Flowers *do* grow in Hell," Wyll pointed out.

They did? Not the point right now. Emeline kept her attention solely on the prince. “Why do you have to leave? What are you about to go take care of?”

Arsen’s lips curved into an unhinged grin that was borderline feral. His canines flashed wickedly. “Small pest problem. Nothing to worry about, little nightmare.”

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18

BURN IT ALL

ARSEN



Unease was an infection that had set in the moment he saw Emeline Rivers looking down at the water with despair in her eyes. Arsen remembered staring back at her from underneath the surface of the water, both riveted and perturbed.

What could have made a human look so stricken with melancholy?

How could the other human not realize she was forcing a smile? How she was physically standing there, but her mind was elsewhere. Lost in the clouds, where a storm was carefully being crafted.

Emeline had a family. One who cared about her from the way they'd carefully read her letter. She had friends. The crew had been it, no? She was witty and personable—there had to be other friends she'd made through her life. Arsen couldn't find anything in her family's home about a serious relationship or past lovers. It didn't make sense to him what could possibly be wrong. What was she hiding?

Unease continued to spread through him.

He still hadn't made any progress with finding Emeline's fears, but he'd tasted them. They were acrid, worse than any poison his father had tricked him with. Soon enough, one of the ladies would tell someone in New Haven about his human.

Then word would get over to Seaspire Castle.

And then he'd either be summoned to New Haven, or if his father was angry enough, he'd be brought before the court in Haven and executed. The latter part would be what his father wanted to do, but he wouldn't risk Lucifer's wrath.

"I thought you were supposed to be the logical one." Samael dug his claws into the leather at his shoulder. *"And yet here you are, distraught over a human."*

Arsen gave the dragon a sideways glare. *"I am not distraught over her."*

"Who are you trying to fool?"

"I'm only curious about her fears, Sam," Arsen shot back. *"You're the one with the unnecessary attachment to her. This would be a lot easier if you'd let me kill her."*

Samael's voice in his head was nothing less than smug. *"I'd like to see you try."*

Dirt and small pebbles crunched underneath his boots. Arsen was idly aware of the houses and shops getting farther apart as he neared the edge of the Southern Ward. Up here, there were only fields and the orphanage. A cobblestone path led to a wooden and stone gate he'd spotted up ahead.

The orphanage had once been a grand estate where one of New Haven's officiates had stayed. That is, until he'd looked the wrong way at Samael and lost his head for it.

Now all of his father's spies kept far away from Scaleridge, which was—honestly—more preferable.

"Do you smell that?"

Arsen lifted his chin, taking a deep breath. It was distinctly metallic. *"Blood."*

Samael let out a quiet growl. *"Then it's true? They planned to attack the orphanage? Are we too late? I told you we should have come straight here."*

"If they had attacked the orphanage earlier, do you believe that Selene would have been running in the streets with some of the children and smiling?" Arsen clenched his jaw, canines aching from the pressure. *"You know we were being followed. The fae who stumbled out of the Tav was part of the company from New Haven. Their guards should have been fed with lies and under the impression that I'm here to spend quality time with Caesaria. None of them should be expecting us to come here at all."*

Samael rolled his eyes. Arsen was ready to shove the dragon's claws off his shoulder and let the little shit hit the ground. *"Yes, you undoubtedly convinced them when you were walking next to her 'attendant.' When are you going to admit that you enjoy her company?"*

"I don't enjoy her company."

"You never forget to bring me widow-makers." Samael hadn't shut up about his lack of spider snacks since Arsen had come back empty-handed. *"And last night you came back smelling of her with no treats in sight."*

Arsen felt his magic stir as the scent of blood grew. *"Stay close to me."*

The door was wooden, with black metal hinges. It was built into an arched stone wall that, if unlocked, would reveal a walkway into the courtyard of the estate. Instead, it was locked. Arsen tilted his head, hearing footsteps behind it, too heavy for Selene. All of the kids were young, which meant it wasn't any of them. They also didn't reek of ale and sweat.

"Should we knock?" Arsen quipped, eyes narrowing at the closed door.

Samael made a trilling noise, his wings beginning to flap behind him as he flew in place beside the prince. *"That would be the polite thing to do."*

Unlike his little nightmare, Arsen was raised with manners. His knuckles rapped against the door. Within seconds, there was a sheet of wood that drew back, sliding across the door.

"Who goes—"

Before the bastard could get the words out, Samael spat venom by contracting the muscles around his venom glands and forcing the liquid through his fangs. There was a less-than-pleasing sizzling noise as the dragon's venom made contact with the fae's eyes and started to decompose the sensory organs.

Arsen wrinkled his nose while the screaming erupted. He nudged the door with the tip of his boot. The hinge whined in protest before it was sent sailing backward into the cobblestone. It slammed against a stone wall, narrowly missing the fae clutching his face. His aim was off on purpose. The git didn't deserve a quick death.

Suffering and fear were a delightful combination, rivaling even the best cup of coffee. Arsen watched as the guard removed his hands to let out another agonized scream. It was so high-pitched that it made both Arsen and Samael's head twitch.

"A little high on the notes there." Arsen rubbed at his ear. "You could have blown my eardrums out."

"You ruined my eyes!" came the fierce bellow.

Arsen grinned, shrugging one shoulder. "Technically, it was Samael."

"Snitch."

Both the dragon and prince watched as the fae's eyes bubbled and burst. A watery, clear fluid ran down his face. It mixed with the blood that came after. The venom had eaten away at the fae's pupils, corneas, and lenses. The vitreous bodies sank through his eye sockets, falling over his cheeks one at a time. They were barely hanging on by the optic nerve when the man brought his hand up. He hesitantly touched the stringy nerve before seizing it and ripping it out.

Arsen glanced over at Samael. *"What do you think our little nightmare would have done if she'd seen this?"*

Samael didn't hesitate. "*Used that dark humor of hers to nullify the horror of the situation."* The dragon cleared his throat. *"Can I burn him now?"*

"Make it quick. We need to go check on the kids."

Arsen walked ahead while Samael's flames drowned out the wails of anguish. Neither he nor Samael were quiet, forcing Arsen to consider where the other guards were stationed. It made him wary. If Selene had been running around with some of the kids earlier, then it didn't make sense that

they’d attacked the orphanage in such a short time. Selene could have said something to him if they were being held against their will.

Something about all of this didn’t make sense. Samael was at his side by the time he made it to the central courtyard. They both looked around, taking in the covered parapet walk from one corner tower to the next. What should have been a guardhouse was where the orphans stayed. Across from the housing stood the great hall. Normally, one could smell fire burning from the chimneys.

“There’s where the smell was coming from.” Samael blew smoke to their right, where a stable was filled with dead animals.

“Do you think they killed the animals to scare everyone?” Arsen walked over to the wooden gates to find that a few goats were still twitching. *“They’re still alive.”*

“Yum.”

Arsen gave the dragon a flat stare. *“Now’s not the time to eat.”*

“You know I hate it when the meat gets cold.” Samael let out a rumble of disapproval, perching himself on Arsen’s shoulder. *“Such a waste.”*

“Pay attention. I’ll bring you widow-makers tonight.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that one before.”

Arsen resisted the urge to roll his eyes again. Snarky little fucker. The prince tilted his head to the side, trying to listen to anything besides the sound of Samael listing off the perfect ways to eat stable animals. He headed in the direction of the guardhouse, where the door was left slightly ajar.

Relying heavily on his senses, Arsen listened.

Nothing.

Not a whisper.

Not a heartbeat.

Dread crept into his chest as the worst outcome possible flitted through his mind. They couldn’t all be dead, right? He hadn’t wanted to… He’d been reluctant about leaving Emeline’s side earlier, but that was because he'd wanted to make sure everyone got to the Tav first. He hadn’t even waited for the food to come out yet.

It wasn’t because of his own selfishness that everyone was dead, right?

Arsen pushed the door open with his hand. His heart rate picked up, hammering against his chest. Several beds were lined up. All the sheets were neatly made, and there wasn’t a dead body in sight. His shoulders

relaxed, but then Arsen saw the wardrobes. Most of them were open, and there weren't any travel cases at the foot of the beds.

The place had been evacuated.

Quickly, but efficiently.

Did they know that the company from New Haven was arriving?

"Sen, why would there be a single guard stationed at the front of an empty orphanage?" Samael asked quietly in his mind. *"Is this a trap?"*

The covered walkway would be beneficial for an ambush. Towers would make better stations for archers. There were plenty of ways for New Haven's party to try to kill Arsen and Samael, but the prince knew better.

The only person the king was afraid of was Lucifer.

If the king outright made a move against his second son, then Lucifer would deal him a fate worse than death. That raw fear of the Light-Bringer was the only thing keeping Arsen alive for the past 533 years. The king might indulge Riven, but Riven had never been able to stop the punishments.

Fear didn't keep the Second Prince safe from the whips nor the pain one could inflict with daggers and disparaging remarks, but that was another story. Lucifer never intended to save Arsen from pain, only from an early, tragic death.

Little did the Devil know, living would be more tragic.

"You're morbidly depressing, and we don't have time for this." Samael flew toward the window beside the door. He looked around before his head snapped up. The dragon's gaze connected with the sight of the tower closest to the guardhouse.

Glass shattered.

Arsen darted forward before the shards could hit the floor. His hand wrapped around the barbed arrowhead, the iron slicing into his palm and sending a shooting pain up his arm. He let it clatter to the ground, but the burning sensation didn't go away immediately. Iron was deadly to fae. At least it didn't hit his heart; otherwise he'd be dead. Blood dripped down his wrist, staining the white fabric red.

"Sam, are you trying to get us killed?" Pain made his voice rough.

Samael ducked his head, embarrassed. *"I was going to avoid it."*

A blistering rage tore through Arsen as he looked up at the parapet, noticing the archer kneeling on stone slabs. He was reaching for another arrow when his gaze met Arsen's through the window.

The prince grinned, golden eyes tapering into narrowed slits.

He entered the fae's mind with no difficulty, savoring the taste of fear exploding on his tongue. In his mind, Arsen found serpents. *Boring*. His lip curled in dismay as he exited the guardhouse. The archer was disoriented with Arsen entering and leaving his mind as he pleased, but it was enough time for Arsen to reappear beside him. He gripped the fae's neck with his bloodied hand, slamming the unpleasant creature into the stone.

Arsen spoke then, tilting his head with a feral smile on his face. "You tried to kill my dragon."

"I was only following orders." The guard gasped in pain as Arsen's grip grew tighter, breaking the hyoid bone sitting right above the fae's larynx and right below his jaw. He watched as the horseshoe-shaped bone punctured through the man's throat, barely missing the cartilage there. "P-please, have mercy."

Hearing those gurgled words, Arsen's smile grew cruel. "You know better than that." His canines flashed as resolution filled him. "I'm not the prince known for forgiveness."

The fae's face reddened with anger and strain. His neck injury had to hurt. "Bastard pr—"

A final crack echoed in the silence. Arsen stood up, promptly kicking the dead fae's body off the roof. He watched it slide down like a rag doll before hitting the ground with a heavy *thump*. Satisfaction rolled off him in waves until he heard someone shout. Then swear.

It was a feminine shout.

A familiar shout.

He shared a glance with Samael. Arsen spoke first. *"If that's who I think it is, I'm dangling her over the docks and feeding her to the water spirits."*

The dragon blinked. *"If the sharks didn't scare her, I don't see how half-fae, half-guppies would."*

Arsen exhaled sharply. *"Don't be upset because they like to splash you."*

"Dragons hold grudges."

"How would you know? You're the only one of your kind."

"Exactly. So I make the rules. Idiot." Samael trilled at Arsen's deadpanned expression.

He ignored the sassy little shit to disappear into smoke and reappear behind his little nightmare. Emeline's hood was up, and she wasn't able to

see him from where he stood behind her. Samael flew from the roof, dropping right in front of her.

"Jesus Christ. Where did you come from?" Emeline pointed at the dead body. "Did you do this?"

Samael shook his head, but his thoughts were with Arsen. *"It's not safe for her here. There could be other archers."*

"You think I don't know that?" Fury ignited his temper again, his eyes shooting from tower to window, to roof, and anywhere else there could be archers. *"Why the fuck is she here and not in the Tav, having a grand old time with Wyll and Caesaria?"*

"If you're here, then where's that devil?"

"Stay with her. I'm going to have a look around." Arsen slipped into the shadows, feeling more comfortable this way.

He walked along the walls, silent as a grave. As much as he wanted to find out what was going on, his thoughts kept lingering on Emeline and what the fuck she was doing here, out in the middle of nowhere.

If this was the best Wyll could do at guarding people, then he was being sent back to the kitchens. He could fetch coffee for the rest of his life. Arsen knew the guard had likely been distracted by Sari and vice versa. That weakness was precisely the reason why Arsen had no intention of ever loving anyone.

Voices up ahead caught his attention. One male, one female, and they sounded like they were panicking.

"We haven't heard from the others at all since yesterday. Do you think he got to them?" The female's voice was wracked with worry.

Arsen stopped at the corner, crossing his arms. He watched the scene play out before him. The female in question was someone he didn't recognize. Hair so pale it reminded him of moonflowers, and it was cut short to the top of her ears. Her skin was fair, too, leading him to believe that she didn't live in Scaleridge. Maybe Ironclaw, but the people there were tanned from long days in the fields.

"*That* cruel devil? Haven't you heard he's too busy breeding the ladies of the court to care about the infestation here? He's got three of them locked inside and doesn't do anything but fuck them at all hours of the day. He doesn't care about his people, and he doesn't see a problem with there being halflings walking around," the other fae snarled, his braids swinging around

his head as he turned to look over at the open doorway. “This damn orphanage gives me the creeps.”

Interesting. Arsen didn’t realize he was going around fucking everyone who lived in the Manor. That was news to him.

The female shook her head, reaching down for the pack of arrows to sling over her shoulder. “Look. Maybe let’s not talk about him. The king said to take care of the brats, and we’ll do that. Then we’ll deal with the pest to figure out how the cretins learned about the real plan.”

Arsen’s smile became something so twisted that even the Devil would flinch at the sight of it. He walked out of the shadows, hearing the arrows scatter as they hit the floor. One dropped a bag in alarm. Two faces full of terror stared back at him. Three full heartbeats passed before the prince broke the silence.

“I only need one to send a message. Who will it be?” Arsen purred, his voice low and menacing. “Answer quickly. Because I have a nasty temper when it comes to waiting.”

The male pointed at his comrade. “Her. Kill her.”

Arsen’s smile grew. Fast as lightning, he stood in front of him and shot his hand out. The prince felt his fingers tear through muscle and crack through bone. They curled around the fae’s heart, feeling it beat against his palm. The fae took a staggered step back, his eyes widening. Arsen twisted his wrist, feeling blood vessels resist until the strain proved too much. He pulled the still-beating heart out of its chest cavity and then, with one bloody finger, pushed the fae’s body so that he fell backward. His head cracked against rough stone, splitting open.

“Cian!” She cried out. Tears welled in her eyes. “You killed him.”

Arsen tossed the heart to her, watching as she caught it. Horrified, she let out a scream. It echoed down the corridors. “Don’t waste your tears over someone so quick to sacrifice you. It’s not romantic. It’s pathetic.” He nodded to the heart. “Tell the king that I don’t like pests entering Dragon’s Den.”

“I can’t tell the king that. He’ll kill me.”

Arsen raised a bloodied hand. He wiggled his fingers in a mocking wave. “If you stay, you’ll beg for death.”

The fae was shaking in her boots at the sight of the bloodied prince. He was about to open his mouth to antagonize her further when Samael’s voice cut through his mind.

“We’ve got company, Sen. Thirty.”

Arsen felt a pressure on his chest before he turned and disappeared.

The moment he stepped out onto the courtyard, Arsen didn’t take any chances. The first gaze he connected with, he wielded fear as his weapon. One by one, the mercenaries fell.

Claustrophobia. He threw the hired soldier into the ground, manipulating the dirt beneath the fae to swallow him whole. He buried him alive, reinforcing the dirt so no magic could break it apart.

Nosophobia. Arsen channeled the Black Death that Riven had created into the next fae. He allowed the archer to fester and rot with an accelerated disease.

Teraphobia. Samael grew to the size of a stallion, savagely tearing another soldier apart.

As soon as that fae went down, Samael let out a stream of fire. While the dragon was busy burning people—a favorite hobby of his—Arsen went to Emeline’s side. She’d seen everything. There wasn’t a trace of remorse or hesitation in the way he slaughtered his own kind. Arsen would bring about everyone’s death in the same vicious manner. And maybe for the first time, she was seeing him for what he truly was: a monster.

Her eyes were still on the decaying fae in front of them, overcome with pestilence. The smell wasn’t pleasant, but neither was the pungent smell of Samael lighting several people on fire. Burned flesh and singed hair permeated the afternoon air, leading Emeline to cover her nose. Shouts rang out, and he acted on instinct. Arsen hauled her behind him. His wrath must have been abundantly clear on his face because she didn’t make one snarky comment.

Seeing the mercenaries run around on fire, screaming, he took the quick chance to snarl a question at her. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Emeline stared at him, a bit stunned. He’d never been truly angry with her. Not once. But right now? Livid was an understatement. A defensive note fell into her voice. “I went to the bathroom, and Selene caught me on the way out. She said that you wanted me here—”

“Where’s Wyll?” His patience was nonexistent.

He saw a spark of irritation in her, but Emeline was smart enough not to test him right now. “Sari had only started to eat, but Selene said she could bring me, and Wyll trusted her to do so.”

A harsh, ragged breath left him. “Wyll’s a fool for trusting anyone.”

Everything made sense now.

Selene was evacuating the children earlier. To an extent, she knew about the mercenaries. There was always a trap meant to be set. The fae from New Haven would turn their backs on the deal struck and planned to murder the children regardless. This could have all been a trap set for Arsen or something more sinister, but he wouldn't know until he brought Selene before him.

There would be no survivors.

No chances taken while Emeline was behind him.

He had one main question for the half-human—why *her*? Did she think that Emeline being offered up to the mercenaries could placate them into leaving the children be? How did she know that Emeline was human? Had someone at the Tav left immediately to tell her when Elara brought down her hood?

A glint of dark iron caught Arsen's eye in the trees. More archers.

"Be careful. Treetops," Arsen told Samael as the dragon unleashed more of his venom and his flames.

"Their hands are shaking. They won't hit their mark," Samael replied, his voice confident but deeper as the fire roared through him.

Arsen knew it too. One arrow fired, and it caught the wall beside him. Emeline shifted closer to him. He kept his gaze forward on the treeline, but an odd feeling stirred in his chest. It was difficult to describe, but it felt like when he thought about Sam. A sense of heightened responsibility. It was an urge to… protect her.

Arsen was feeling protective. *Of her*.

He swallowed, ignoring the feeling for now. He shut down his senses. It would only serve as a distraction.

There was a scream and hands against his back, shoving him forward. Arsen stumbled, catching his footing quickly but not fast enough. He heard the air whisper toward them, but it was too late for him to react.

He saw the barbed edge catch the light before it sank into Emeline's side. The cloak did nothing to stop the arrowhead. Arsen stared at her, lips parting slightly. That earlier unease, which had been a simple infection, now put him into a state of shock. She opened her mouth to say something, but blood dribbled down her chin. A mouth that always had something snarky to say now trembled.

"EMELINE!" Samael's deafening roar shook the realm.

As he shifted forms, his tail swung out—leveling the entire orphanage in one fell swoop. Stone and rocks fell around them as Samael became larger than the towers. His voice was octaves lower, roaring her name again *and again*.

The scent of her blood soaking her cloak destroyed them both.

Flames and magic, gold in color, exploded behind Arsen's vision. It was a tidal wave of power and wrath, quickly becoming too overwhelming to contain. Samael reacted to it, preying upon the mercenaries like a devil unleashed. He tore into flesh and clawed limbs apart. None of the fae had a chance with Samael in his final form.

This was the Samael about whom the fae of Dragon's Den told their children scary stories. The one who could level towns and bring about the change of power. It was Samael and Arsen's markings that foretold a new reign would emerge one day. And maybe that was the reason his father hated him… Because it was at Arsen's birth that Lucifer foretold King Eris's reign would come to an end.

Arsen was humming with power. The gold serpent who whispered in his ear from time to time now broke away from his arm. It became a creature of light, rising behind him. A sentient thing straight from the depths of Hell who would swallow the realm if given the opportunity.

It didn't react to Arsen's wrath like Samael did. Rather, it was fueled by the odd protective urge swelling inside him. The urge to protect his human devastated Arsen with thoughts and worries he'd only ever had for the black dragon. The one who'd been by his side for centuries and knew his heart better than anyone. Arsen's body shook, fighting to control the serpentine creature behind him. It was attacking the fae indiscriminately.

Emeline dropped to her knees in front of him. The soft *thud* drew his attention exclusively to her. His vision focused. More blood spurted from her mouth. Red coated the cobblestone with a sickening *splash*. It was an image he knew would be ingrained in his mind for the rest of his tragic existence.

And seeing her like that?

Not scared, but in pain?

The forced, desolate smile on her face that reminded him of the first time he saw her?

Arsen's control snapped. And he lost himself in his power as his gift leveled the entire Southern Ward of Scaleridge for hurting what was *his*.

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19

SAVING SUNLIGHT

EMELINE



If this was a *Yelp* review, she would rate it zero stars for experience. There was an intense, searing pain tearing through Emeline's left side. She could feel the pressure of the arrowhead growing when she dropped to the ground. It sliced deeper into her, causing more blood trickle from her mouth. Shock made Emeline feel like she was beginning to dissociate from

her body. The only thing that kept her grounded was the pain. Distress and agony threatened to suffocate her, but she forced out a smile.

This was easily the worst physical pain Emeline had ever experienced.

And yet, when she compared it to her grief, it felt like relief.

For a moment, light blinded her, and she thought maybe this was it. Maybe this was the light everyone talked about before dying. Maybe this was Heaven. However, she didn't expect Heaven to have a towering serpent. The creature was made of divine light. It had to be divine because Emeline had never seen a brilliant gold so blinding. So resplendent. That's the only way she could describe it while actively bleeding out. Her vision tunneled, becoming hazy around the edges. Gold and amber scales flashed past her as the creature swallowed the last of the screams.

Emeline felt cold, even as Samael rested his head against her. Fuck, when did he get so big? One golden eye was almost the size of her head. He leaned his spiked muzzle against her. It should have been uncomfortable, but she couldn't feel the rough texture against her cheek.

She was dying.

Movement shifted in front of her, causing her to look up blearily. All she saw was a shadow. The muscles in her side spasmed from the deep wound. She let out a shuddering breath, coughing from the blood welling in her throat.

It took her a few precious moments, but she was able to see Arsen again. His eyes… She'd thought they were intense before, but now they looked like twin suns. They reminded her of the divine light from the serpent. Upon focusing, Emeline thought she could see a gathering of flames raging behind his irises. It was as if Helios blew life into those fires.

Samael was making low, throaty sounds that were probably loud, but everything was muffled. Muted. She blinked again. Or at least she thought she had, but she must have temporarily lost consciousness. Arsen held her with his left arm, her body tucked against his chest. She couldn't feel the heat of him.

At all. Everything was cold and numb.

Emeline saw him bring his right wrist to his mouth. Canines pierced into his skin, but she couldn't make sense of it. Why would Arsen hurt himself? Her eyelids grew heavy, darkening her vision like a curtain dropping at the end of a play. This was—after all—her final act. At least it didn't hurt anymore.

It was finally over.

She was—

Warmth trickled down her throat. It was sweet with a citrus tang. Despite her dulled senses, she thought she could taste honey, lemon, and a hint of spice. If sunlight had a taste—this would be it. Whatever it was, Emeline slowly became more aware.

Aware of the excruciating pain in her side.

Aware of the gentle touch against the nape of her neck.

Sunlight continued to dance on her tongue, filling her with life. The haze lifted but weakly. It prompted Emeline's eyelashes to flutter for a heartbeat before she could open her eyes. Daylight stung momentarily.

Arsen was leaning over her, determination and vehemence shrouding the rest of his emotions. His brows were drawn together, his bottom lip stained with blood. Emeline realized too late that he had his wrist against her mouth, and he was holding her head at an angle so she could drink.

Drink from him.

Drink his blood.

Panic curled around her, welcoming her into its embrace. She tried to pull away from Arsen, understanding that it was his blood that was… *healing* her. She whimpered, trying to shake her head and pull away. *No—this was wrong*—humans didn't drink blood.

The prince let out a growl of annoyance. "Drink," he demanded. The tips of his fingers pressed into her neck. Not enough to be uncomfortable but firm enough to hold her in place. "Just a bit more. The wound is almost healed." Arsen's voice lowered, barely above a whisper. "Drink, little nightmare."

Healed? As in *completely*?

That had to be an exaggeration.

The arrowhead had been lodged *deep* inside her.

Arsen continued after a minute, satisfied when she'd drunk a bit more. "Alright. That's enough. Any more and you'll die. Humans aren't meant to drink demonic blood. Especially one as potent as mine."

Fuck—why was she continuing to drink?

She hastily let go as Arsen proceeded to pull his wrist away from her mouth. Emeline shook her head, trying to clear the fog as she shoved against his chest to get away. He wasn't budging. She glanced down at the

wound, moving the cloak to the side to inspect it. The skin there was angry and inflamed, but closed.

Next to her, she saw the discarded arrow. The dark metal was coated in blood, and she became queasy at the sight of it.

Her words came out in a ragged breath. “I’m adding it to the list.”

The prince stared at her. “What the fuck are you talking about right now?”

“Non-consensual blood drinking. It’s on the list,” Emeline began, trying to stand up, but she found that her abdomen felt tender. Each jostle of movement, even if it was as simple as her chest rising and falling with every breath—it *hurt*. “Your stupid blood couldn’t take the pain away?”

“My *stupid* blood saved your life, you infuriating human,” Arsen snapped, but he was cut short from saying anything else when screams rose in the distance.

His attention slid to his left arm. Emeline followed his gaze, confused. The leather and cotton had been burned away, revealing the full expanse of his arm. Only scales, the color of sea foam, wrapped around his corded muscles.

It was missing—“The snake on your arm. What happened to it?”

Arsen didn’t answer her, but his deprecating look turned to Samael. *“Stay with her. He ought to have destroyed the fields by now. He won’t stop until my anger cools.”*

“Who destroyed the fields?” Emeline watched as he stood up, taking a step back from her with a bemused expression. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because he has a bad habit of forgetting that all actions have consequences.” A new voice appeared in her mind, flooded with running undertones of amusement and relief.

Emeline slowly turned herself toward the dragon, who was staring back at her. Samael was so different in this form. Gone were the dusting of gold freckles on his face and the short, stubby spikes over his eyes and back. In this form, they weren’t stubby. His snout was rough, with armored scales. They became longer and sharper as they extended away from his face. His horns morphed into two long, gleaming prickets.

Razor-edged scales along his neck flared, heat bristling. Emeline couldn’t see much behind him, but she did see that his wings were black, tipped in more gold than before.

“I—you—” Emeline stumbled over her words. She could *hear* him.

“I can hear you too,” Samael pointed out, amused.

His mouth opened, revealing jagged teeth longer than her arms. Instead of the two fangs he had in his smaller form, he had four. The two at the top were curved, whereas the two at the bottom were a bit straighter.

Emeline turned her head to look back at Arsen but found him gone. She frowned. “Where did he go?”

“Lucifer’s serpent is gone. The demonic markings are reactive. Arsen lost control of his emotions, and it freed itself.” Samael shifted his body, causing her to wince at the movement when he bumped her side. A low whine left the dragon. *“You need rest.”*

“I need a drink. Like alcohol. A glass of Cava; bigger than *you,* big.” Emeline leaned against Samael, feeling the heat from his scales.

It was almost comforting.

She hoped she wasn’t bothering him, but she felt cold inside. Was it from poor circulation? Was she still healing inside?

“You are not a bother, human,” Samael noted.

“Can you hear everything I’m thinking?”

“I can. You won’t be able to block me out—You’re too weak. Only Sen can block me out and even then, he struggles.” Samael sounded like he wanted to laugh, but he was careful not to in the event that he moved her too much.

There were worse things than a dragon being able to hear her thoughts. For example, taking an arrow for someone she didn’t even remotely like. Emeline thought back to the moment she’d seen a glimmer of metal in the tree line.

It’d caught her eye, and Arsen had appeared distracted. He hadn’t noticed the archer readying his bow. When the fae had released the string, she’d felt a fresh wave of horror. And like the ocean and its ruthlessness, she’d been a puppet to its ministrations. Her body had moved on its own, shoving him out of the way.

But that’s not all that had happened.

For a brief moment, she was back in the kitchen. Arsen had been standing there, the soft glow of the torchlight catching his grin and the scars on his face. Emeline realized that a part of her didn’t want him to bear another jagged scar. Not when she was still unsure of who gave him the

ones on his face in the first place. And if he died, then so would Samael because their lives were tied.

That was all it took for her to give in.

As soon as her hands left his back, victory had flared inside her. A disarming feeling that made her think, *"I couldn't save my pregnancy, but I can save them."* It had been the last thought before the arrowhead had struck her.

"You were with child?" Samael asked, surprise evident in his voice.

Oh fuck.

"We're not talking about it." Anxiety leached onto her skin, drinking every bit of peace from her veins. *"If you can hear me, can he? Can Arsen? Does he know?"*

Samael exhaled smoke. When he was small, it wasn't a problem, but as a towering dragon—she coughed, hastily waving it away. Pain throbbed deeply in her side.

"With a bond only forged by blood, he's too far away to hear you. He'll have access to your mind for only as long as his blood is in your system."

"How long would that take? For his blood to be out of my system?"

She saw Samael's scales curve as he grinned ferociously. *"A few weeks."*

Emeline almost shouted in disbelief had it not been for Samael's grin turning into a snarl. She looked over to see Wyll and Sari looking shocked by the entrance to the courtyard. All it took was a single blink for the royal fae to appear in front of her, looking frantic. Emeline jumped in surprise when dragon scales suddenly became hot. Samael snapped his teeth at Sari. She barely escaped him, reappearing next to Wyll.

"For Astaroth's sake, I wasn't trying to hurt her, Samael." Her eyes were bluer than normal, and when Sari spoke, she sounded vehemently pissed off. "Where is Arsen? We saw that Lucifer's mark was let loose, and we came straight here."

Emeline was about to speak when Samael's words dug into her. *"Do not mention the blood bond."*

She scowled. *"Great, so when they see the arrow next to me and realize the cloak is soaked with blood—what do you expect me to say? That I have a fast recovery time? I'm human, if you've forgotten."*

More smoke billowed from Samael's nostrils. *"If you tell them, I'll eat them."*

“You wouldn’t.”

“The blond one is hanging back because he knows I will.”

“I’m not dead,” Emeline said dryly, remembering they were waiting for a response. She still couldn’t get up, and chose to stay on the ground next to her portable heater with fangs. “How bad is it? The fields?”

Wyll was cataloguing all the dead bodies and limbs around the courtyard. She hadn’t paid attention to Samael’s wrath, but now she tried hard not to look around. Seeing brain matter wasn’t exactly appealing.

“From the chatter we heard on the way here, the fields are completely destroyed. It’ll take some hard work and then lesser magic to restore them,” Wyll began, his voice tight. “If Samael’s here and you’re here, why did Arsen leave you both behind?”

Sari’s eyes drifted down, blatantly noticing the arrowhead, and that the dark cloak was ripped. Fae had heightened senses. Of course she smelled the blood. Could she smell Arsen’s blood too?

“You didn’t think this through, did you?” Emeline almost laughed at Samael’s annoyed grumble. *“Is it really so bad that Arsen fed me his blood? It was to heal me. Wouldn’t they be happy that he has a little bit of goodness in him?”*

“Tell her then. See how you like the questions that follow.”

“Were you hurt?” Sari’s frown transformed into a stern grimace as she gestured to the cloak. “I can smell your blood—and there is a lot of it. That arrow—were you wounded?”

“’Tis but a scratch.” Emeline smirked, feeling proud of herself for landing a *Monty Python* reference, but alas, it was wasted on these two. That might be more tragic than almost dying. “It was a scratch, but I’m fine now.”

Sari’s eyes narrowed. “A small scratch doesn’t result in several pints of blood on the ground. You were impaled, weren’t you?”

Wyll hesitantly walked closer, his eyes staying on the dragon rooted to her side. They were about four to five meters away from her, but well within—what Emeline considered—teething dragon distance.

“I am not teething,” Samael interjected defensively.

“But you do have a tendency to bite people.”

“Only if they deserve it.”

“Er, sort of?” Emeline felt like she was in trouble by the way Sari’s eyebrows both rose as if to say, *‘Do you want to try that again?’* “Okay,

yes. I was hit with an arrow."

Wyll leered from Samael to her. His mouth tightened, but his stare was blank. He was trying to reason out what had taken place, but didn't know where to start.

"You got hurt…" Sari spoke slowly, and Emeline waited for her to figure it out. It was only a matter of time. Sari was as perceptive as she was graceful. "Severely, by the looks of it… but you don't look like you're on the brink of death…"

"Which means that you were healed," Wyll guessed. His next words came out like an accusation. "Did Arsen save your life? Did he—did he give you his blood?"

"Is there any point in lying?"

Samael nudged her, making her flinch. *"Good luck."*

What did he mean by *'Good luck'*? A little help would be nice.

Emeline didn't know what to do with her face, so she smiled. Awkwardly. "Is that a problem?"

"He did," Sari stated, awestruck. She glanced over at Wyll. "He fed her."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Wyll ran a hand through his hair, looking stressed out. "Where's Selene? She came here with you, right?"

Emeline's awkward smile grew. She must have looked insane. "About that. Selene ditched me, and then as soon as I found Arsen and Samael, we were ambushed."

"What do you mean, you were ambushed?" Wyll practically shouted, taking a step closer, but then was sent skittering back when Samael made a guttural noise. "Don't answer that with a smart-ass response. You're *sure*? She left you, and then you were immediately ambushed? That makes it sound as if it were a trap."

Emeline nodded stiffly. Her nerves were already wrung tight from almost dying. "I barely had time to tell Arsen about Selene before the attack." She paused. "Why are you both stressed out because Arsen fed me his blood?"

"I am not stressed out—" Wyll began to deny when he was cut off.

Sari humbled him with, "—You are *very* stressed out."

The guard sent her an incredulous look. "His Royal Highness has a blood bond with a human who should have been killed days ago, and there

are two ladies back at the Manor who will go straight to the officiates if they find out. How exactly do you think the king is going to react when he learns that his son has begun a courtship with a human?" Seeing her bewildered look, Wyll nodded curtly. "I'm trying not to be an ass right now—"

"You're failing."

At Emeline's words, Wyll's glare became harsher. "—But you being alive isn't only a risk for Arsen. It's a risk for everyone at the Manor. The king already hates the half-breeds in Scaleridge, but if he learns that his son is blood-bound to a full human, then it will not *only* be your lives at risk. Viera will be killed because she practically raised him. I will be killed for failing to stop him. Caesaria will be killed because the other ladies will tell the king that she was partial to you. Draven will be killed because he fed you. Do you understand? Everyone's life is at risk because you keep escaping death at the very hands of the person who is meant to kill you."

That wasn't fair to put on her.

It's not as if Emeline had a say in any of this bullshit. She didn't ask for her crew to be slaughtered. She didn't ask to be held hostage. In fact, she'd told Arsen to kill her. To end it. She'd been fully prepared to die this evening, and he'd stolen that away too. She also didn't ask to drink his blood. Nor to be saved.

Why was she being yelled at for the decisions made by others?

"If you're so upset about it, Wyll—" Emeline clenched her jaw as a lump formed in her throat. She wasn't about to cry because she was sad or scared. She was *frustrated*. Frustrated because all these things were out of her control, and just like the loss, she was left to bear the weight of responsibility. "—Then fucking kill me. Right here. Samael, don't you do a fucking thing. You want to save everyone? Do it. Right now."

"I will not—"

"It's not your choice to make, Samael," Emeline bit out without looking at him. She kept her eyes on Wyll's. "Do it. Take one of those pretty daggers, and slit my throat."

"Emeline—" Sari began, but she cut her off too.

"You don't get to interfere either. If Wyll wants to make all of this my fault, then take care of the problem. But if you don't kill me, right here, right now—then I don't want to hear so much as another fucking complaint from you."

Wyll laughed, but there wasn't anything nice about it. It echoed in the space between Sari's concern, Samael's agitation, and Emeline's resolve. It amplified between all the walls forged there. "You think I can kill you *now*?" Another laugh escaped him, but he managed to say, "By feeding you his blood—only Arsen can kill you. For anyone else to try to kill you right now would be an act of war against him. I'm not sure if you've noticed it yet, but he's got a bad temper."

Emeline ignored the weird fae customs for what she actually had a problem with: people treating her like she was a toy that needed to be discarded, but were fighting over who got to throw her away.

"Arsen isn't here, and no, he's not the only one who can kill me. I promise you that when that dagger slices through my throat, it'll bleed regardless of who wields it," Emeline said bluntly, tired of these theatrics. The fae were fucking dramatic, and she was tired. Her head tilted to the side. "Go on. Do it, you discount Legolas."

Sari stepped in between them. "That's enough. The both of you. You"—she shot a glance over at Wyll—"know that you cannot hurt her now."

The blond stared at Sari like she had six heads. "Don't tell me you're on his side. We're all about to lose our lives for someone he's known for less than a week. Am I the only one around here with common sense? I refuse to risk your life for *hers*. Arsen is being selfish right now."

"He wasn't selfish when he scarred his face to save you." Samael bared his fangs. His head lowered, rearing back his shoulders as he prepared to attack the guard. *"I should bite his head off."*

Emeline looked at Samael in shock and then back at Wyll. "You're the reason for Arsen's scars? The ones on his face?"

Wyll looked like she'd slapped him. "How did you…" He trailed off as if only now realizing the blood bond also bonded her to Samael. "…Oh great. First, the odd attachment and now he can talk to her."

Claws scraped into the ground.

Sari eyed the dragon nervously. "Wyll, I know you're upset, but pissing off Samael isn't a bright idea. I understand you're worried about Arsen and the rest of the fae at the Manor, but Emeline isn't the one you need to have this chat with. She hasn't done anything wrong."

"Nope." Emeline leaned her head against Samael's snout, running her hand over a scale to try and calm him down. It was futile because he was already seething. "Only took an arrow for someone I don't even like." She

meant it as a sardonic joke, and yet Wyll looked appalled. “Do you have any other facial expressions besides bitchy, angry, or shocked?”

Sari’s lips parted, her eyes filled with incredulity. “What do you mean ‘*took an arrow for someone*’—You saved Arsen’s life? Did you, by chance, miss the giant, murderous dragon and the two ancestral marks on him? He never needs saving.”

“Everyone needs saving; it doesn’t matter who you are. Sometimes it’s not easy to hold your hand out or trust someone to take it,” Emeline pointed out, looking at Wyll oddly. “You’re his guard. His *personal* guard. You’ve definitely saved him before.”

At her words, Sari appeared stricken.

Wyll’s voice turned hollow. “No. I’ve never saved him.” He stared at her like she was a question with an answer that kept eluding him. Emeline felt uncomfortable at the prolonged staring and even more so when it turned speculative. Wyll continued, “It doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“You.” He said it like that explained everything.

Sari jumped in, “You saved the prince of a realm that hates you for being human. You were willing to sacrifice your life for his. For theirs.” The noblewoman didn’t stop there. “Why? Why would you do that? Wyll isn’t wrong for being upset that Arsen would risk others’ lives for you without consulting them first—so give us a reason. Tell us why we should risk the king’s wrath for you to live.”

That wasn’t an answer she had readily available.

It was complicated and messy.

Emeline didn’t like being introspective; she liked drinking hot chocolate and ignoring all of her problems. Life was much more fun that way.

Wyll tilted his head, narrowing his eyes. When he spoke, it wasn’t accusatory but hesitant. Like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer either, but he had to.

“Do you care for Arsen?”

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20

LUCIFER’S MARK

ARSEN



The fields were decimated. What used to be lush and green was now barren and black. Bulbous lumps of char turned out to be turnips. Arsen kicked one, watching it roll over the uneven landscape. The tension in the air was palpable, with even the wind scared to make too much noise. Arsen didn’t have such an affliction.

“Someone’s not going to have turnip in their stew, and they’re going to be very upset with y—”

The serpent’s tail whipped out. Arsen barely had time to vanish before reappearing in the same spot. Dust and debris were thrown into the air behind him as its tail smacked against the ground.

“—now that was rude,” he pointed out, brushing a bit of dirt off his shoulder. Arsen watched the creature as it circled him, apprehension sinking into him. It buried itself in the very marrow of his bones. “You’ve had your fun. Now it’s time to go back.”

“So you can continue to hide in the shadows of the realm that I made for you?” A malicious snicker reverberated inside his head. *“You rarely let me out. Tell me, Heres, what made you lose control of me?”*

Arsen gave the serpent a flat stare, crossing his arms. “You’ve known since I was a child that I’ve never wanted to lead. Don’t act surprised now. It’s dreadfully du—”

He didn’t see the tail coming. It slammed into his back. Arsen brought his forearms up to protect his face as he hit the ground hard and rolled until he crashed into the serpent’s body. He lay on his back, glaring up as it leaned its head over him. Arsen didn’t flinch as its jaws expanded. He stared down the creature’s throat, then flicked his gaze over to its fangs. They dripped liquid flames, falling onto the side of his neck.

The creature hissed. Arsen could feel his skin broiling from the venom. It was agony, but he was used to physical pain. He went back to that familiar place in his head where he felt nothing.

He smirked through the increasing discomfort. “You were present while my dear father placed me on the rack. While he snapped ligaments and dislocated my joints one by one. And you were there when he collared me and kept me strapped to the chair for nine days, refusing to let me go. If you think that a little pain is going to make me yield, then you’ve forgotten who I am.” Arsen’s smirk grew. “You can’t hurt me.”

“You are used to pain but do you know who isn’t?”

Dread replaced his pride. Still, Arsen broadened his smirk. “Wyll. Definitely—”

“The little nightmare you’ve grown so protective of.” The serpent cooed, closing its mouth to gaze at him. Two sets of golden eyes stared at each other, but they were filled with opposing sentiments. One was filled with searing amusement, while the other promised vengeance if provoked.

“Do you remember how it felt when you knew she was going to die? She was so close. Humans are fragile that way. But you gave her your blood. You gave her my *blood.”*

Arsen’s gaze darkened. “Leave the human out of this. She’s of no concern to you.”

“She’s of great concern. You’ve spent the last five hundred years weaving threads of isolation around you, only for a human woman to be the string that unravels you.”

The words hung in the air, thickening the tension the longer they stayed suspended between them. Arsen lifted his chin, defiance making his lip curl in disdain.

“You must be bored in Hell if you have the time to—”

He gritted his teeth as more fiery venom slipped from the serpent’s mouth. This time, it hit his forearm. Leviathan’s mark burned back, irritated by the creature’s fire. Because Arsen was a fourth-generation descendant of Leviathan, his mark wasn’t potent enough to come alive on its own. The only one who could summon Leviathan in any form was the king.

Lucifer’s mark, on the other hand, was very potent.

It had to be, considering he was a first-generation descendant of the Devil.

Arsen spoke through the excruciating torment coming from his arm. “If you wanted to see Haven destroyed by its own royal family, then you should have picked Riven. He’s the crown prince and as ruthless as you want me to be. He dragged a fourteenth-century plague across countries, killing more than two hundred million humans as a child. You—”

“—Why would I pick your father’s favorite when it would be much more interesting to see the son he hates destroy everything he’s coveted this past millennium?” it cut in.

“I don’t have an answer to your question.” Arsen dematerialized, falling into the shadows only to be followed when the serpent dove after him.

In shadows they fought, but soon enough, the creature’s jaws wrapped around Arsen’s midsection. He threw his head back as they reappeared on the field, the snake biting down. Luckily, its fangs didn’t pierce him, but that didn’t mean the venom wasn’t dissolving his shirt. Once the shirt was gone, the venom blistered his skin.

Arsen used his fist, slamming down on the serpent’s head, but to no avail—it didn’t even budge. “Will you fucking let go of me?”

“What are you going to do about the human? Are you going to dispose of her?”

“No,” Arsen spat, trying to push the upper jaw of the serpent up. “You can fuck off. You want me to destroy Haven? The king? If it weren’t for the human, I would have died. You might hate humans for being created in God’s image when you weren’t, but there is no one who wants Emeline dead more than herself. And I’m fucking tired of everyone telling me to kill her.”

Power flooded Arsen’s veins as his wrath surged. He called upon the blood of Leviathan in him, turning himself into water. He fell from the serpent’s mouth. As soon as he hit the ground, his form took shape again.

“You are the Morning Star. The Light-Bringer. You chose to defy God. If you order me to kill her, then I will defy *you*.” With his heart hammering against his chest, Arsen looked straight at the true Devil and gave him a wicked smirk. It paired perfectly with the scorn in his eyes. “You *will* return your mark to my flesh. You *will* respect my decision regarding Emeline. And you *will* keep your nose out of my business, or I will descend into Hell myself and challenge you for the throne.”

Through the serpent, Lucifer let out another malicious snicker in his mind. *“You believe you would win? And you dare challenge me? The one who gave you your power? I was created to reflect the glory of God. I served Him as a high-ranking angel. I was His masterpiece.”*

“You wouldn’t have chosen me as your heir if you didn’t believe I’d be destined to do great things,” Arsen said with absolute clarity, never breaking eye contact. “You prophesied that I would be the reason the king’s reign ends, and his undoing. That cannot change. It’s the future of this realm and as old as the very soil beneath us. You vowed that I would be someone whose light couldn’t be extinguished. Whether Emeline is in my life or not is irrelevant to you. I am well aware of the fact that I became your weapon the day you gave me life instead of accepting the king’s sacrifice.”

The dagger on his neck was proof of that.

A reminder to the King of Haven that Lucifer’s weapon grew up in his court.

It would have been silent if not for Arsen’s blood roaring in his ears. He was looking upon the King of Hell, threatening to succeed him. He’d never challenged him before. Hell, he’d never even stood up against his own

father. If Lucifer found fault with his declaration, then he'd be killed. Samael would die too.

And then what would happen to Emeline?

Why was he thinking about her?

Why was he desperate to get back to her?

He simply wanted to get back to Sam, right? *Right?*

"Very well." The creature began to fall apart, flames slipping onto the ground. Those flames raced toward Arsen, latching onto his arm and burning him all over again. His knees went weak, but he refused to fall. He would never kneel before anyone. *"Have your fun with the human. But remember that you have a duty, not to the king who slaughtered his own siblings but to me. After all… you wouldn't have met your precious little nightmare if it wasn't for me."*

Meaning that if Lucifer hadn't saved his life, he'd have never met her. Arsen's fists clenched as the searing pain grew hotter before it cooled down. His shirt was gone, but at least his breeches were intact. He glared at the snake on his left arm, feeling rightly annoyed with the old bastard. Instead of using more of his magic, Arsen decided to walk back to the orphanage.

Or whatever was left of it.

When Eris summoned a demon with a sacrificial lamb—*him*—Arsen hadn't made the choice to live. He hadn't made the choice to die, either. It was the same situation he'd put Emeline in: having no choice at all. A disgusting feeling ransacked him. There was regret and anxiety. An inner voice nagged that he'd done something wrong.

Was this… guilt?

Did he feel guilty for taking away her choice? A heavy sigh left him as Arsen stuffed his hands into his pockets.

This was going to be a long walk.

.——— ———.

He heard them before he saw them.

Caesaria's voice carried in the wind, sounding every bit confused yet confident. "You saved the prince of a realm that hates you for being human. You were willing to sacrifice your life for his. For theirs." Her voice became a bit more frantic and desperate. "Why? Why would you do that? Wyll isn't wrong for being upset that Arsen would risk others' lives for you

without consulting them first—so give us a reason. Tell us why we should risk the king's wrath for you to live."

Arsen's interest piqued. He walked around the stone walls, using the treeline as coverage. Not even the leaves made a sound as he silently walked closer. He could barely make them out, but didn't want to alert Wyll or, more likely, Caesaria that he was nearby. Samael closed his eyes, knowing exactly where he was and feeling safe enough to start resting.

Wyll cocked his head to the side, staring at Emeline with a mix of wonder and perturbation. "Do you care for Arsen?"

Before she could answer, Samael shifted forms. Emeline winced, her body jostling. She pulled the dragon onto her lap. Samael was completely knocked out, turning his body to lay his head against her. Arsen rolled his eyes. The little traitor was searching for her comfort, and he was receiving it. He could hear the dragon's soft snores as she ran a hand down the short spikes along his neck.

He leaned against the trunk of a tree situated near the treeline, keeping an eye on Caesaria to make sure she didn't sense him first.

"Do I care for him?" Emeline repeated the question, evidently procrastinating about her response. "Yes."

Arsen's heart skipped. He placed a hand over it, wondering if the serpent had crushed his body hard enough that he was now suffering from arrhythmia.

Emeline persisted. "Samael is part of him, so I'd have to. Wouldn't I? I don't want anything to happen to him—" She tipped her chin down at the dragon. "—which means I wouldn't want Arsen to die."

His lips pressed together in a tight line. He wasn't sure what he was annoyed about, but he didn't feel like listening in on the conversation anymore.

Wyll ran a hand through his hair. "Well, I suppose it's a good thing that's the case. Arsen is expected to marry one of the ladies. If he doesn't, he's going to get summoned."

That's enough.

She didn't need to know what would happen if he did receive a summoning.

The prince stepped out of the treeline, eyes on Samael, but his focus was on Emeline. He was an opportunist, after all, and now her mind was

open to him. It was like being presented with the greatest sin in his life, and he was too much of a devil to resist.

He could admit that he enjoyed verbally sparring with her.

But this entire time, he'd been curious about what her mind was like.

Caesaria turned her head the moment his boots hit stone, prompting Wyll to turn sharply and raise a blade in his direction. Arsen raised an eyebrow at that. Both fae scowled.

His little nightmare turned, noticing him last. He saw her eyes trail over the powerful muscles on his upper arms. Then his chest. And then lower, to where her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of red at the sight of his abdominal muscles.

That earlier annoyance dissipated as quickly as it'd appeared. In its place, satisfaction and pride fought for first place. She was physically attracted to him. He'd known it when her soft body had fit perfectly against his. She'd been surprisingly pliant in his arms, and it made him want to own her completely. The cozy, warm scent he always associated with her became spicy. He could have tried going further with her, but he wasn't sure how she'd react.

Would she have reciprocated his unabashed desire?

Or would she have thrown the closest thing she could find at him? There weren't flower vases in the kitchens, but there were knives.

"God hates me. That's got to be the case by now. He made the prince—who wants to kill me—unreasonably attractive. Holy fuck."

Arsen didn't have a chance, losing the fight to keep his expression neutral. A haughty smirk formed on his lips. His gaze held hers as they made eye contact. *"There's nothing holy about me, little nightmare."*

He wanted to send her a wink, but Caesaria and Wyll were looking too intensely for his comfort.

Wyll asked first. "Is it true? Did she save you?"

"Why do you want to know?" Arsen replied in lieu of giving him an answer.

He knew why Wyll wanted to know. The fae had been looking for an opportunity to repay him this entire time. Their—dare he say—*friendship* was built on quid pro quo transactions. Wyll had been the kitchen servant whom he'd given a chance at being something more. The Lady of Grimwood couldn't marry a servant, but she could marry a guard bestowed

nobility. Eris would never grant Wyll a title, but Riven would if he did something that called for it… like saving a prince.

The fae said nothing because Caesaria was standing beside him. Sort of ironic, considering that the prince knew that *she* knew. Whether Arsen wanted to acknowledge it or not, Wyll treated him like a brother. He was more stern than Riven was with him, but whereas the crown prince took to his duty before him, Wyll took to his duty to protect Arsen before Caesaria. It was the only time Arsen came first to anyone, but even that was spoiled by responsibility and obligation.

And it was temporary.

Though it was also his fault for not trying to get more familiar with Wyll on a vulnerable level. It was Arsen who refused to let anyone get close. There was too much going on in his world.

His father's meddling.

The border between Haven and Dragon's Den getting more volatile.

Conniving court ladies wanting the title of Princess.

Most days, he wished he was a youngling again, playing in the Woods of Wisteria with Samael. Back then, things were so much easier. He'd play with sticks, point them at Samael, and pretend he was destined for greatness. In reality, Arsen was only destined to do what he thought he was good at: breaking things.

"Why can't I hear him?"

Emeline's thoughts were loud as she scrutinized him. Amusement washed away his worries and the looming shadow of death that always followed him.

"Because you don't know how to block out a blood bond," he replied coyly, even more amused when a flicker of anger crossed her face. His voice turned serious inside her head. *"Can you stand?"*

She couldn't.

He knew it when her mouth tightened at the corners, pain flashing in her expression. Seeing it caused a foreign ache in his chest. It had him kneeling down before her. The little traitor didn't stir at all as he slid one arm underneath the bend in her knees and another around her waist. Emeline's gaze widened, her arms protectively wrapping around Samael while the dragon continued to sleep on her. He lifted them both, carrying her like she could be a princess instead of a woman he was required by Haven law to kill.

“Arsen.” She glanced down quickly to make sure Samael wasn’t crushed.

He wasn’t. The prince’s lips pressed together as the dragon nuzzled his face against her chest. He was only getting comfortable; meanwhile, Arsen had more wicked thoughts about pressing *his* face against her breasts. His jaw clenched, remembering they had company and weren’t out of the woods yet.

Emeline wasn’t going to get hurt because he was distracted again.

“Wyll, Caesaria—I need you both to take guard. Pay attention. I can’t move her and…” It took a lot of effort to admit this. Arsen’s request felt foreign on his own tongue. “…I’m exhausted from containing Lucifer’s mark. Samael is going to be asleep with his power drained. I can’t do much right now…and I need your help.”

Caesaria grinned, her blue eyes bright. “You can count on us.”

Wyll looked shocked that he’d asked for their assistance. Arsen could understand. In spite of knowing each other for over two hundred years, this was the first time he’d reached out his hand for help. He didn’t like it, but he wasn’t willing to risk Samael and Emeline’s safety for his pride.

Nothing more was said as they started walking. Wyll took the lead, whereas Caesaria trailed behind them. He knew the other male didn’t like it, but Wyll respected her abilities as a—

“Idiot. Moron. Asshole. Jerk. Sadi—”

Arsen kept the humor out of his voice, choosing to pretend like he was annoyed at her badgering. *“I’m listening. What do you want?”*

He glanced down to see her eyes narrowed at him. *“So you’re not listening to every thought I have?”*

“As enjoyable as it is hearing you lust over me, I do have other priorities. Like making sure that Samael doesn’t get hurt while he’s recovering,” he pointed out in a wry tone.

Emeline looked back down at Samael. *“Is he hurt?”*

“No, he’s exhausted.”

“Are you exhausted?”

“Very.”

Emeline frowned deeper at him. Concern glimmered in her eyes, and he wasn’t comfortable with acknowledging it. Instead, he stared straight ahead, relying on Wyll and Caesaria to sense the enemy before he could. It was a layer of vulnerability that he wasn’t comfortable with either.

“If you’re tired, then you need to put me down.” Emeline tried to move, but his grip on her tightened imperceptibly. *“Arsen. You—”*

“You’re in pain because of my blood. Not the arrow. That wound has already healed. Your own immune system is detecting the unnatural blood inside you and trying to get rid of it. The pain wouldn’t be so bad if you were to drink Wyll’s blood or a half-human’s. You might even have been able to tolerate Caesaria’s. But because you’re not used to taking blood from me and you took a lot at once—your body is confused and attacking itself,” Arsen explained, glancing at her from the corner of his eye.

She was a bit pale, but otherwise coherent. There was a small flush against her cheeks. Was she warm? A cool breeze danced over them, but his blood ran hot. He’d never given anyone his blood before, so he couldn’t be sure how it would affect her.

What he did know was that by giving her access to Samael, it was clear he didn’t want her to die anymore. As for what he did want from her… Arsen found his eyes on Samael again. At some point, he’d tucked his head against his chest, and now rested it against the spot where Emeline and Arsen’s bodies touched.

The fitful creature looked tamed.

Arsen wasn’t sure how he felt about that, but at least he had a long walk to ignore it and pretend that his protectiveness over her wasn’t problematic.

.——— ———.

At the Devil’s Tav, the floor above the taproom held various private rooms. Elara occupied one of them, but the rest were for rent or for guests who had a pretty coin to spend. Caesaria stood guard in the room where his little nightmare and Samael were already asleep. He’d leaned against the wall, next to the window, while Emeline asked him question after question about the Devil’s mark. Arsen had stayed until she fell asleep before asking the daughter of a duke to stay with her.

He hadn’t told Emeline much—too hyperaware of Caesaria and Wyll also inside the room, pretending not to be interested in their exchanges.

Now, Wyll was by his side, and the Tav had been cleared out. Elara wasn’t pleased, but the prince wasn’t in any sort of mood to jest.

“Selene,” Arsen began, crossing his arms. “The next time you see her, you’ll tell her that she’s being summoned to Morningstar Manor.”

“The Manor?” Elara’s eyebrows furrowed. Alarm sang in her voice, louder than the anxiety and curiosity present. “Whatever for?”

“Judgment.”

That confused her more. “Is she in trouble? If she accidentally disrespected you, Your Highness, I promise that it wasn’t her intention. She’s but a young girl, even for halfling years. She—”

“Will receive my judgment. I don’t require your opinion on the matter.” Arsen’s eyes narrowed into serpentine slits. “Unless you mean to question me.”

Elara shook her head, never meeting his eyes. “You frequent my Tav enough to know that I am loyal to you, Your Highness. But I do work with Selene daily. I find it difficult to believe she did something so atrocious that it warrants a summoning to Morningstar Manor. She spends her days cooking here or helping out at the orphanage. She’s a sweet girl.”

Wyll kept his mouth shut despite Elara looking at him for validation. The guard might disagree with ninety-nine percent of Arsen’s decisions, but he was loyal. He wouldn’t undermine the prince in a public setting, but he would question him in private.

“Noted. Alert the town that the orphanage has been destroyed. Talk among the townspeople, and see who can house the children. Let them know there will be a pecuniary incentive from the crown to take care of the children until the orphanage can be rebuilt. All material and labor expenditures will be billed to the Manor, and I will hold a town hall soon.” Arsen ignored the question lingering in Elara’s gaze. He tolerated the Tav’s owner well enough, but if she continued to speak out—he was going to rip out her trachea, tie it into a bow, and gift it back to her. He persisted, aware the sun had set. “You will keep the Tav closed. Show Wyll the records for how much you’ve made the past two nights, and I’ll double it for your troubles.”

Elara didn’t look too upset at that. “A night of rest and I’m getting paid for it. You can have anything you want at this point. Wine? Dinner? I know some beautiful fae who would love to provide His Highness with… other services.”

Arsen didn’t try to hide his disgust. “Any fae who disturbs me tonight will be fed to Samael. He’s always hungry after he wakes up.” He turned to head toward the stairs but stopped suddenly. Wyll almost walked into his

back. There was one more thing he needed to address. “Send an errand boy to the night market. I need you to bring a few things to the kitchen for me.”

Elara nodded slowly. “What do you need, Your Highness?”

He listed off five ingredients while Wyll stared at him like he’d finally lost his mind. Perhaps he had. As soon as they hit the stairs, he was asking questions.

“For what reason do you need all that stuff? You *hate* sweets.” The stairs creaked under their boots as Wyll continued to follow him. “I think you’d rather cut your tongue off than eat chocolate.”

That wasn’t an exaggeration. Arsen absolutely hated sweets. He drank his coffee black, preferring beans that had been roasted for a long time. It brought out more rich, bittersweet, and smoky notes in the flavor.

“I just do,” he replied cryptically.

He hated sweets, but his little nightmare was fueled by hate and sugar. She’d also taken an arrow for him today and almost died because of it. The least he could do tonight was make her a cup of hot chocolate.

And then he’d start the interrogation.

Saving his life didn’t mean he would ease up or let go. Arsen still had every intention of exploiting the open connection he had to her mind.

Emeline’s worst fear couldn’t hide from him forever.

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21

MURDERER

EMELINE



She wasn’t sure what woke her up. Emeline sat up on her forearms, exhausted. Samael was bathed in moonlight, sound asleep. She looked at his chest to see the steady rise and fall. He was breathing. Good. For a second, she was worried about how he didn’t react at all to her waking.

The thick wool blanket slid down the front of her cotton nightgown. After wiping away all the blood, Emeline had dressed in the clothing

provided and gone straight to sleep. The ruffled lace on the neckline, sleeves, and cuffs wasn't something she'd typically wear, but that could apply to everything she'd worn since she'd ended up in Dragon's Den.

Emeline noticed a shadow move over Samael and cut her gaze to the window. Her heart was about to order a cease and desist letter with the loud thud it gave against her chest.

"Don't you have your own room?"

Arsen was sitting at the windowsill, his forearms resting on his knees. At some point, he'd changed. He wore black breeches like before, but he'd found a black cotton top to wear with a leather belt loosely wrapped around him. It held a sheathed sword. In his hand, he twirled a small dagger between his fingers. His expression appeared bored, but Emeline thought the dagger was a dead giveaway that he was fidgety.

"I am not fidgeting." He tilted his head, eyes trailing from her face down the front of her nightgown. "And I don't know what a cease and desist letter is, but I don't plan on writing any."

Emeline sat back against the headboard, miffed. She forgot about the whole mind-reading thing, and now she had to deal with him exploiting that connection.

"You were never going to hide it for long."

She wanted to punch him. "You said it yourself that if you can't read me, then it's likely I don't even know my own fear."

"The information's all in your head, little nightmare." His smile turned conniving. "Once I have the pieces, I'll be able to put the puzzle together…" Arsen's brow furrowed. She wished she knew what he was thinking for him to look at her so intently. "I'm wondering what will draw out your fears. Think about the worst time in your life."

Nope.

Not going there.

If she had to start singing *TLC* in her head, she would. There would be no scrubs sifting through her trauma like it was any of their business.

Still… There was a way for him to learn everything organically. "If I tell you about myself—" Emeline noticed he'd stopped twirling the dagger. He was preparing to ward off any personal questions before she'd even phrased them. She changed tactics. "—Will you tell me more about Dragon's Den and Haven?"

Arsen looked at her, a bit surprised. “You want to learn more about this place? I thought you hated it here.”

Emeline’s eyes widened slightly with mock innocence. “Oh, come now. It’s not like I was brought here against my will… repeatedly insulted for being a human, like that in itself is a lower social class here… *Hmm*…” She was theatrical, tapping her index finger against her cheek as she pretended to think hard. “Oh, and let’s not forget—hit with a damn arrow for someone who murdered my friends.”

“No one told you to save me. You could have let me die,” Arsen said bluntly. He saw her lips part to argue, forcing him to add, “Don’t bring Sam into this.”

“It has everything to do with Samael.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. Emeline stiffened, seeing him stand up. His movements were graceful, placing the dagger on the windowsill next to a silver tray. The soft clang of metal against metal echoed loudly in the room, but it didn’t deter him as he turned to walk toward her. She tried to scoot back, but Emeline was already against the headboard. The sleeping dragon was to the left of her, which created an open space to her right. Arsen sat there, on the edge of the bed, less than a meter away from her.

This close and with the moonlight at his back, she could see the glowing embers in his golden eyes. They were luminescent like a fox’s. Fresh rain enveloped her, coaxing her to breathe him in.

“What do you want to know about Dragon’s Den?” Arsen placed his right hand flat against the bed, on the other side of her left leg.

He leaned in slightly, and she hated that he knew her heart was beating fast. By the twitch of his lips, he was fully aware and actively listening in on her thoughts.

Fucking sadist.

Arsen didn’t fight the grin now, but she answered his question. “Back to social classes; depending on who your demon daddy is—that’s how you’re ranked within society, right?”

He lifted a shoulder and let it drop. “Easiest explanation, yes. Lesser fae could have powerful ancestry, but their blood is diluted enough that they can’t accomplish anything more than basic magic.” A question remained in her eyes, and he knew what she was curious about. “Basic magic is influence. The fields were destroyed earlier, but lesser fae will be able to

coax the land into healing. It'll take some time, but not as long as it would for crops grown by humans."

Emeline nodded, mulling that information over. "I think you need to stop calling them lesser fae. They're fae—point blank—and it sounds demeaning."

"Is that an order?" he inquired in a dry tone.

She nodded firmly. "I saved your life. It's the least you could do."

Arsen glanced at her oddly. "I'd have thought you'd ask something more than '*Don't be mean to weaker fae.*'"

"Would you bring me back to the human realm?"

"No."

"Then this is good enough." She took a deep breath, glancing off to the side as she thought more about what she wanted to learn about Haven.

How did you ask questions if you didn't know what you wanted to know? Emeline knew the demonic marks signified that a fae was very powerful, or at least had more potent demonic blood than the average fae. One's abilities determined one's social class, leaving the fae with less diluted blood as a working class. Anyone partially human was considered a second-class citizen, which didn't sit right with her.

But that was the case with all societies, wasn't it?

Someone always had to be at the bottom. Arsen had said there were monsters everywhere, and it seemed that oppression was everywhere too. But just because it existed everywhere, it didn't make it right. No one deserved to be oppressed by a ruling entity based on their gender, religion, blood, or beliefs.

It was medieval. Which Haven was.

It was unjust. Which Emeline thought Haven clearly was.

That earned a low chuckle from Arsen. She looked back at him. The moonlight caught the lighter strands in his hair, turning them more silver than gold.

"The other day, when you mentioned Sari's father having to go home… you had said he missed home because that's where all the fun is. What did you mean by that?"

He gave a faint, crooked smile. "It's one realm, but two very different territories. Haven is where most fae live. It's safer—to an extent. The people have learned to deal with Lucifer's interesting creations. The widow-makers. Spirits. Some of the creatures you know as myths left the

human realm because it was safer to coexist with the fae. Winged horses. Some with a horn on their—”

“Unicorns?!” Emeline leaned forward, excited. “So they do exist?!”

Arsen’s smile turned wicked, reminding her they weren’t far apart from each other on the bed. The reality was that he’d already been leaning toward her and now their faces were closer than *appropriate*.

Briskly, she leaned back, creating more distance. Emeline hid her fluster with, “You were saying?”

Eyes glimmering with amusement, Arsen continued. “If anyone with human blood steps into Haven, it’s a death sentence.”

“And Dragon’s Den is any different?”

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“Because of Samael.” Emeline said pointedly, “I did notice there were half-humans here. Does that mean they’re welcome?”

He shook his head. “It means they’re tolerated. Barely. My father is no stranger to killing kids. Samael and I wouldn’t do such a thing. Any children who’ve found themselves on vessels headed to the fae realm have found themselves shipwrecked on human lands.”

“How does that explain why there’s ‘fun’ back at Sari’s home?”

“Grimwood Estate is near the mountains that border Haven and the Den.” Arsen shifted slightly, so his hip pressed against her calf, but he was able to reach and run his fingers from between the dragon’s horns down to his snout. He stroked up and down the dragon’s head in a soothing gesture, earning a sleepy *purr* while he explained. “Recently, my father has been a bit more… radical than normal. He wants those with even a smidge of human blood dead. The thing is, when the realms split, there were fae and humans involved in romantic relationships. The realms dividing didn’t break up those relationships; it only forced the couples to choose between Haven and the human realm. Since then, all the humans who were coupled with fae have died. It was over 500 years ago. But their halflings and their offspring still walk the land. In Haven’s eyes, killing them is getting rid of a pest problem. In Dragon’s Den, it’s—”

Emeline cut in, her tone flat, “Murder. It’s deliberate and systemic, which is the very definition of genocide. Your father’s a fucking cunt.”

Arsen bit his lip, fighting a laugh. “Yes. He’s a cunt,” he agreed. “But he’s the king. Riven won’t take over until Eris is deemed unfit by the court or dies.”

“Has he really killed children?” Emeline’s question was morbid, but she couldn’t understand how someone could do that.

Then her subconscious turned into a viper, whispering in her ear, *But you aren’t innocent either. You killed a child too.*

Emeline went still, her heart pounding against her chest. The accusation didn’t sting. It felt like she’d had her skin flayed open; vulnerable to every acidic torment her mind wished upon her. Blood roared in her ears, and she couldn’t handle the anxiety bubbling over.

I didn’t mean to.

I *didn’t* mean to.

I didn’t *mean* to.

She repeated it in her head like a prayer she was desperate to have answered. Only she knew that she’d been forsaken long ago when all her tears led to nothing. No answers. No closure. Emeline felt the edges of her vision darken. There was a burning pain in her chest. She needed to—

“Breathe.” Hazel eyes drenched in despair met shining ones. The light there eviscerated the shadows, threatening to swallow her. Arsen reached out, his thumb and forefinger angling her head to tilt back so he could stare closely at her. If he was looking for answers, then like her, he’d find nothing too. “That disgusting taste again. You kept repeating you didn’t mean to do something. After you asked if my father murdered children.” His eyes darkened until there was no light peeking through. “Did you kill a child, little nightmare?”

Her vision blurred. Embarrassment cut through her, but it was grief forcing the tears to fall. She felt them fall down the sides of her face rather than straight down her cheeks. Hot tears embodying her emotional turmoil silently hit her nightgown.

“I can’t decide what I hate more.” Arsen’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Your fears or your tears.”

She sniffed, blinking through her blurry vision to see him scowling. “Neither my fears nor my tears are yours to hate. And I thought you wanted them. My fears.”

“I want to know what they are,” he clarified and then looked as if he wanted to say more, but didn’t.

The fact of the matter was that Emeline didn’t know what scared her. Was it that she thought it was her fault? No. She’d spent weeks—months—blaming herself every time she looked in the mirror. How could she fear it

being her fault when she already believed that to be the truth? It was the reason she didn't visit friends. The reason she isolated herself—the reason why she wasn't afraid to die. What she felt she'd done was unforgivable… to take a life so soon. Emeline still wasn't sure how it'd happened, and that alone was almost enough to kill her.

Arsen's scowl deepened. He let go of her, eyebrows furrowed. "You're not making any sense. Your thoughts are scattered."

"Then do yourself a favor. Get out of my head."

"Not a chance." He grimaced. The hand stroking Samael was now resting on her knee, over the blanket. "I will find out what you've been hiding. Why you taste of fear at the oddest moments with no explanation that I can think of… And now I'm wondering if my little nightmare is a murderer."

Was she? Unsure.

Did she feel like one? Absolutely.

Her heart and her mind were two opposing forces, never on the same page. All she knew was that she'd spent the last few months avoiding everything that brought her the simplest joys. She'd reduced herself to nothing more than living.

Eat. Go to work. Come home. Read or doom-scroll. Sleep. Repeat.

Everyone thought that dying was a hard decision, but it was even more difficult to experience life when it felt like she didn't deserve it. Arsen would find out what had happened. She could only fend off her own mind for so long, and even then, the intrusive thoughts would surely make an appearance. Nonetheless, she felt an inkling of desperation to not be the only one exposed.

"I'll tell you. Of my own free will—" Though *free will* was pushing it when she felt a bit cornered. However, if he agreed to this, then she would want to tell him. "—But first, I want you to tell me something that you've never told anyone."

Arsen's eyes sparked with mistrust. "Why should I trust you?"

"I'm not going to sit here and convince you," Emeline remarked warily. "You're Pandora's box, filled to the brim with murderous tendencies and trust issues. What I'm about to tell you is something I've never told anyone —not even someone who had a right to know—and it would make me feel better if I wasn't the only one being vulnerable."

It wasn't a quick change.

Emeline sat there for minutes, watching as Arsen became lost in his own mind. Resplendent eyes were muddied with hesitancy, dubiety, and suspicion. There was little she knew about him other than what he presented before her. Knowing that he'd been mistreated as a child was the first star in an otherwise starless sky that painted his life.

Then something changed.

A flickering light in his eyes, burning with hesitancy. "My life isn't something you want to know about. It's not the fairytale you believe because I'm a prince."

"I figured that out when I realized your parents are abusive," she said gently, shifting so her hand was placed on top of his.

Emeline's face warmed, feeling his body go rigid under her touch. She didn't have the choice to take her hand back because a sleepy dragon went and placed his muzzle over the top of it. She couldn't hear any of his thoughts, but Samael's breathing evened. He'd fallen back asleep as soon as he'd made himself comfortable.

When she looked back at Arsen, his eyes were already on her.

Her breath caught.

And then he finally spoke. "The nobility is aware that I was meant to be the sacrifice for the realms to split. For Haven to be created. They know that the king intended to kill me." His voice was quiet, like the walls were listening in and waiting to use his secrets against him. "What they don't know is that my father *had* killed me. When Lucifer appeared in front of King Eris and Queen Liora at the altar, I'd already been sacrificed. I shouldn't be alive right now, and my father has never let me forget that."

She still wasn't breathing. Rage filled her gaze. "He killed you?"

"He never gave me a name, either." Arsen's smile was humorless. There was spite and resentment—and if she didn't know any better, maybe something like hurt. "For over thirty years, he called me *'spare.'* It wasn't until Lucifer named me that the king was forced to use it."

Emeline was still reeling from the fact that Arsen had died—as an infant. To find out he'd lived without a name for more than thirty years? That was longer than she'd been alive. What's more, Arsen was a prince, but he'd truly had nothing.

A name was meant to be something everyone had, but even that had eluded him.

"We kill him."

Arsen stared at her blankly. “What?”

“Your cunt father. We feed him to Samael.”

The prince blinked, pulling his hand away. Emeline thought she’d royally fucked up. She focused on keeping her hand steady, so Samael didn’t stir again. However, it was then that Arsen did the most perplexing thing.

He started laughing.

She’d heard him give a quiet laugh. A chuckle that was more reserved than anything. He’d grinned maliciously and given more wicked smirks than she could count. It was at this moment that Emeline realized she’d never heard him laugh.

Not a real one.

This was a deep belly laugh that had his right arm wrapping around the front of his abdomen. A freeing sound that forced her own lips into a smile at the sound of it. Arsen’s body shook, despite his obvious attempts at trying to contain his amusement with his fingers digging into his side. This was the sort of sound she wanted to hear more of. The sort that had her chest aching in a beautiful, yet worrisome, manner.

“The king is several millennia old,” Arsen reflected warmly, yet there was a heady exasperation lurking in his tone. “Samael and I are quite strong, but we wouldn’t be able to take on the king, the queen, my brother, and the royal army all at once.”

“Your brother wouldn’t help?”

“Riven’s duty is to Haven. The kingdom comes before anything and anyone.” There was no emotion in his voice. Arsen said it like the phrase had been repeatedly ingrained into his head over the years.

Emeline wrinkled her nose. “Sounds like bullshit. He’s your brother.”

“The same could be said about my father.”

Yikes. That was true. “What about your mother? Sari mentioned your father conceived you with a concubine… a fae with no markings. Instead of staying with your father, couldn’t you have stayed with her?”

Emeline thought of his father’s cruelty and realized maybe his mother was dead. Panic embalmed her. “*Please don’t say she’s dead. Please don’t say she’s dead*.”

The corners of Arsen’s lips fell imperceptibly, an ache growing in her chest. “She’s alive, fret not. After she… handed me over to my father, she earned her freedom and went off to have a family. She married someone in

Ironclaw. A halfling. They have a daughter with a son on the way. Nova and Aadi."

On the way? Then he must stay in touch with them.

"You're in contact with them?"

That smile was gone now.

Emeline sort of wanted Samael to eat her now. She relayed as much, unsure if he was still asleep or not.

"Why, when I can hear you put your tail in your mouth?" the dragon replied with a big yawn.

He stood up, moving to the extra pillow next to her, where he proceeded to fall with a *thud* onto the top of it. Completely unbothered, he nuzzled the pillow, appearing to go back to sleep. Emeline shot him a sour look before turning back to Arsen. She waited for a moment, wondering if he would say anything else.

"I saw her once. A very long time ago. Samael and I went to Ironclaw to see if…" He trailed off, running an absent hand through his dark hair, looking a bit disheveled. As the fae who was always so self-assured and confident, it was refreshing to see him struggle to find the right words to say. "…How she was doing, I suppose. I spent the entire ride wondering what I would say to her."

"And what did you say to her?"

This time, Arsen's smile wasn't nice. "Nothing. She saw me and ran away."

If hearts could crack, then Emeline's had already splintered in about fifty different directions. She'd been in a constant despair over the loss of a life she didn't get to know. She'd pushed everyone away. Wished for death on more than one occasion but held back to not make her parents sad. She wasn't responsible for anything more than herself, and even that was too much.

On the other hand, Arsen was responsible for… well, she didn't know how big Haven was, but she had an idea of how large the territory for Dragon's Den was, according to the maps she'd seen. Arsen had to guard the Veil from humans and banished fae alike. He had to deal with his father —the person who'd *killed* him and still refused to accept him. There was evidently a civil war brewing if his father wasn't opposed to genocide. And then there was the part with his mother.

Empathy, not pity, washed over her.

She felt sorry *with* him. Not *for* him.

His actions and the things he'd said weren't excused by the tragedies, past and present. She'd hold him accountable for that. Nonetheless, Emeline was emotionally mature enough to recognize that, for all his faults, Arsen had good in him too. The people of Scaleridge respected him even if they feared him.

And they had to fear him, right?

"Why do you think they don't look me in the eye?" Arsen inquired, listening to her thoughts without a hint of shame in his expression. "My father spread a rumor after my rebirth that anyone who looks into my eyes will die. He doesn't want anyone to look upon his greatest misfortune."

'Fucking cunt' might be too nice for the king now. This millennia-old fae needed a vase thrown at him and perhaps a lobotomy. Emeline took a deep breath, knowing that it was time. He'd trusted her with more details than she'd expected.

Her gaze found Arsen's, and she told him something about herself that no one else knew. "A few months before the wreck, I found out that I was pregnant. Luis would have been the father. Our tryst was supposed to be casual and something we would never bring up again. Obviously, that should have changed when I found out I was pregnant. But the thing is, I never told Luis. Before I was able to hear the heartbeat—I lost my pregnancy. I…" A lump formed in her throat. One she couldn't swallow down like she had hundreds of times before. Saying this—out loud—and to *Arsen*… It felt real. Like she was experiencing the trauma all over again. "I don't know what I did, but it happened. There was blood. So much blood." Her voice shook. "I knew what had happened, but I had bloodwork done to confirm it…"

Emeline looked up at Arsen, only to find the silhouette of him was blurry, and light blended in with shadow. She couldn't tell what he looked like with the stinging in her eyes.

A hand fell on hers. He turned hers over and squeezed it gently. It gave her the strength to continue, even as the words broke her to say it out loud.

"It's my fault. I miscarried. I killed my baby."

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22

ADMIT IT

EMELINE



Her lip quivered, and sorrow seized her by the neck. It held her still while misery forced itself down her throat, choking her with every disparaging thought she'd had about herself since the day she lost her pregnancy. Emeline brought her hands to her face, fiercely wiping her tears away, and whispering incoherent apologies that could barely make it off her tongue. Her nails scratched against her cheeks carelessly.

Emeline felt her cheek press against a chest. Two strong arms wrapped around her lower back. Like this, she wasn’t accidentally maiming herself. Her hands went to the back of his tunic, holding on for dear life. She was straddling his lap, the hem of the nightgown rising on the tops of her thighs, but she didn’t care.

All she could truly comprehend was the feeling of safety enveloping her. For the first time—*ever*—Emeline felt grounded. It was a sense of belonging that was wholly unfamiliar to her. It was *that* safety and *that* peace that gave her the freedom to cry.

And she did.

God knows how long it lasted.

Minutes? An hour?

Time was irrelevant while she acknowledged her grief and felt safe enough to do so. She was mournful for the moments she would inevitably miss. Her hopes and dreams were seeds in the ground, left unwatered. They'd withered and died before they’d had a chance to sprout.

Losing the pregnancy early meant that she was left with a lot of *what ifs*. Would the baby have had her auburn hair or Luis’s dark curls? Would she have had a daughter or son? Whose laugh would the baby have taken after? Would she have stayed in Spain or moved back to the United States to live near her parents?

Emeline was searching for the point where her grief ended, but even as her tears dried and the sobs wracking her body stopped, she still felt the despair heavy in her chest. It was as endless as time, forcing her to consider the fact that she might not ever stop grieving the loss of her baby.

The feelings didn’t go away. And neither did the mortification when she became aware of their proximity. Her hands gripped the back of his tunic tighter, wrinkling the material. For as tightly as he held onto her, she wasn’t letting him go either. But with a growing awareness came other emotions.

Shame reared its ugly head in her direction.

What was she doing?

“If you ruined my shirt, then I’m going to be rather upset with you,” Arsen remarked.

There was no bite to his tone.

It almost felt like he wasn’t sure what to do now either.

Emeline bristled, straightening her back. She couldn’t move off his lap with the way his arms caged her. If she was being honest—which was the

theme for tonight—then she'd have to admit that she wasn't trying very hard to get off him.

Oh well.

This would be something to unpack later. Something her brain would try to overanalyze right before falling asleep. She leveled the wicked devil with a firm glance that would have been much more intimidating if he wasn't aware of how fast her heart was pounding. "If I did, it's not my fault."

Arsen's eyebrow rose.

She explained. "I was very content bawling my eyes out over there." Emeline gestured to the spot where she had been before he pulled her onto his lap. "And for the record, there isn't any snot on you."

The prince didn't say anything, looking into her eyes like there was a river of answers to be found, and he was ready to drink everything in. She stared back at him, unsure of what to say. There was fascination and curiosity present, making her wonder what he was thinking.

"You know what I am. What I'm capable of…" Arsen drifted off, letting the sentence hang in the air. From his tone, it sounded like he was both in awe of her and upset by something. "I'm trying to understand how you can still look me in the eyes. I didn't hold back at the orphanage. I took everyone's worst fears and created fire, disease, and even covered their screams with more pain. You should be running away from me right now. All I do is break things."

Samael stirred, causing her to look over. He was fitful in his sleep. The sharp ends of his claws pierced through the fabric and bedding. She reverted her attention to Arsen to see that he hadn't stopped staring at her—to the point where it was unnerving. It wasn't even because of his unnatural eyes, but because of how they made her feel. She was comfortable going through life without making an impact. It was like skating over a frozen lake, knowing that she'd never make the water ripple.

With Arsen, she felt like he was the ocean and she was the moon. Everything she did had a gravitational pull, affecting the tide and currents of his being. He watched her closely, aware of her movements, and under his gaze, she felt seen. Like she had no choice but to exist in the present and not the past.

It was as rehabilitating as it was stress-inducing.

But it was easier to live in the fog than try to find a way out of it.

“You want to be numb.” There wasn’t any judgment or amusement in his voice. Only curiosity. “The sole reason you’re still alive is because you don’t want to hurt others with your death. Your parents would be devastated, wouldn’t they? I gave them your letter. They passed it back and forth. Your mother was particularly worried, and so was your father; but for her sake, he tried to hide it.”

A wry smile spread across her lips. “That sounds like them. They’re both worrywarts. They were like that when I was on deployment too. Watching the news for any mention of my ship and then emailing me about a recent article they'd come across, wondering why I didn’t tell them what I was up to. As if I could get away with reporting the ship’s movement to them.”

“They care about you.” Another statement.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, *‘Well, they’re my parents.’* But in Arsen’s case, and in many instances, blood didn’t equate to family. How many people in the military had she felt a familial love for? If she wasn’t so terrible about nurturing those friendships, then maybe she’d still talk to them. Instead, she’d let those relationships die from a lack of communication.

“You have people who care about you too,” Emeline found herself saying. “Wyll and Caesaria care about you enough to meddle. Wyll tries to be someone who can protect you, and Sari’s doing what she can in her capacity with the marriage trials. You said your brother snuck you wine before—surely that means he cares about you, too, no? Enough to get into mischief with you?”

Arsen ripped his gaze from hers. The action was reluctant, like it took serious effort to look away from her, but he stared at Samael as if he couldn’t bear to say the truth and face her. “It’s complicated.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“Wyll worked in the kitchens when he was young. The first time Caesaria visited Morningstar Manor, he’d been the servant tasked with bringing her anything she wanted. I think the moment he saw her, he fell in love. I knew he wouldn’t be able to ask for her hand as a servant, but he could as a commoner who was granted nobility.” He sighed. Arsen’s golden eyes were unfocused as he said out loud what she was sure he’d convinced himself of. “Wyll’s alleged care for me is driven by a misplaced sense of duty.”

“You think that he only wants to protect you so that he can… What? Gain a noble title and marry Sari?” When Arsen nodded stiffly, Emeline raised her eyebrows. “Did Wyll tell you this outright?”

“No.”

“Then how are you so sure that’s the case?”

“It just is.”

Emeline crossed her arms, smiling smugly at him. “Hm.” Arsen’s gaze lifted to hers, glowering at her expression. She answered his unspoken question. “Let me guess. You’re going to tell me that Sari’s care for you is driven by a weird sense of duty to her family or that she’s using you too, so that she can hold out for Wyll?”

It didn’t look like he wanted to answer her, but she didn’t require his validation.

Emeline continued, “Right, so how long have you been self-sabotaging yourself from creating deep relationships with people?”

“I do not self-sabotage.” Nearby, a dragon snorted. “Shut up, Sam.”

“*You’re the one waking me up,”* he complained, stretching and letting out a big yawn that had all of his sharp teeth on display. *“If you could stop feeling so anxious, then I could sleep properly.”*

“I am *not* anxious.”

“*You’re holding the human like that stuffed animal you used to carry around before I hatched.”* Samael’s voice was haughty, causing Emeline to grin.

“You had a stuffed animal?” Her eyes brightened with every intention of making fun of him.

Arsen’s scowl deepened. “I did not.”

“*He did,”* Samael confirmed. *“It was a black dragon the crown prince had given him when he was a babe*.”

“Do you still have it?”

“No—”

“It’s on his bed back at the Manor.” Samael let out a disgruntled noise when Arsen grabbed a pillow, smacking him on top of the head. “*If you kill me, we both die, Sen.”*

“Good riddance,” he growled out. The entire time, Emeline had a shit-eating grin on her face. Noticing it, he hastily added, “Not a word from you.”

“Not a word but *words*.” Emeline gestured vaguely toward the door, ignoring how she liked that he’d returned his hold on her. “There’s a bunch of reasons why people self-sabotage. Fear of failure or success, which I don’t think applies to you. You definitely don’t have low self-esteem. Insufferable, actually.” Emeline paused, thinking it over. “Now, a need for control and childhood trauma?” She felt the urge to annoy him further because that was better than feeling any sort of ache in her chest. “If daddy issues were a tangible person, they’d be scared of you.”

“*Everyone’s* scared of me, little nightmare.”

“Not me.”

“Not *yet*.”

“Not *ever*.”

Emeline wasn’t sure why she felt so confident about that, but her words tasted like the truth. There wasn’t the faintest tang of a lie in them. Arsen did something she was quickly becoming familiar with. He said nothing, staring at her like she was a puzzle, but none of the pieces made sense to him.

Her eyes drifted to the corner of his mouth, where his scar caught the light. She reached up, pausing only for a heartbeat before the tips of her forefinger and middle finger touched the jagged skin.

Arsen flinched, causing guilt to take a large bite out of her. “Sorry. Did that hurt?” The prince said nothing, prompting her to ask another question. “How did you get these scars? Samael alluded that you had scarred your face to save Wyll.”

She went to pull away when Arsen’s hand wrapped around her wrist. He blinked twice as if caught off guard by his own actions. Despite the clear frown on his face and the way he was looking at his hand like it was the enemy, he didn’t let her go. Rather, Arsen curled his fingers around her wrist. She was aware of how big his hands were compared to hers. His fingers were long and graceful in their movements, like a pianist’s.

“Samael’s emotional. You have to learn to ignore him sometimes.”

“*Tell me how that works out when I bite your limbs off.”*

The corner of Arsen’s lip quirked up, his attention drifting briefly toward the brooding dragon. It returned to Emeline like he couldn’t look away for long. She tested the waters, reaching for his face again without breaking eye contact. This time, he didn’t move away, but his shoulders

were tense. She brushed against the scarred skin, not prying. Not pressing for information. Emeline gave him as much time as he needed to answer.

It took seven thundering heartbeats for him to find his voice. “This might come as a surprise to you, but the king hates my existence.”

“Shocked,” she deadpanned, dropping her hand.

He exhaled sharply, dark amusement coloring his voice. “Wyll made an inconsequential mistake while we were at Seaspire Castle. He looked me in the eyes when my father had spent hundreds of years crafting his favorite rumor. Wyll’s punishment was to have his eyes removed.”

Emeline stilled. Horror exploded in her chest.

Arsen’s hand tightened around her wrist. “I got in the way. He cut the side of my jaw, near my lip. That was unintentional. When he realized I’d disobeyed, he went after my right eye. He tried to cut it out before Lucifer appeared and stopped him.”

“I’m surprised that Samael didn’t.” Then his words digested in her mind. “Wait—Lucifer appeared? *The* Lucifer? The fallen angel? *That* Lucifer?”

“How many Lucifers do you know?” He eyed her, but Emeline didn’t think a Disney one counted. “I didn’t use the gifts—the power I’d been given from Lucifer—until that moment. When Lucifer appeared, and I saw the fear present on my father’s face, I knew that it was only his fear stopping him from killing me. By using his fear of Lucifer, it allowed me to keep Caesaria and Wyll away from his wrath.”

“Have you always had those gifts? The ability to wield fear?”

He nodded. “Since he brought me back to life.”

“But you never used them? Not even when… when your father was hurting you?” Emeline tried her best to understand. “Why didn’t you make him afraid before then?”

“I didn’t care what he did to me.” Honesty dripped from his voice, but Emeline couldn’t be happy about it when the reality of Arsen’s upbringing was the very definition of sacrifice. “I didn’t belong to that family. Still don’t after more than five hundred years. Back then, I could endure anything if I went into that part of my mind that disconnected me from the world.”

She didn’t think she had any more tears to shed, but now Emeline could feel the corners of her eyes prickling with grief. “And what about Samael? When—how did you find each other? You said he was like a familiar?”

His gaze darkened, and she knew that he was pulling back. “Do you remember the first day in my office, when I said that you were more afraid of living than you are of dying?” Emeline nodded slowly, trying to understand where he was going with this. “Before Samael, I wasn’t worried about dying. My death wouldn’t make anyone grieve. Wyll and Caesaria have each other; they’d move on quickly. *Maybe* Riven, but…” Uncertainty clouded his expression, but he didn’t dive deeper into how his brother would feel with him gone. Whatever their relationship was, it was as muddled as his feelings toward it. “I suppose I can understand what you meant by living in a fog. I’d shut myself down until Samael hatched. Lucifer gave him to me when even the fog became unbearable for me. Samael, after he hatched, became the one creature who knew everything about me. Fickle as he is, everything good about me is because of Sam.”

“*You can’t get rid of me, Sen. No matter how much you try to hide away,*” Samael said loftily and a bit smugly.

The ghost of a smile fell on the prince’s face. “I should have tried to hide you away. Instead, you became overly attached to someone who wants to die.”

Emeline snorted inwardly. “Can you blame me? I mean—I blame me. I killed—”

“You didn’t kill anyone,” Arsen cut her off.

Concern drew her eyebrows together. “But it was my body that failed. I couldn’t sustain my own pregnancy. I—” Her throat closed around the words, but she forced herself to say the truth. “It’s my fault.” More tears fell. “I am the reason my baby died.”

Part of her expected him to refute it—to argue more that she wasn’t responsible for the death of her baby. He didn’t. Emeline’s eyes hurt from all the tears and crying, but somehow they still found a way to trail down her cheeks. They coated the hem of her nightdress. Arsen didn’t fully meet her gaze. By the way his eyes followed her tears, it was like he was cataloging each one of them.

He breathed harshly through his nose.

A secret smile formed on his lips.

Emeline couldn’t believe it at first. “Are you laughing at me? Do you find this funny?” Her heart started to wind up, fluttering in her chest fast enough for it to feel like it was a constant ache. “You believe it, then. You—”

“I believe that *you* believe it was your fault.” Arsen stopped her spiral before she could descend into madness. Though it felt like she was already there. “Do you want me to sit here and tell you that it wasn’t?”

Emeline pressed her lips together for a moment before saying, “No. I wouldn’t believe you.”

“Then we’re at an impasse.”

“You’re smiling, and it makes me want to throw a vase at your head,” she murmured, wiping her eyes. Frustration blossomed at how her eyes hurt, and she knew she was going to have a headache in the morning. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’re grieving over the loss of your pregnancy.”

Emeline scrunched her nose. “No shit, Sherlock. Do you—”

“Let me finish before I give your mouth something to be busy with, Emeline.” Arsen interrupted her with a stern tone that probably would have made a lesser woman squirm in her seat.

It was her.

She was the lesser woman.

And it didn’t go unnoticed, considering she was in his fucking lap.

The bastard’s lip quirked, but he continued, “You look at yourself and your grief as something to be ashamed of. You look at what happened as your fault. I can’t tell you otherwise when you’re not receptive to hearing that it wasn’t. That’s a war you need to fight with yourself. I’m not a woman, so I won’t pretend to know how it feels to lose a pregnancy.” Arsen’s voice turned softer. His head tilted slightly, catching more moonlight in the gold strands of his hair.

There was only a brief silence as he chose his words carefully. “What I can say is that your grief isn’t something to be ashamed of. There’s beauty in mourning. Before that baby took its first breath, you loved it. Before that baby had a heartbeat, you had dreams for it. You loved that child so much that when the pregnancy was lost, you had so much love inside you with nowhere to put it. *That* is your grief, little nightmare. In its purest form, it’s love with nowhere to go.”

Emeline could only stare at him.

It wasn’t like everything had changed for her in an instant, but she could admit that this was a new perspective she hadn’t considered. More so, it was jarring to think of something she hated so deeply as love. Emeline had

thought of her grief as ugly and unnecessary. It had been this disgusting, incurable disease that she didn't know how to live with.

Rather, she'd felt silly above all else. Felt like she was overemotional and her emotions were about as unnecessary as she was to the world. Caring so much about the *what ifs* and *what could bes* had led Emeline to think she was crazy. Yet Arsen had validated her feelings and didn't lessen them. Her own doctor had told her she should be *thankful* that she'd lost the pregnancy early and at a stage where it was '*easy*' to heal from.

God, she felt so conflicted.

What was the right way to feel?

How was she supposed to react in a situation like this?

"There is no right or wrong way to feel, little nightmare. You just do." Arsen, it seemed, wasn't interested in hiding that he was always listening to her spiral. That crooked smile transformed into a more familiar, wicked smirk. "I've never been the hero, nor do I pretend to be a good person when I'm not. Don't forget that."

"You might be a pain in my ass, but you're not inherently a bad person." Emeline went on to explain, "I think that you are far kinder than how you perceive yourself to be, considering how you were raised. You have a duty, but it's to protect the people here. I still disagree with your methods, but I won't pretend I can undo a five-hundred-year-old bad habit."

She paused, but it was only briefly to gather her thoughts. "The people here respect you even when they fear you. They named a flower after Samael that's meant to celebrate their greatest moments—the most precious times in their lives. They wouldn't have done that if you were evil. There wouldn't be the issue of fae wanting to live in Dragon's Den if you were a bad ruler."

"Careful. Ideas like that are akin to treason," he pointed out dryly. Emeline noted that he didn't *disagree* with her, only that it was important she didn't repeat them. "My father is currently doing everything he can to get me killed without directly inciting Lucifer's wrath. I found out about his plans for smiting the orphanage days ago through rumors from his guards stationed around the Manor. Although I didn't think it was an outright ambush for him to have me killed. Points for originality, I suppose."

His humor was as dark as hers, if not darker.

Good thing this wasn't the human realm, or they'd both be committed. Maybe they could have matching straitjackets. Or at the very least,

monogrammed ones.

His and Hers.

The prince rolled his eyes. He feigned nonchalance, but his grip on her hips had subtly become tighter when he added, “What you said before was exceptionally dull. The part about thinking that I’m not a bad person. It sounds like you care for me.” There was the briefest hesitation before confidence coated his tongue. “Don’t tell me a few sweet words are all it takes for you. It took that little effort for you to start to care about the person who killed your friends?”

Emeline didn’t cower or become flustered.

She didn’t retaliate how she normally would have—with razor sharp blows in the form of thinly veiled threats. The opposite, actually. Because now she knew him better. Now she knew that he hid his own discomfort and vulnerability behind a viper's tongue. Emeline was beginning to realize they had more in common than she thought was possible.

She leaned forward slightly, inches away from his face. It was close enough that she could take in every fleck of starlight in his eyes and the shadows lurking beneath. “Bold words coming from someone who already cares for a human.”

“I don’t—”

Of course he’d choose denial. *Boring*.

When Emeline cut him off, she did it with a voice that demanded to be heard. She cut through all of his verbal defenses when she said, “Arsen, you might want to know what my fears are, but that doesn’t explain why you saved my life. Nor does it explain why you cleared a room when I was having a panic attack in the dining hall. And it certainly doesn’t explain why you held me—why you continue to hold me—if not to comfort me. In. Your. Lap.” Her eyes narrowed as she stressed the words, taking in how his expression pinched, and his jaw ticked with agitation disguised as anger.

Emeline left a challenge for him. It swayed in the very little space between them, waiting to see what he’d do next. “Admit it.”

He eyed her. “That you’re also a pain in my ass?”

“That you don’t want me dead anymore. You like having me around.”

The prince leveled her with a glare. It should have been scathing, but it barely sparked an ember. “Don’t mistake my physical interest in you for something sentimental. It’s disgustingly naive and quite boring.”

“I’m not. If you only wanted to fuck me, then maybe that would have happened already. If I really thought that you were going to kill me, then I wouldn’t have been opposed to a little hate sex to send me off.”

She was bluffing.

Completely and undeniably ambivalent to what his true feelings for her were. But getting on his nerves was a skill that she intended on mastering. If he didn’t care for her, then he wouldn’t be reacting like this… which made her wonder if there were some truths to her bold accusations.

Did he have feelings for her after all?

“*You’ll have to excuse him,*” Samael piped up from where he was resting. His tone was exceedingly smug—almost like the Devil himself was hiding in his voice. He sounded both wicked and like he knew he was about to get in trouble for what he had to say next. “*The poor fae has never mated with someone. He doesn’t know how to broach the subject of feelings with the human woman he’s protective of.*”

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23

EMOTIONS ARE HARD

EMELINE



Once again, social cues were afraid of Emeline because she found herself blurting out, “You’re a virgin?”

Arsen wasn’t looking at her. Even with the darkness, she could spot the foreign warmth seated across his cheeks as he glowered murderously at Samael. If he turned a bit more to the left, Emeline

wondered if that blush would reach to the tips of his pointed ears. His chest was still. Was he even breathing?

Samael let out the dragon equivalent of a cackle, rolling onto his back with his wings tucked underneath him. "*He's currently threatening me and detailing how he would cut me up and feed me to the tavern's patrons for breakfast.*"

"That's not very nice," she mused.

"*He's not often shy—*"

In one swift move, Arsen had Emeline off his lap. She bounced onto the bed to his right. The fae turned his body partially toward hers before lifting his left leg and landing a sweeping kick against the pillow that Samael had been lying on. The diabolical trill was cut off as the dragon was sent tumbling—right off the bed with a loud *thump*.

Emeline's eyes widened. She scrambled off the bed, shooting a reprimanding look at the prince, and snapping his name with disapproval. When she rounded the bed, she saw Samael lying there. He was lying on the ground with his stomach against the hardwood. His right wing partially covered his snout.

"*Leave me to die. At least when I perish, so will that emotionally stunted virgin.*"

Emeline bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. "You're so dramatic."

The dragon rose, lifting a foreclaw onto the edge of the mattress to glare back at Arsen. "*Are you not worried about me? What if I have a concussion? Don't be so heartless.*"

She expected Arsen to snark back, but the fae smirked like he was enjoying a private joke. He moved off the bed, slipping the nearby dagger into the waistband of his breeches. He walked over to Samael, but his words were directed at her. "You need to rest. There's still another hour until first light. That sweet drink you're partial to is on the windowsill if you need something hot before bed."

Sweet drink?

Hot chocolate?

Emeline beamed a smile at him before walking over to the tray with excitement building in each step. "They serve hot chocolate here? I didn't realize the fae considered it a common drink. If they serve this, then I don't know why coffee isn't. I checked earlier to see if they'd have it for you."

She was half rambling to herself, trying to make sense of it. Arsen shrugged instead of giving her a verbal answer. He picked up the dragon, who was comically glaring at him. Emeline ignored the distant reply, thinking he was still cross with Samael for sharing his lack of sexual experience.

Samael huffed, smoke bleeding out of his flaring nostrils. "*I don't want to sleep with you.*"

"Too bad, you overgrown worm." He flicked the dragon's forehead. It couldn't have hurt with the hard scales protecting him, but it definitely annoyed the creature. Arsen earned a snapping of jaws that surely would have had him losing a finger or two if his reflexes weren't so quick. "You've taught me that I can't leave you two alone. Especially now that she can hear you."

Emeline rolled her eyes as the two left the room. It was hard not to smile again when Arsen paused to tell her to lock the door behind them. That was another thing someone who wanted her dead wouldn't be caught saying. Plus, she was in a realm where fae were able to use magic. What good would a metal latch do?

Her question was answered when she heard another voice speaking to Arsen outside. Wyll. Was the blond guard standing watch? With a quiet sigh, Emeline realized she was still tired. There were a lot of reasons justifying her fatigue. Arsen's blood in her veins. Almost dying. There was also the mental and social battery aspect. It was more than depleted—it was fried. How did Arsen deal with so many people daily? Even Caesaria and Wyll—being involved with a royal court was exhausting.

All Emeline wanted to do was drink hot chocolate and watch social media videos. Another thing to get used to was not having an electronic leash. It felt like detox because there were moments here and there where she caught herself looking for her phone, only to remember that she was in a realm where unicorns existed but not Wi-Fi.

God, she fucking wanted to see a unicorn.

And try fae wine.

Emeline brought the mug to her lips, wondering why escaping hadn't crossed her mind of things to do or try. She tentatively took a sip of hot chocolate, expecting it to be room temperature or worse—cold. It wasn't. Surprisingly, the drink was hot enough to be enjoyable but not too hot that she'd burn her mouth.

It was perfect.

She smirked to herself.

Absolutely perfect.

Exactly how she'd have made it if she was in the kitchen. Which meant… hot chocolate wasn't a common drink here, the same way coffee wasn't. The kitchen staff weren't the ones who made this for her.

It was an emotionally stunted virgin who was quite wicked, quite handsome, and quickly becoming the biggest threat to her heart.

.——— ———.

Her body still felt lethargic, but Emeline couldn't shut her mind off. If Arsen didn't want to kill her, then were her fears truly so interesting that he needed to spend precious time figuring them out when it was apparent that his realm was on the brink of civil war?

The king was ready to kill off an entire orphanage of half-fae. He thought that a needless act of genocide and getting his son killed in the process was—what—a bonus? If only Samael were here, then maybe Emeline could find out more about Arsen. It would be nice if he could offer the information freely, but even if she knew him better than most, that relationship was still transactional.

And that was another thing weighing on her mind.

Emeline had known Arsen for a week. Seven days. Yet she knew more of his secrets and inner thoughts than Wyll or Caesaria. They'd known the prince for hundreds of years. Why was that? Why did Samael take to her so quickly?

Maybe it was a good thing that those two busybodies were gone.

She could spiral in private.

With a quiet groan, Emeline sat up and headed to the door. Light had entered her room not too long ago. If she was bored and Wyll was guarding the door, then maybe she could pester him with questions to pass the time until everyone was awake.

She shivered as her feet padded against the cold, wooden floor. Emeline undid the small metal latch, ready to greet Wyll's unfriendly face, but she was welcomed by a smile instead.

It also wasn't Wyll.

Sari grinned at her, not wearing her usual attire. She wore dark breeches that were snug at her hips and tucked into knee-length black boots. Her blue leather jerkin was decorated with silver buttons.

“What do you think? I have a feeling I’m the most attractive female guard around.” Confidence sang in her soft voice.

The court lady did look beautiful with her braids fashioned in a half-up, half-down ponytail. Silver cuffs were latched onto her braids. Emeline wished she had a sliver of Sari’s poise and grace. She was lucky if she didn’t trip over her own two feet most days.

“A walking wet dream,” Emeline mused, leaning against the doorframe. “Where’s Mr. *I-Take-Out-My-Anger-And-Frustration-On-Others*?”

Sari’s grin morphed into a grimace. “Attending to the prince’s needs. His royal grumpiness hasn’t had coffee since yesterday morning. Add in what happened, and he’s in a particularly foul mood. Truly, I wouldn’t be surprised if he started breathing fire with how short-fused he is right now. Lucky for us, Wyll never travels without a small stash of coffee beans for emergencies. He tried to reason with Arsen, saying that he was on duty—guarding our doors—and nearly got his head bitten off.” The fae paused to laugh before explaining further, “Wyll woke me up and asked if I could stand guard in your bedroom until he gets back, but the door was locked.”

Emeline had started shaking her head halfway through Sari’s rundown. “You both cater to him too much.”

“He’s a prince, Emeline,” Sari spoke slowly, trying to emphasize her point. “Whatever odd relationship is between you two—that he would willingly share his blood—you should understand how he treats you isn’t normal. Also, because he’s royalty, the expectation is that his will is meant to be obeyed. If the prince wants that horrid coffee drink, then he gets it.”

Gag. Next.

“Sure.” She forced a smile because she didn’t know shit about their so-called relationship either. “Do you want to come in? I imagine it’d be more interesting to wait in here rather than stand outside all alone.”

Sari nodded, her easy grin returning once they were inside. Emeline closed the door and could almost feel the moment the mood shifted. Sari’s easy grin fell to an awkward smile. The fae nervously shifted her weight from one foot to the other. The tension became palpable, and after years of naval service, she wasn’t good with subtlety.

“Spit it out. Whatever’s on your mind.” Emeline took to sitting on the bed with her back against the headboard, while Sari hesitantly sat at the edge. “You look like you want to say something, so let’s clear the air.”

“I feel bad about how things went down after you almost died,” she confessed. A line formed between Sari’s brows as she tried to articulate her thoughts and feelings. “None of this is your fault, and the person we should be directing all our questions to is Arsen. We’ve been his friends for so long, and yet there’s still such a high wall between us. It makes it difficult to get straight answers from him.”

Emeline was unimpressed to say the least. “So basically, you both felt that I was an easy target, tried to get answers out of me, but lo and behold—I don’t know shit.”

Sari winced. “Yes, I’d say so.”

“Are you sorry?”

“I wouldn’t have spent the last forty minutes wondering how to apologize to you if I wasn’t.”

Emeline tapped her chin. “Hmm…” She pursed her lips, pretending to think hard about the situation. “I give it three stars.”

“Pardon?”

“Your apology. It kinda sucked, but I appreciate you wanting to make amends and recognizing that you and Wyll were in the wrong.” Emeline took a deep breath, letting go of any hidden resentment. She found none hiding. In reality, Emeline wouldn’t know what she’d do if she were in their situation. They wanted to live, and her presence threatened that. Emeline didn’t care whether she lived or died. It was a step up from actively wanting to die. *Progress*. “If you want some unsolicited advice, I would say that you and Wyll need to sit down with Arsen. Tell him *clearly* how you both feel about your…friendship.”

Sari’s expression filled with skepticism. “We’ve been friends for a very long time. He has to know where our loyalties lie.”

“You’re assuming he does, and maybe, to an extent, he knows that you and Wyll are on his side—but there are conditions in his mind. You have to think about how he grew up. How Eris raised him. He’s not going to assume that you guys stand by him out of sheer goodwill. Every interaction he’s had with someone was because they needed something from him, or they were punishing him.”

Emeline bit her lip, glancing idly down at her nails. She wanted Sari to understand Arsen's perspective without giving any secrets away. She continued, "Right now, think about how Arsen might see his relationship with you. With Wyll. Think about how he'd approach the relationships given his upbringing. If you've never expressed to him that you care about his well-being, then you're never going to be a real friend to him." Emeline paused, then shrugged. "If that's what you want. If not, then ignore me."

She was met with silence, causing her to stop picking anxiously at the sheets and look up at Sari. The fae was staring at her, flabbergasted. Truly, her lips were parted, and she looked at Emeline like she had two heads. Please don't let that be a side effect of the demonic blood running through her veins. Emeline could barely handle her thoughts from one brain, never mind two.

After a long moment, Sari's lips formed into a sinful smirk. "Since when did you know Arsen so—dare I say—well?" An unknown epiphany flashed across her face, causing Sari's eyes to widen slightly. She unexpectedly jumped off the bed, dramatically wiping her breeches like they were dirty. "*Ew*. Please tell me I didn't sit where you two—"

"No." Emeline's voice was flat.

She hoped her expression was unamused, but her cheeks reddened at the insinuation. They had done something more intimate than sex. Fucking was easy. Mindless even. Baring the darkest, ugliest pieces of your soul to someone wasn't just hard; it was giving another person the power to hurt you. And this was Arsen that she was talking about.

Emeline had trusted him to look at the worst parts of her, and he didn't look away. He didn't coddle her. He gave her the space and the safety she didn't know she needed to feel. Fuck, she hadn't done nearly enough overthinking about this.

Maybe Emeline had given her last shred of sanity to Arsen. The circumstances might have been convoluted, but after he'd given her a small piece of himself, it'd felt right to tell him about her loss.

At the mere thought of her miscarriage, Emeline's heart was pounding fast. The sound must have been thundering for Sari, and that's why her demeanor turned smug. The fae thought that she was onto something. Convinced they had fucked.

"No," Emeline repeated, this time more forcefully. "No fucking of any kind occurred. We talked… about him and his childhood—things that don't

involve you, so don’t ask. I can keep secrets, just not my will to live.”

Emeline’s tone made it seem like a joke when it wasn’t, and Sari took it like one. The lady sat back down on the edge of the bed, her demeanor noticeably calmer.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Sari remarked wryly. “I am curious as to what made such a devil finally be honest with someone. He’s always so distant. I know you haven’t known him for long, but you’ve noticed, no? He’ll nod or have a conversation, but there’s always that wall I spoke of earlier. Hell—with Wyll, too. Seeing you get close to him so effortlessly, I think it makes Wyll jealous. I mean, he’s always seen the prince like a brother, despite the royal barriers.”

Emeline wouldn’t call it effortless.

Trust wasn’t effortless.

Part of her wanted to laugh that the person who’d threatened her life countless times, only days ago, was now someone who knew about her miscarriage. The same could be said about her knowing his past.

Their traumas were uncharted waters that neither he nor she could effectively navigate alone. The memories lingered in the crests of the waves trying to drown them both. For Arsen, Samael had been a life ring. For Emeline, Samael was a lighthouse, and the other was a jagged rock. If she latched onto the rock too tightly, it might cut her, but for right now, all she could do was hold on and trust the rock not to break and let her drown.

But a question came to mind.

Was Arsen worth drowning for? Could Samael be trustworthy enough to guide her when she didn’t know him that well either?

Did she mention that it was a good thing two busybodies couldn’t listen to her spiral? She’d be—

“You do the same thing he does.”

Emeline blinked, realizing she’d gotten lost in her head again. “What? Sorry?”

“Arsen will tune everything out and talk to Samael. There are times that Wyll and I will start our own conversation because he’s off having his own. I am curious as to where you go.”

Nowhere pleasant.

If the mind could make a Heaven of Hell and a Hell of Heaven, then Emeline was stuck in purgatory. She tried to weigh her sins on her own, unsure if she’d sinned in the first place. Was losing her pregnancy a failure

on her? Or was it a tragedy to be mourned? Her mind was something she wouldn't wish on anyone. There was nothing crueler than Emeline's own demons. Nothing.

With a swallow, she glanced away to blink back tears and focused on Sari's revelation. Emeline could recognize that Arsen was more comfortable with Samael, but he had a lot on his plate and, all things considered, only trusted Samael with matters close to the heart. On the other hand, she also recognized that Wyll and Sari weren't wrong to start their own conversation if he wasn't an avid participant.

The three of them had terrible conversation skills, resulting in a muddy relationship. Who'd have guessed the human would be more emotionally mature than fae who had lived for hundreds of years?

"Are demons emotionally constipated? Is this where you lot get these terrible personality traits from? Might want to write home to your demon daddies that they're a few millennia behind on emotional maturity."

Sari rolled her eyes. "Are humans overly emotional?"

Touché. "Is talking about your feelings really *'overly'* emotional?"

"It is when the monarchy is involved. Trust me when I say that you're lucky not to have to deal with such things." She sighed, looking off toward the window. Sunlight kissed the edges of the bed, sending rays sprawling over the covers. "The Bloodstones are always trying to find a way to usurp the throne. The Larkspurs think they're crafty by trying to compel royal officiates into thinking the Seaspire line isn't fit for the throne. My father's more interested in fostering a better relationship with the king in an effort to find out his weaknesses." Sari pressed her lips together in a tight smile. "I highly recommend you don't repeat this to anyone. You'll make a lot of people unhappy."

Emeline stared at her. "Does Arsen know your father is like that?"

"He's quite perceptive. I'd say so."

"And you're surprised that he keeps a wall up around you?" Emeline smacked her forehead, looking at the fae with theatrically wide eyes. "Your father is using a friendship with the king as a way to fuck him over later. How does Arsen know you're not like that?"

"Because I'm honestly more interested in what Wyll is doing than I am about ruling. Truthfully, anything is more interesting to me than ruling. I'd rather be back at Grimwood Estate. There's a wonderful view of Leviathan Lagoon from my window."

Emeline's head tilted. "Did you go swimming in the lagoon a lot?"

"Are you kidding me? Absolutely not. The creatures lurking there are carnivorous. The king tends to execute traitors by throwing them into the water."

For fuck's sake.

What was this—Sparta?

"Well," Emeline began, eyeing the fae. "If you want things to change, you need to talk to Arsen. Figure out the kind of relationship you want with him. It's not easy to be vulnerable, but that's what it takes to build trust."

Emeline pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. She placed her chin on her arm, wondering when the fuck had she gotten so introspective? Only a week ago, she would rather have dove head-first into a cement pool than talk about her feelings. Truth was, since crying on Arsen's chest, she felt lighter.

Sari nodded, that ever-present playful grin back on her face. "Speaking of relationships with Arsen—"

"Don't even."

"—what *is* the manner of your relationship with him?"

Emeline pretended to think hard. "What a difficult question." Then in a bland tone, she said, "Enemies."

Sari didn't look convinced. "Enemies are invited to royal dinners?"

"I don't know anything about royalty except that they're all emotionally constipated."

The fae tried again. "Enemies ride horseback together?"

"How do you know that I wasn't trying to push him off the horse when you and Wyll were having such riveting conversation in the carriage all alone?" Emeline challenged, wiggling her eyebrows and earning a faint blush from Sari.

"Then let me ask you this." Sari leaned forward, smirking. "Enemies save each other's lives and are carried all the way to an inn where the *enemy* prince takes care of her—and stays by her side until she wakes? Is that what enemies do? Because that is something Wyll would do for me. And if you weren't aware, he cares deeply about me."

Emeline opened her mouth at the same time there was a brief knock at the door. It cracked open without waiting for them to give permission.

"Say," she began in a snarky tone, "why don't you use this perceptiveness of yours and help Wyll stop being such a whiny bitch if he

wants to foster a better relationship with Arsen? Then he can talk to the prince instead of being an asshole to me."

A throat cleared.

They both swung their heads toward the door to see Wyll standing there. His cheeks were stained red with anger or embarrassment—she couldn't tell. Maybe both.

"Lady Grimwood, could you please excuse us for a moment? Arsen's downstairs in the Tav with two giant mugs of coffee. He's inhaling them like his life depends on it, and someone should probably tell him to slow down." The guard's attention shifted to Emeline, his eyes narrowing. "The human and I need to have a word alone together."

Ah. Fuck.

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24

LOYALTIES

EMELINE



The door closed behind Sari as she left the room. The soft click of the latch was barely audible, but because of the tension in the room, it was deafening.

Emeline was uncomfortable in only her nightgown and resorted to clutching a pillow against her chest. If Wyll tried to stab her, she might have

a fifteen percent chance of survival and only because it would be a shame to ruin Elara's furnishing.

"Look, if you plan to kill me, Samael is going to be very displeased with you."

It was a joke. How else was she supposed to deal with a possible life-or-death situation? Except this didn't appear to be one, based on how Wyll was stubbornly looking out the window rather than focusing his attention on her.

He wore black breeches and a midnight-green jacket made out of a thick cloth. It had a cross-stitch pattern, but was sleeveless. Underneath, she saw moss-colored sleeves running down his arms, with brown leather bands tied around his wrists. The same color leather was bound around his hips and strapped to his thighs. He had an impressive display of obsidian daggers on his right hip all the way to his left thigh. A golden-hilted shortsword was seated at his right side.

Maybe this was a life-or-death situation after all.

Her chance of survival was surely in the negatives now.

"I'm sorry."

Emeline's jaw went slack. "What?"

"I said, I'm sorry."

She squinted at the way his mouth pressed together in a tight line. "Say that again? I think I misheard you."

"For Abaddon's sake—I said, I'm *sorry*—" Wyll growled, only to turn back and see her smug expression. "—You heard me the first time, didn't you?"

Emeline lowered her makeshift defensive shield to her lap. She rested her elbows on the pillow, unsure of what exactly he was trying to apologize for.

"Are you sick?"

"What?" He looked confused. "No."

"Were you threatened?"

Wyll's lips turned, weighed down by annoyance and discontent. "I'm trying to apologize. I know that I've been unfair to you, and, believe it or not, I don't like threatening people unnecessarily. I save that sort of thing for Arsen. He's the one who likes making people uncomfortable."

"Now I'm people? When you found out that I was a human, you looked at me like I was a cockroach." Emeline raised her brows, looking at him speculatively. "What changed?"

“You saved Arsen’s life.”

“So, because I saved—”

Wyll cut her off. “It was brave.” His voice was firm, and he met her gaze steadily. “I’m speaking more about your achievement as an individual rather than the fact that you saved our prince’s life. What you did… most fae would have hesitated.”

Our.

Emeline said nothing. She didn’t know the right thing to say, nor did she think it was an appropriate time for her flavor of dark humor to make an appearance.

The fae guard continued when she kept quiet, “Whatever your reason, I’m thankful that Arsen is alive. I stopped being a *‘whiny bitch’* as you say —” She grimaced at him. “—and quickly realized that I was in the wrong. So… I’m sorry.”

Slowly and a bit theatrically, Emeline clapped. “Four stars.”

Wyll stared at her like she was an idiot. To be fair, she was. Why else would Emeline have allowed herself to cry while straddling the enemy prince?

When Wyll’s confusion didn’t disappear, Emeline explained, “Your apology was better than Sari’s.”

A fond warmth heated his gaze, turning amethyst to lavender. “You’ll have to give her some grace. It’s not often that anyone tied to royalty knows how to properly apologize.”

Dissatisfaction found a home in her scowl. “Would it be an exaggeration to say you lot allow the monarchy to get away with murder?”

“No. I know that Sari told you about how Arsen was almost killed as a babe. If the king had succeeded, the entire royal family would have gotten away with it.”

Right. About that.

Arsen hadn’t survived anything.

It was sickening to think about, but Arsen was slaughtered as an infant and sacrificed to split the realms. Lucifer had appeared—instead of Astaroth —after Abaddon had said the chance at winning an all-out war against humans was slim. Arsen was alive because Lucifer had given him another chance at life. Though, by the way things sounded, it wasn’t much of a happy life until Samael hatched.

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?” Emeline’s voice was gentle before turning a bit mischievous. “You love Sari. Did anything happen in the carriage?”

If possible, Wyll’s frown deepened, but a flush spread across his cheeks. “Did she say something?”

Emeline countered his question with another. “Would it be so surprising if I noticed regardless of whether she mentioned it or not?”

“If the other court ladies found out that we… enjoy being around each other, then they could use that as a way to have Duke Grimwood fall out of favor with the king.”

“Royalty sounds exhausting.”

“You have no idea.”

Something like solidarity formed between the two. Emeline wrinkled her nose. Gross. She needed to clear the air with Wyll now too.

“You’re still an ass for how you treated me earlier.”

“You’re still an uncivilized human who has no business being in the fae realm.”

Not wrong.

“You’re still the thrift-store version of Legolas.”

Wyll looked like he was fighting a grin as they put the past behind themselves. Emeline didn’t care to hold a grudge. There were more important things on her mind right now, and she was trying to give herself the grace to process her emotions about last night rather than bottling them all inside her.

“I want to bathe and change. Is there a chamber here like at the Manor?”

“What you experienced at the Manor, you won’t find here. There’s a private room, but the water will be cold. I could ask Sari to get it ready for you, but the daughter of a duke isn’t supposed to be catering to humans.” Wyll added the last part, clarifying, “I know that she would if you asked, but if anyone were to see—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Emeline waved him off. “We hate humans, blah blah blah. Just show me where to go and a change of clothes, please. Preferably something like what Sari and you are wearing. I’m tired of dresses.”

Wyll snorted inwardly, shaking his head. “We were taught to hate humans, Emeline. But now I’m starting to learn blind hatred makes fae ignorant, not honorable.”

She figured that was the closest she’d ever get to Wyll admitting he was beginning to enjoy her company.

.——— ———.

In the Navy, there were times when the ship was put on water hours to help conserve freshwater. This meant that the least amount of water was used to accomplish the job of getting clean. There were also times when the heaters were broken or having maintenance done, leading the temperature of the water to be freezing cold. In comparison, this was so much *worse*.

She was given a large bucket and matching wooden cup. Her nipples could have cut diamonds, standing there, trying to bathe properly. The soap bar was small, but she made it work.

All of this strife, only for Sari to walk in on her while she was naked and start howling with laughter. It’d taken her a few minutes, but Sari had revealed to Emeline that the Tav had a modest bathing chamber. This predicament she’d found herself in was simply Wyll’s revenge for the *‘whiny bitch’* comment.

Emeline decided at that moment; she liked Wyll. It reminded her of the camaraderie among service members. Light hazing was the start of a great friendship.

Sari had brought her a change of clothes. Dark-brown breeches with an off-white tunic. Not as fancy as her attire, but Emeline didn’t care. She slid on the shin-length boots, wearing a broad smile. It was nice to be able to move around freely for the first time since she’d ended up in this realm.

“What’s the plan this morning?” Emeline inquired as they headed down the stairs. “Are we heading back to the Manor?”

“I’m not sure. Arsen’s been on a proper rampage this morning.”

She frowned at that, wondering what his problem was. The tavern was bathed in sunlight. Elara stood behind the bar table, drying a steel cup with a ragged cloth. Her gaze was downcast, but she kept sending curious looks at Wyll. The blond guard was seated by the window. A plate of untouched breakfast sat before him. It looked like eggs and some sort of sausage.

Arsen and Samael were nowhere to be found.

It surprised her enough to ask the obvious question out loud. “Where’s the prince and Samael?”

“Town hall of sorts,” Sari replied in a dismal tone. “He couldn’t wait, and I think he went to the fountain to hold an impromptu meeting with the fae who live here.” Seeing her questioning gaze, Sari expounded, “The fountain is located in the square. It’s quite big.”

Emeline’s eyebrows drew together with concern. “It’s still early.”

“You underestimate how long it took you to bathe.”

“I had—you know what—never mind.” Emeline wasn’t going to give Wyll the satisfaction of knowing that he’d annoyed her. “Why’s he acting so oddly this morning? Didn’t you give him coffee? Or do we need to invest in a coffee-infused pacifier? I don’t think the CPSC would approve, but there’s always Etsy.”

Sari stared at her blankly. Emeline shook her head. She wasn’t going to explain the Consumer Product Safety Commission or an online shopping experience to someone who had no interest in the human realm.

Wyll answered her question as they neared the table. “That’s what I want to know. Did anything happen between you two last night?”

Wow. On the spot.

Yes. “No.”

Emeline’s expression was the picture of nonchalance, but her heart raced, betraying her. Sari grinned, while Wyll rolled his eyes.

“Care to try again?” Wyll pressed.

She’d sooner die than betray Arsen’s fragile trust. If someone asked Arsen about her, Emeline could only hope that he’d keep her secrets as fiercely as she was willing to keep his.

“Nope. Can we go?”

Sari nodded at her request. “I was waiting for you to suggest that.”

“The prince said to stay here.” Wyll scowled. His tone said that he’d already had this argument with Sari. “We don’t know how the crowd will react with the fields and the orphanage being destroyed.” Now he spoke directly to Sari, his expression cynical. “You know that tensions are worsening. This might cause Scaleridge to turn on Arsen, despite him being an advocate for them against New Haven.”

Emeline cocked her hip to the side, placing her hand on her waist. “Wyll?”

“Yes?”

“You’re Arsen’s personal guard, right?”

He eyed her suspiciously. “Yes…?”

“Then go do your fucking job and guard him,” Emeline said with a sweet smile. “Lead the way. We’ll be right behind you.”

.——— ———.

The sun told her it was almost midday based on its positioning in the sky. Sari had been correct to say that Emeline didn’t realize how long she’d been in the private room trying to clean up.

Who could blame her?

Not only were the supplies inadequate, but Emeline’s mind was a labyrinth. As she worked through her thoughts and feelings from last night, there was guilt, shame, and maybe the most unexpected thing—*relief*—finding her at different turns.

She didn't want to go back to the beginning of the mental maze, so she allowed herself to face her guilt and shame. Allowed herself to feel instead of searching for the numbing fog. Not even the beautiful shops could quell Emeline’s loud thoughts. Although seeing plants magically grow in front of shops had a very important question striking her.

Emeline’s head whipped to Sari. The cloak’s hood almost fell back completely until Wyll caught it and fixed it. A nice gesture, if one could ignore the way he’d almost pulled it down the entire front of her face.

She glared at him before addressing the lady, “Why didn’t Arsen take me to you instead of giving me his blood if it was going to be such a big deal?”

Sari glanced at her sideways, the sapphire hood of her cloak hiding the fae’s face partially from view. “Isn’t it obvious? Waiting for me to save your life wasn’t worth the risk of losing you. To some degree, Arsen values your life.”

Wyll scoffed quietly behind them, grumbling, “There goes any plans he had to kill her.”

Emeline ignored their prying gazes by focusing on the town’s scenery. The cobblestone beneath her feet was even, yet she felt unsteady with the confirmation.

She would have to unpack that information at a later time because they were nearing the town square. In the center stood a grand fountain. It was enormous, at least eight meters tall. A dragon was sculpted from black slate, water falling from its open mouth. It looked similar to Samael except for

the lack of gold dusting the scales and snout. The wings were outstretched, easily four meters wide. It towered over the crowd, filling the large square.

There had to be hundreds of fae packed in tightly.

Cinderblocks formed a circle around the fountain. Standing on top of them was Arsen. He wore all-black leather armor, a long blade sheathed at his side. His arms were crossed, and, in spite of the warmer weather, his armor hid most of his markings. The only one visible was the head of Leviathan on the back of his left hand.

They made their way closer to the front, slipping between the crowd with relative ease. Emeline kept her gaze on Arsen. His shoulders were tense, eyes blazing with anger. She shifted her attention, becoming more aware of everyone staring at the fountain. There were a few people quietly chatting under their breaths among each other. She barely caught the whispers as they walked past them.

"…Is this because of the orphanage? Is the prince planning to answer for the king? We know this is the crown's doing…"

"Ridiculous. No apology can right this…"

"…Don't look into his eyes, sweets. They say that one glance from the Second Prince will have you dead on your feet…"

"Briar said that she saw a large golden serpent in the fields. Said she saw it from her home. Saw the prince fighting it…"

"…Odd that he's holding a meeting here, no? Normally, we'd have to travel all the way to New Haven…"

"The puppets at New Haven won't like this one bit."

"Did you see the prince carrying someone yesterday? Tried to get Elara to spill some truths, but she's keeping quiet."

"…Where's that dragon of his? It's so rare to see Samael not with the prince."

"*Shhh*. He's about to speak."

Emeline stood a couple of rows away in front of Arsen. Sari stayed by her side, but Wyll continued making his way forward to stand on the cobblestone in front of the prince. The guard's right hand was on the hilt of his sword while he faced the crowd with a menacing glower. More whispers circulated around Emeline and Sari.

"Is he upset with us?"

"Do you think he's going to allow the king to kill the halflings?"

“Why would the Second Prince want to fall out of favor with his father? It’s only a matter of time—”

“Quiet.”

Arsen’s voice had the entire square going silent. Emeline peeked from side to side, seeing that the majority of the fae appeared tense. Scared. They looked like they were all awaiting a death sentence.

Was Arsen really that frightening and intimidating to them? The silence was so thick with unease and restlessness that she found herself shifting her weight uncomfortably from left to right. For some, Emeline wasn’t sure if they were breathing. It was like they dared not to make a sound in his presence. Younger fae looked up at their parents with concern painting their expressions.

While everyone waited with bated breath, Arsen didn’t cower to the silence. He wielded it like he did fear. Confidently. His shoulders relaxed as he got ready to address the people, faith and sin warring in his gaze.

“The orphanage being targeted is not something that I take lightly. Nor will I overlook it, regardless of who the guilty party is.” Arsen paused, scanning over the hundreds present. Emeline knew only two gazes would meet his directly. A muscle in Arsen’s jaw tensed. “I’ve heard the rumors.”

Rumors? Beside her, Sari sucked in a sharp breath. Emeline saw the lady’s blue eyes widen, causing Emeline to nudge her with a curious look.

Sari’s voice was barely above a whisper as she leaned toward Emeline. “He usually ignores the gossip. To address a rumor is to give it life.”

That didn’t appear to worry Arsen. His back was straight, using one hand to gesture to the crowd. “It’s no secret the realm was created to protect us from the greed and deceit of humans.”

Emeline snuck another glance at everyone, seeing that the majority still looked concerned. She didn’t understand the dynamics between Haven and Dragon’s Den as much as she’d like to. At least by keeping a pulse on the crowd, she could draw conclusions from their reactions. Demeanors shifted as the silence grew. Concern turned to panic with a few angry expressions emerging.

Why?

Was it because of humans?

Did they think because Arsen was the king’s son, he would dismiss their worries? Their fears? The prejudice running amok throughout the entire realm?

“Don’t you?” It was Arsen’s voice in her mind.

Emeline snapped her gaze to meet his. Golden eyes were tarnished by indecision. Anyone looking at him would see a prince. Calm and self-assured. She saw someone with a wild look in his eyes, trying to find the balance between insurrection and acceptance. When Emeline knew nothing about him, she believed his anti-human propaganda. Days ago, she’d have said that Arsen indiscriminately hated humans from the way he slaughtered them. Yesterday, she would have said he was cruel. Merciless.

But now Emeline believed the situation to be much more complicated than trying to sort these people into sides of *‘good’* and *‘evil*.’ Humans and fae came in shades of gray, not black or white. Arsen’s hatred of humanity felt like meaningless reiterations he’d repeated because the alternative was giving his father the opportunity to kill him… to kill the people he was trying to protect while in the shadows of the court.

Emeline’s fixated stare refused to let this go. *“You are not the monster that your father has tried to make you out to be. Incite trust instead of fear. Give them your loyalty instead of your father, who doesn’t deserve it. You are better than this.”*

Arsen didn’t respond to her directly.

He shifted his attention back to the hundreds waiting for his next word. When he spoke, it was in a tone that could have made God himself fall to his knees before him. “For the past five hundred years, I have witnessed Haven become what we were taught to despise in humans. Greed doesn’t discriminate between races. Hate isn’t monopolized by humanity. We are taught young that humans kill for power. They lie, cheat, and steal among their own kind for personal gain. I’ve seen the same things that we villainize humans for exist in the king.”

His voice grew louder, a vein straining on the side of his neck. “Scaleridge is not under New Haven’s authority. You do not answer to them. You do not answer to those who prioritize one life above another based on their demonic ancestry. You answer to *me*.” He gave another pause, letting his words sink into the crowd as a shadow descended over them.

Emeline squinted against the sun, catching a glimpse of an enormous creature passing overhead. It flew only a couple of meters above the fountain before flying off again. Samael was in his true form, looking like

the harbinger of death. Black scales swallowed the sunlight, and smoke danced in the wind.

"You answer to *him*," Arsen continued, his voice harsher. His chest rose and fell before he shouted, "Have I made myself clear?"

The echo that his voice created made several fae stiffen. For a heartbeat, no one moved. Not even Arsen as he waited for anyone to speak up. Emeline watched as an elderly fae raised his hand. He was dressed tidily in a dark-burgundy tunic. His breeches were made of a finer material, giving him an air of sophistication. His beard was gray and neat, cut short against his skin. "Eildon Louden, Your Highness. I've managed and facilitated the money for the town, as my father did before me." In his hands, he nervously picked at a matching hat. "If what you say is true—are you renouncing the crown? Is this an official declaration of war?"

"No," Arsen said firmly. Emeline could almost feel the disappointment saturating the air around them. It didn't deter the prince as he crossed his arms. "It doesn't take a war for there to be change."

Eildon's mouth pressed into a tight line briefly. The earlier nervousness transpired into anger with his fingers curling around the cotton brim. "You believe that the crown will be receptive? You govern a town that is treated the worst out of all Dragon's Den. How are we supposed to trust you when it is your blood who calls for the death of our family, our friends, and our neighbors? Your blood is the one who targeted an orphanage. Who constantly targets the innocent."

Treated the worst?

Was he serious?

This was as bad as it gets?

Arsen's jaw clenched in what she could only assume was irritation. Emeline could understand perfectly what he was feeling. Arsen knew about the human realm. He knew the monsters who lurked there and how Scaleridge was far better off in comparison. But how would a group of people know how good their circumstances were if they had nothing to compare it to?

It was a hot anger, sparking in her chest. The kind that made one aware of every second that ticked by, marked by every passing heartbeat. Emeline was never good at keeping her mouth shut, and she wasn't about to start when she had a front row seat to Arsen being mistreated by the very people he was trying to protect.

“Are the fae in this town starving?” Emeline’s voice cut through the air like an arrow, embedding straight into the elderly fae a few meters away.

Several rows of heads turned to her at once, causing her cheeks to warm faintly. Even in the military, she’d hated public speaking, but she knew how to project her voice. She knew how to make sailors listen to her. Fae, she was beginning to realize, were no different than humans. Magic aside, their hearts could be swayed just as easily.

Eildon’s thick eyebrows scrunched together, taking in her cloaked appearance. “Clearly not. We’re a community that prides itself on taking care of each other. Every child who was displaced yesterday received a warm meal and a bed last night. We will regrow the fields with our magic and have a feast to celebrate.”

“Do gangs and thieves commonly patrol the streets, coercing shop owners to pay for safety?”

“No—”

She cut him off viciously. “Has the prince given you any reason to doubt him? And I’m not talking about the relation to his father or the crown prince—I’m speaking about *him*. The fae right in front of you. The one who is affording you the opportunity to speak your mind and not kill you where you stand like the king would.”

She didn’t know the latter part for sure, but by the murmurs of agreement, Emeline had hit the nail on the head.

A flush of embarrassment spread across the fae’s face. He promptly turned and bowed his head to Arsen, placing a hand over his heart. “Forgive me, Your Highness. I meant no disrespect.” When the prince didn’t immediately respond, he continued in a skittish ramble, “Your people are scared, and we are unsure of where your loyalty lies.”

Emeline’s heart was still racing, thundering to her own ears. She didn’t actively have a death wish, but she certainly didn’t have an *‘I want to stay alive’* wish either. Grounded in the moment, she wasn’t sure how to act.

Arsen took the opportunity to walk the cinder blocks. He stared out at his people, who refused to look at him directly. Emeline watched as their gazes turned when he neared, or they suddenly got interested in straightening their tunics. Whatever the reason, there was conformity in not looking at him.

The crowd anxiously waited to hear Arsen speak. They’d hung onto every word that had already been exchanged. She knew this day would be

the source of conversation for weeks to come. Maybe even years, depending on what he had to say.

It was appropriate that Arsen didn't answer immediately or make empty promises to fill the silence. It showed that he was comfortable standing in front of the masses and took what they had to say into consideration.

"Glad that I have your approval, little nightmare."

Emeline sent him a withering glare. He saw it when he stood in front of her row again. Evidently, her glare amused him, as it caused the corner of his lip to rise faintly.

Finally, Arsen decided to speak. "I believe in what everyone has created here. When the king demanded that I guard the Veil to protect Haven, he placed me far away from New Haven." He shifted as he talked to everyone, glancing around at the fae who were too scared to meet his eyes. "When the original town grew too quickly, and the infrastructure failed, Ironclaw was established. When the officiates cast out the les—the fae who didn't meet their ridiculous standards, Scaleridge was founded."

She listened, finding herself more and more hungry for information about the realm in which she was caged. Emeline wasn't the only one. Sari no longer looked anxious but rather… amazed. Shocked, for reasons Emeline wanted to discover later, along with other information about Dragon's Den.

"All of you have created a town that treats fae of all backgrounds with a basic kindness. With respect, which should be as common as Hell's lilies. Instead, it's a scarcity among the entire realm. You ask about my loyalty? Where my allegiance is should the day come when the crown finally descends upon this town with death in their wake?"

A devastating roar shook the ground.

Emeline knew it was Samael despite the distance. She couldn't see him, but she somehow knew he was close. It was a comfort in the back of her mind. Arsen's fists clenched by his side. His shoulders drew back, and his eyes were divinely bright, outshining even the sun.

He continued, "My loyalty lies with the fae who seek to create a community where anyone is welcome… where prejudice has no place…"

He let the sentence purposefully hang in the air, while the other half of his smile rose in a wicked manner. Almost like what he was about to say next would be a defining moment in fae history.

Emeline wasn't sure if that would be a good thing or not.

Arsen’s stare narrowed in on her.

The Second Prince of Haven spoke with absolute clarity, forcing the words to echo again throughout the entire square. “My loyalty also lies with the human woman who saved my life.”

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25

SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

EMELINE



Emeline was going to kill him.

How could he throw that information out there like it was no big deal? These people were starving for new information, and he was happily feeding them.

"Did he say human?"

“He must have misspoke and meant a halfling. There aren’t any full-blooded humans here.”

Wyll’s grip visibly tightened on the hilt of his sword, eyeing the crowd like a coiled snake prepared to strike. Emeline looked over at Sari only to see the lady was also judging the crowd.

Catching her gaze, Sari said, “We should go. I don’t know what he’s planning, but revealing that you’re—”

“Look at me.”

Emeline’s gaze lifted to Arsen’s. The sun outlined his silhouette as well as the hand that was outstretched toward her.

An invitation.

The crowd began to part, heads turning as they found the source of their prince’s attention. She swallowed nervously, but Emeline wasn’t about to make a fool out of Arsen by publicly refusing his hand. She was already planning in her head all the biting remarks to say about this later.

“I look forward to it,” he practically purred in her mind.

Emeline could feel Sari’s worry like it was a tangible presence behind her. Concern was visible in the way Sari had taken a step toward her but stopped.

“What are you planning?” Emeline sent the thought his way, hopeful that he’d answer it and not leave her guessing like everyone else.

“Being better, I suppose,” Arsen mused back.

Wyll moved to the side, not looking at her. It wasn’t malicious—he was keeping all of his attention on the fae surrounding them. Waiting for someone to step out of line.

She reached for Arsen, feeling warmth settle into her when he took her hand in his. He helped her step onto the large cinderblocks, lining the perimeter of the fountain. Like this, Emeline could feel the weight of everyone’s stares on her.

None of them were on Arsen.

Not on the prince, who’d publicly declared that he would fight for them and give his loyalty freely. Emeline curled her lip in a fierce sneer, and she did the boldest—or stupidest—thing yet since entering the fae realm.

She let go of the prince’s hand.

She faced him with everyone’s attention still locked onto her.

And then Emeline brought her hands to Arsen’s face, pulling him down so that she was eye level with him. Hazel eyes met golden ones with no

resistance.

Knowing how strong Arsen was, he'd allowed it by how pliable he was under her touch. Gasps reverberated throughout the square, but Emeline didn't tear her gaze away from him. It didn't take a war for there to be change, and Emeline destroyed the king's rumor, which had been festering among the fae, with a single act.

She hoped he was listening as she thought, *"Are you out of your mind? What brought all of this on? Wyll and Sari said you've been acting strange all morning. Pissy too."*

"Can you blame me?" Fox-like eyes stared back, as if deciding whether she was a blessing or a curse. *"Hundreds of years of pushing people away and telling myself it's better off this way. Then I met you, and now I find myself untethered."* Arsen paused, his gaze unsteady like he wanted to look away, but he found that he couldn't. Under her hands, he relaxed.

He continued, *"The truths I've kept guarded even from my own brother are slipping away from me every second you're next to me. All morning, I haven't been able to feel my own body, and now that your hands are on me, I'm grounded. You, little nightmare, are my tether."*

Surprise flared inside her. There was an ease in his demeanor that was barely noticeable, but she could feel it with his face in her hands. *"Riven doesn't know that you died?"*

The gold in his eyes dulled. *"That's what you focused on? Maybe I should return you to the human realm after all. Or let you swim back. You enjoyed it so much the first time."*

"I'm not a damn book, you asshole. I'm not yours to return whenever you find yourself finished with me."

He smirked. *"I might make you finish, but I'll never be finished with you."*

Another kind of heat tore through her. A forbidden one that reminded her everyone was still watching… and she was still holding the prince's face.

"My duty is to guard the Veil from humans, and now one has me in her hands. She's meeting my gaze. There's no doubt that I'll be summoned to New Haven now."

Emeline let go, turning to see the crowd. It was hesitant at first, but she saw it then. Fae began to slowly look at Arsen. He straightened out under their stares. When she focused on him, Emeline thought she could hear him.

“They’re looking at me, Sam.”

No, she *could* hear him. She heard the quiet awe in his voice like he was cautious of speaking too loudly, should the illusion break.

His head was turning, soaking in all of the attention. His chest was still, holding his breath. Did he think if he breathed out, the moment would escape him? How did it feel to be looked at by strangers for the first time in… ever?

Arsen was finally being seen, and Emeline didn’t think he knew how to process it. It’s why his first instinct was to reach out to Samael. He trusted Samael to understand how he was supposed to react.

An annoyed huff came through. *“They should be kneeling. It’s time that you accept the realm that was created for you. Lucifer made a safe haven for you and a safe den for your heart to roam free. Eris should be dead already.”*

He meant that.

Emeline could hear both the thirst for blood and the poetry in his voice.

“What?” Emeline stared at him in shock. *“Did he mean you’re supposed to be the king? Not Eris? Or Riven?”*

Samael’s smug voice filled both their heads. *“Look who’s lost control of his emotions again and forgot to focus on blocking her out.”*

“Arsen—”

“Not now. We have an audience,” he cut her off abruptly.

Fuck. They did. So many fae, and somehow Arsen’s presence made them little more than an afterthought. Most people would be shaking or nervous with this amount of attention. Not Arsen. Emeline, on the other hand, wanted to throw up.

The prince addressed the crowd with what felt like finality in his tone. He gestured to her first. “If a human can save the life of someone meant to destroy her, then how are we to continue living at odds with one another?” Arsen then gestured to the crowd, walking along the fountain’s edges as he spoke. “If an entire town is able to live in harmony, then why not a kingdom? War may be the last thing that I want for Dragon’s Den, but that does not mean I will not fight for you.”

His steps were light, unperturbed by the weight of his words nor the stares of his people. In fact, Arsen looked more regal than ever before. He was calculating under all the attention, and rather than allow it to burden him, he looked *determined*.

Sari let her cloak slip from her shoulders. The silver cuffs in her hair flirted with the sunlight, gleaming endlessly. She radiated confidence while everyone began to realize they were in the presence of the duke's daughter.

"The prince has my loyalty." She grinned, reminding Emeline of the devil near her. It was downright sinful and wild. Freeing. "As does the human for saving our prince's life. Astaroth's bloodline will join the fight."

A feral grin broke out on Arsen's face. It sunk in that this was the first time Sari had spoken her allegiance for Arsen in front of so many. Pride swelled for her friend, while Wyll's shoulders went rigid as the crowd reacted with murmurs and uncertain looks. His knuckles were white around the handle of his sword. But he didn't step away, instead upholding the duty he'd sworn an oath to. Protecting the prince.

Whatever was happening, it was not good.

Or maybe it was—she wasn't sure yet.

What Emeline *did* know was that there was no going back.

.——— ———.

The table was set up with snacks and treats. An array of breads, meats, and cheeses. Small pastries, resembling muffins and danishes. There was plenty of fruit scattered around the table and even a few jams. Emeline was finishing her third plate of food, while Arsen was on his third goblet of wine. Sari nursed her second. Unfairly, they'd given Emeline that diluted Perry again and water.

She hadn't been alive like they had been when Paul Revere was yelling down the streets of Lexington, but for fuck's sake, she was old enough to handle a little wine. She was a sailor, after all.

Arsen, sitting beside her, was lazily running his fingers along Samael's tail that hung off Emeline's lap. Calm and collected, unlike the guard who had been glaring down at them for the past ten minutes. Emeline reached for more food, while Wyll continued his riveting three-versus-one tirade, lecturing them all.

"You have been insufferable all day and then decide to—what—declare war against the crown because we're joining team human, now?"

The prince raised a brow but didn't stop messing with Samael. It must have tickled because the dragon slapped Arsen in the face with his tail.

He touched his bleeding lip, smirking before answering Wyll's question. "Have you considered that I'm tired of playing these games with my father? And to be clear, I specifically stated that I do *not* want war." Arsen's voice grew hard. "What fae don't understand, because most of them have never seen it, is that war doesn't only affect the soldiers."

He was right.

Emeline raised a grape to her lips, pausing thoughtfully. "No one suffers more from war than the innocent. Food and resources will become scarce. Trade will be halted. I don't know how fae fight, but the human battles are bloody and often underhanded."

"We wouldn't know," Sari interjected, placing her wine on the table before her. "Not many of us were alive when the realms split. The one who has the most experience with killing is—"

"*That* jerk?" Emeline quipped, shifting her gaze to the prince who was trying to annoy Samael again.

The dragon let out a warning growl, his whole body rumbling.

She hoped he bit the psycho.

"No," Sari said bluntly. "I was going to say his brother. Riven has millions of deaths on his hands."

Arsen glanced over at Emeline with an explanation ready. "The legends of death and the plague? That was all my brother's doing."

Was he talking about the bubonic plague?

Emeline scowled at him. "There's no way that's true. It was rats. I think."

Arsen tugged on Samael's tail only to let out a hiss of pain when Samael turned his head and blew a short flame, licking his hand with heat. Served him right.

"Queen Liora's '*demon daddy'* is Leraie," Sari began, turning her focus away from a small plate of breads and jams to Emeline. "Leraie is a Marquis of Hell, widely known to cause battles and disputes. He's notably skilled as an archer, but the thing is, his arrows cause disease. Gangrene. Rot. The humans may have blamed rats because a child with a bow killing off humankind seemed like a bit of an exaggeration."

Or a B-rated horror movie.

She'd watch it.

Emeline shook her head and then leered at Arsen. "Don't worry, you're still number one on my list of people I don't like. At least Riven would kill

me if I ever came across him."

Outwardly, Arsen ignored her.

Inwardly, he was the sin whispering through her mind like the serpent to Eve. *"If you spend your nights on the lap of someone you hate, then I'm curious to know how you treat someone you care for."*

A blush rested high on her cheeks. She reached for another piece of fruit to keep her hands busy. *"Can you burn him again?"*

Samael let out a huff. *"For the right amount of widow-makers, I'll do worse."*

Wyll cleared his throat, evidently ready to move on with his next victim. Emeline arched a brow, daring him to speak his mind.

"The king isn't going to be happy that you've destroyed a centuries-old rumor."

Emeline sneered. "What did I do to make you think I give a shit about what Eris wants? He is no king to me."

Samael nuzzled her front with a low purr of adoration. She felt a golden gaze burning at them both. *"Good human. Maybe you can teach the moron beside you a thing or two about making a stand."*

She rolled her eyes. Now he was just being mean. Arsen was quietly protective of Wyll, Sari, and the rest of the fae in both Scaleridge and at the Manor. Samael just wanted to see the world burn for him and Arsen only.

"You might not care about yourself, but perhaps you can find it in yourself to care about the hundreds of fae you just doomed because Eris will slaughter them all to keep his nasty rumor alive," Wyll snarked back with a squinty smile, reeking of condescending incredulity.

Emeline crossed her arms, absently aware of Samael moving over to Arsen when he somehow procured widow-makers wrapped in cloth. "You can't gaslight me. Eris already wants them dead. It's not like my actions will make them dead-*er*."

The guard stared at her blankly. "I assure you that I don't want to light you on fire." Wyll dismissed her, and Emeline thought that would be the end of things.

It wasn't.

He met Sari's gaze head-on, but now he looked even more upset than he had before. "Your father isn't going to be happy with you."

"My father is rarely happy with me," Sari pointed out wryly. She picked up her honey wine, bringing the rim of the goblet to her lips. Taking a

purposefully long sip, Sari added after a few moments, “I’m tired of the males in my life telling me what to do. Who to marry. How to conduct myself both in private and in public, and—like Arsen—I’m tired too. This game has been going on for centuries.”

“I don’t think I want to eat her anymore,” Samael noted.

He was sitting upright in Arsen’s lap. Spindly legs stuck out of his mouth as he chewed. Emeline could hear soft crunching sounds, forcing a shiver of disgust to travel down the length of her spine. She lowered the bite-sized sandwich she’d made from the table back onto her plate, no longer hungry.

“I don’t think Wyll shares the same sentiment. He would love the opportunity to eat Caesaria.”

Emeline snapped her attention to the smirking devil. “Arsen!”

The other two fae in the room stared at her with furrowed brows, but it was Sari who asked, “What? What happened?”

Her face flushed. Arsen’s smirk only grew more wicked. “Nothing. Uh, he’s just feeding Samael too many of those disgusting spider things.”

Emeline’s statement made the chaotic gremlin beside her growl. *“No such thing.”*

“You’re a glutton,” she shot back at Samael.

“At least my thoughts don’t revolve around a—how did you word it? Emotionally-stunted virgin?”

“SAM!”

Two voices rang out in disapproval this time, leading the dragon to snicker in their minds. He leaped off Arsen’s lap, sauntering off toward the kitchen with his head held high.

“Hungry,” was all he said.

Wyll pointed to Samael as he left. “Where’s he going?”

“Hungry,” Emeline noted matter-of-factly.

The guard’s scowl addressed Arsen. “He better not ‘accidentally’ eat all of the meat again. Elara was rightfully upset.”

Emeline didn’t think it was an accident. She scooted her chair back, claiming the excuse that she was going to use the bathroom. It was on the second floor; the same room where she’d had to wash off with a bucket and a wooden mug.

While she didn’t need to use the bathroom, Emeline wanted a bit of time to herself while she tried to understand what happened earlier. Arsen

addressed the crowd with a promise to fight for them. She knew what he'd said would be akin to treason, but how bad would it be for him to be summoned to New Haven? What about Sari? And Wyll? What would happen if they were all summoned?

Emeline had barely turned the door handle when someone placed a hand on her shoulder. She turned, expecting it to be Sari or Arsen, but the scent was all wrong. No florals or fresh rain. This was citrusy, like bergamot and something else. Driftwood? Not rain, but the ocean.

Before she had the chance to scream, that same hand moved over her mouth. "Don't."

Hazel eyes lifted to meet mismatched ones. The fae towered over her but Emeline could make out his eyes despite the silver cloak over his head. They were unusual, and that was saying a lot when she looked at Arsen's serpentine eyes daily. Around the fae's right pupil, there were hints of green and white. Similar to a wave's crest when it crashed over another in open water. One pupil appeared normal, but his left one was especially odd.

His entire iris was black except for the design over it. Like a compass, there were two viridescent rings, encasing a four-star pentagram. Emeline noticed his right eye color was constantly shifting and in motion, like the sea. Dark lashes framed his eyes. More details which she could have noted if it wasn't for something else that struck her as odd.

The curve of his jaw was familiar. So was his straight nose. The shape of his eyes. Rather than a fox, his were more like a wolf. The way he loomed over her was similar, and she realized something then.

His pupil was a mark.

A demonic mark.

It meant this was a powerful fae in front of her… and with his features so similar to another devil she knew of… Emeline relaxed. Her gaze narrowed into daggers on the stranger who hadn't let go of her yet.

"Arsen, are you listening?"

A breath hadn't passed before he answered her, *"Always, little nightmare."*

That short timeframe and lack of hesitation both amused and annoyed her.

"Care to tell me why your brother is holding me hostage outside the private room? Can't a girl use the bathroom without being kidnapped?"

"Do you really believe Sam would let that happen?"

Another voice entered her mind, *“Samael is too busy eating all of the Tav’s meat supply. Plus, Sen knows I will eat Riven if he hurts either one of you.”*

“You are a glutton,” Arsen scoffed.

Emeline shifted her focus back to Riven as he let her go. He reached up, pulling down the hood of his cloak. Long, elegant fingers were decorated by several metal rings on each finger. They could have been silver or copper; she wasn’t sure. Two black lip rings were pierced into his bottom lip. Snake bites.

She took in more of his features. There was an aura about him that was decidedly more unsettling than Arsen. His black hair was tapered, shorter around the nape. The hair on top was longer and neatly parted, but a bit windblown. A few locks of hair reached his lower lashes.

The crown prince might have been wearing a dark uniform underneath, but she couldn’t see all that well with his cloak covering most of him. She’d only caught a glimpse of it when his free hand reached up to mess with the hood. Emeline did recognize the jade pendant responsible for attaching both sides of his silver cloak together. It was the insignia for Haven, Leviathan wrapped around a sword.

Was he pretending to be a soldier or guard? The uniform was simpler than the ones Arsen wore, even if she didn’t get to see all of it. Wouldn’t the crown prince of a kingdom be dressed more ostentatiously?

Arsen’s voice appeared in her mind again. *“I sensed him at the square. Was wondering when he’d finally show up. Play the part and see what he wants.”*

“You’re risking my life to see what your brother is plotting? I hate you.”

“I hate you too, little nightmare.” The way he said it was unnecessary. Rougher and in a huskier voice that made her swallow hard.

“Focus Emeline. There’s someone who may or may not be trying to kill you, and he’s related to the irritating psycho downstairs,” she chided herself.

Seeing that she hadn’t screamed or made any attempts to fight back, Riven eyed her warily but released her. He was still too close for comfort.

“You’re an odd human.”

Rude. Then again, Sari had said the same thing once. That meant it had to be somewhat true, right?

Emeline gestured to him. “You’re an odd prince.”

That was the wrong thing to say. His hand wrapped around her throat hard enough that she knew the bruises would be instantaneous. Her back slammed against the wood, pain rattling and traveling up her spine. Her shoulder blades dug into the wall uncomfortably. Something in the side of her neck made a slight cracking noise.

"I was going to pretend to be someone who wanted to help you escape this realm. Planned to watch you get ripped apart by the sea spirits, but evidently, there's no need to pretend anymore. You know exactly who I am."

His grip on her throat cut off her oxygen, allowing real panic to descend into her nerves. Fight or flight had her nails scratching viciously against his wrist, drawing blood. It didn't matter.

A psychotic look danced in his eyes.

She didn't know exactly how old Riven was, but he was older than Arsen. He'd killed millions more than his younger brother, and he'd done it as a *child*. This was the king's favorite and Emeline knew that as much as she called Arsen a killer, Riven was much worse than he was.

And unlike Arsen, Riven had no qualms about killing her.

Emeline fought harder against his grasp, realizing something in the haze of her panic. She'd made a joke about Riven killing her earlier. She'd spoken of the Devil, and one had appeared. But she was fighting back.

She didn't want to die.

She wasn't ready.

Emeline didn't know if this was the same experience everyone had before imminent death. Seeing faces. Memories. Images of Sari, Samael, Arsen, and even Wyll flashed in her mind. This hadn't happened before when she'd thought she was going to die at sea. Being suffocated was like drowning. The creature in front of her had a menacing glint in his eyes more terrifying than any shark. And yet she clawed at his hand, kicking out.

She. Wasn't. Ready.

She was fighting to survive.

Not for her. Not for anyone else.

Emeline *wanted* to live.

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26

AND THE DEVIL SHALL APPEAR

ARSEN



Riven entering Scaleridge with company from New Haven was… unexpected.

What did their father know already? What about the officiates at New Haven? How fast did word travel about the human at Morningstar Manor? Did Lucetta send an errand boy? A page? Did Sabine?

Of all the fae, why did it have to be Riven?

Arsen had sensed a faint trace of his brother's power while in the square. It was the defining moment, leading to his decision to tell everyone about Emeline. The issue was that if Riven wanted to stay hidden, he would have stayed away. Him revealing himself—*purposefully*—was a warning. Get rid of the human, or he would step in.

Hiding from his brother was futile.

Hiding Emeline was even more pointless.

Nothing could stop Riven when he was on a warpath. He was the crown prince, and Eris had raised him with the understanding that the realm was his to rule as he pleased. However, Arsen was betting on the fact that Riven was more calculating than their father and less impulsive.

By making a show of Emeline, Riven wouldn't kill her in the square.

Revealing Emeline to the people of Scaleridge might not have afforded her very much protection, but some was better than none. Riven wouldn't murder her in front of so many fae and halflings. It would make her a martyr.

This was supposed to make him hesitate. Clearly, that wasn't the case.

A whisper danced across his mind as he disappeared from the Tavern's taproom, reappearing at the top of the stairs.

"I don't want to die."

Through the blood bond, Arsen saw images flash in her mind. Caesaria throwing her head back, laughing at something she'd said. Samael with a wing over his snout and one cheeky eye peeking open. Arsen saw himself holding his side while a genuine smile played on his lips. Wyll was included, a wry expression on his face that was almost familial.

For the first time since she'd been here, Emeline wanted to live.

She wanted more time with them. With *him*.

All the feelings from this morning spiraled, barreling into him. The anxiety of a human knowing a few of his secrets. The agitation of not knowing what to do. Emeline consumed his mind, and he was irritated at not being in control.

"Focus on what's important to you." Samael's voice blanketed his thundering emotions, forcing them down, and showed him through the bond that he was nearing the stairs.

There was a window behind Arsen. Rays of sunlight fell on his back and on his brother's silver cloak. Several of Riven's rings glinted back at him, catching the light. Scratches covered his right hand, and he could hear the

distressed choking noises coming from Emeline. Riven held her against the wall by the neck, glancing over at him with a lazy grin.

Arsen lost it. Any façade of control slipped away.

“Let her go,” He snarled, stalking toward his brother.

Riven let go of her, disregarding her as if she were a toy with which he was done playing. She crumpled to the floor as his brother met him halfway.

“It’s good to—”

Arsen’s fist slammed into the side of Riven’s jaw. An audible *crack* pierced the air. Riven stumbled back, laughing as he held the side of his face. He spit out a wad of blood on the floor, rubbing the spot that was already beginning to heal. Riven watched as Arsen took a protective stance in front of Emeline, standing with his back straight. He didn’t bother reaching for his sword, knowing that a real fight with Riven would force him to use the Devil’s mark, and as much as he loathed to admit it—he hadn’t fully recovered.

Samael hadn’t recovered either, and the pompous prick had flown over the town square, wanting to show off. Speaking of his dragon, Arsen could hear the sound of claws scraping against wooden steps. Samael ditched his midday snack for a much larger meal.

“You can’t kill him,” Arsen said firmly.

A low growl seethed through his mind. *“I wasn’t asking for permission.”*

“I can’t believe you hit me,” Riven pointed out with a fake pout. His tongue ran over one of the black rings on his lip, staining the area with red. “My feelings are hurt. I thought I was your favorite brother.”

“You’re my only brother,” Arsen replied indifferently, hiding his relief when Caesaria appeared at the top of the stairs behind Samael. He could sense her now and gave the order, “Heal her.”

“She will do no such thing.”

Behind him, Caesaria hesitated. Arsen was careful to keep his posture relaxed, his expression apathetic while Riven watched him closely. Every fucking second he wasted was another that Emeline was hurt, and it was painful knowing that he was the reason. Again. His golden mark glowed faintly, making the hallway brighter.

Arsen knew his eyes gleamed with the same warning. “Better to ask forgiveness than permission. You taught me that.”

Riven snorted inwardly. “Why, yes. I did. But when you’re right in front of me, then there’s no use asking—”

“Take her.”

At Arsen’s words, Caesaria threw herself toward Emeline. Riven went to stop her, but it was Arsen using the crown prince’s momentum as a weapon that sent Riven crashing through the window. Glass shattered, catching and reflecting the sun. Beams of light scattered everywhere. A few screams broke out outside, but Arsen slipped into the shadows before Caesaria disappeared with Emeline to their room.

Wyll appeared before him, seeing the ruined window and then his shadow. “Where are they?”

“Where they were this morning,” Arsen replied cryptically in the off chance Riven was listening. He disappeared without waiting for a response.

The Second Prince reappeared outside the front of the Tav, immediately spotting his brother. Riven was standing, completely unharmed. Pity.

Elated, a smile spread across Riven’s lips. “The duke is going to be upset when I deliver his only daughter to him.” His head tilted. “Or whatever remains of her.”

Arsen re-entered the corporeal realm, shedding his shadow. Good thing Wyll wasn’t around to hear that.

Riven continued, “You know, it’s really not fair. What’s it like to travel like a hellion? One of the damned? Do you see dear old Lucie on your travels?”

The serpent on his arm rippled with dismay.

Arsen rolled his eyes. “Would you care to find out? If you touch Emeline again, I’ll deliver you to dear ol’ Lucie myself.”

Riven pursed his lip, looking derisively upset. “And then who will slaughter this town? Not you.”

“That’s what you’re here for?”

“No, not at all.”

Riven’s replies were non-answers as always, and Arsen wondered if this was what Emeline felt every time she tried to get information out of him. It almost made him smile except for the reminder that he’d gotten her hurt.

Emotions he’d failed at ignoring this morning now doubled, unsettling him even more. It didn’t make sense. Bottling his feelings was easier than sinning, but because he’d been honest with her last night, he found it was hard to tighten the lid. Those emotions he didn’t understand how to deal

with now came and went as they pleased. It'd felt good talking to someone about his past. A relief, even. He wanted to discuss that and more with her, and Arsen was struggling with all of it.

Did wanting to talk about it make him weak?

If he was struggling with his own emotions, was he pathetic? He wasn't prepared to deal with her being hurt again, never mind his brother stirring up trouble. Like the shattered glass earlier, there were so many pieces of emotions scattered about. He didn't know how to arrange them so he could feel whole again.

"This is the part where you ask me what I'm here for," Riven reflected with a coy expression, noticing the silence. "Or do you not care about the fae here? What if I gave you a choice? The pests here or the human? Who would you—"

"The human."

Riven stared at him blankly. "I expected you to at least hesitate. Look ashamed. Maybe conflicted. There are innocent fae here, even full-blooded ones, who would have a place back home."

The younger prince stayed silent.

A more wicked smile spread across Riven's lips. "And what if I gave you a choice between Lady Grimwood and the human? That personal guard of yours—the blond or the human? What would your choice be then?"

Riven didn't care about his answer. He only wanted to play games. Riven treated others like they were expendable in a sick game only he knew. That's where Arsen differed, and perhaps it was because he wasn't around their father as much as his older brother was.

Arsen didn't want to be a monster, but felt like one.

Riven wanted to be a monster, and he was one. He delivered pain and suffering like a saint would bring forth peace and harmony.

How else could Riven have watched millions of humans suffer at his hands as a child? He was Eris's favorite because he excelled at becoming the monster Eris wanted him to be. Arsen was the only one who'd ever received Riven's kindness.

Instead of trading threats like younglings, Arsen crossed his arms and hit his brother where it would hurt. "If you hurt the human, you will never see me again. I don't care if we're both alive for another millennium, I won't acknowledge you."

Riven stilled unnaturally. "You're my brother."

“Don’t care. You hurt Emeline? We’re done.”

Even when they were young, Arsen had a difficult time getting a read on Riven’s fears. He’d let it slip once because he hadn’t realized that Arsen was in the room. Lying crumpled behind the king’s throne at Seaspire Castle, he’d barely been able to breathe, never mind alert his brother to his presence. Eris had taken a break from beating Arsen to summon his heir and admonish him for making a mistake earlier in the day. Arsen couldn’t remember what it was now, but he remembered that at the time, it was something completely trivial.

Riven wanted to be liked by the people he considered family.

And his only fear was that Arsen hated him. The younger prince had seen it in Riven’s eyes when he’d stared up at the king. Too weak to move, but not weak enough that Arsen would miss an opportunity like that one.

Perhaps Riven felt guilty about how his younger brother had been treated growing up. Arsen wouldn’t know because they’d never talked about it. Never had a real conversation. All he knew was that in some capacity, Riven did think of Arsen as a brother. A familial love was present. But it didn’t matter when Riven’s duty was to Haven.

The kingdom came before anything and anyone.

That had been the lesson Eris had beaten into Arsen when he’d asked if his brother could help him with learning how to wield a bow and arrow.

“You would put a human before your own brother?” Riven’s incredulity mixed with resentment. “What has become of you?”

Arsen’s smile was cold. “How would you know? You haven’t visited in over a hundred years.”

“I’ve seen you before—”

“—at the castle, yes,” Arsen said plainly, crossing his arms. “But you haven’t visited the Manor since Father made you see to it that it was suitable for the spare of Haven to stay at. You brought over that stupid painting of the castle with that gaudy silver frame. It still doesn’t match anything in the corridor.”

Riven mirrored him, crossing his arms. “It was an expensive frame.”

“That jackass tried to kill me, and you’re both arguing about *picture frames?*” A feminine voice shouted down at them. One dripping with rage and a promise of revenge. “Are you fucking serious?”

Arsen couldn’t help the relief that had his lips turned up in a grin. Emeline stood by the shattered window, looking absolutely murderous.

Beautiful. Her pinched expression said she wasn't sure who she was more upset with. The glower was aimed toward both fae princes. It *should* be Riven. What did he do except make sure that she received the help she needed?

Hands gripping Emeline's shoulders, Caesaria appeared behind her. "Let's not draw any attention, shall we?"

Emeline was pulled from sight, but he could hear their conversation just fine.

"Are you insane?!" It was Caesaria who spoke first in a hushed whisper. "Do you have a death wish?"

"Sometimes."

"Emeline!"

"What? Did you want me to lie? Say, do you think Elara will be upset if this vase breaks?" He could hear the idea blooming in her voice.

Caesaria sounded confused. "It's made of metal. Why would it break?"

Riven looked confused and bored at the conversation. He opened his mouth to speak when Arsen saw a pewter vase in Emeline's hand. She lifted it above her head, and the word *'don't'* stuck in his throat. A small—idiotic—part of his mind was convinced that she wouldn't do it.

A human wouldn't be stupid enough to throw a vase at the crown prince who already wanted her dead. A human wouldn't be so needlessly careless that she'd choose a vase as her weapon when it wouldn't even bruise said crown prince. Evidently, Arsen was the stupid one to believe Emeline wouldn't do something so impetuous.

The pewter vase slammed into the back of Riven's head. Arsen heard the *thunk* before it clattered to the ground. Three faces appeared by Emeline, and it was almost comical.

Samael had his foreclaws on her shoulder, wings beating as he cackled in both their minds. Arsen could feel the dragon's joy and amusement through the bond. Caesaria—rightly so—looked horrified, while Wyll looked grim. Riven glanced down at the vase before he turned around to see Emeline with her hands on her hips, looking pleased with herself. The window was large enough to see her empty hands, and Riven apparently found it safe to turn his back to her. Awe and disbelief mingled with his blatant scheming.

The end of his brother's lip rose. "Did that really happen?"

“You mean did my foolish little nightmare of a human throw a vase at you because you tried to choke her to death?” When Riven nodded, Arsen confirmed it. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“She does understand that I can kill her, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I could tear through her abdomen right now and rip out all of her internal organs. Make a necklace with her entrails.”

“She’s aware.”

“Then why isn’t she afraid right now?”

Wyll spoke up unhelpfully. “She’s a bit dense and doesn’t know what she’s afraid of. You’ll have to excuse her, Your Highness.”

“Why should that matter? Arsen knows what—” Riven saw something on Arsen’s face that the younger prince didn’t realize was showing. Whatever it was, Arsen schooled his features, but not quickly enough. Understanding crept into Riven’s expression. “You don’t know what she’s afraid of. That’s why you’re keeping her close, isn’t it?”

Arsen made sure his tone gave nothing away. “How I choose to play with humans is of no importance to you, Riven. You haven’t had a problem with how I’ve been treating them for the last five hundred years. Don’t start now.”

“I haven’t had a problem because you’ve taken none of them inside Dragon’s Den,” Riven said, raising a brow. “You haven’t brought any back to your Manor. Certainly haven’t defended one nor threatened our relationship over one. I’m ‘starting now,’ as you say, because you’re acting odd.” His brother squinted at him, confused. “You’ve never brought up me not going to the Manor as an issue before. Have you been upset about this?”

He was right. Arsen wouldn’t have raised the issue before. Talking with Emeline had ruined him in that aspect. This wasn’t the right time to discuss it either. Not with fae starting to appear after hearing the Tavern’s window shattering. Seeing a crowd begin to trickle in, Riven’s cloak disappeared like water dripping down his body.

The puerile soldier’s outfit he’d been wearing before was now a tailored dress uniform, a sea-green color accented by silver buttons running down the front of his coat. Shimmering tassels fell off his right shoulder, while his left held a cape attachment. It was emerald in color, swaying gently in the breeze behind him. Arsen glanced down at Riven’s shoes, noticing the tips were plated with silver.

He met his older brother’s smirk with a flat stare. “Does this occasion really call for such attire?”

“You’re a prince, Arsen. You might as well try to look the part sometimes. Living in armor and tunics is what your guards have to deal with, not you,” Riven chastised him, rings sparkling in the sun as he ran a hand through neat, styled hair. “Then again, you do keep some odd company.”

“Can you decide if you want to kill him or not?” Samael wavered. *“I don’t like this side of you that hesitates.”*

All his heart had been doing lately was wavering. Flaring at times, becoming a docile ember at others, and sometimes, burning so hot he wasn’t sure how he was still standing.

Of all his relationships, the one he had with Riven was the most confusing. It made him want to talk about it with a certain human, and it was a struggle to accept even that.

“Your Highnesses.” A nearby fae walked up, clad in leather armor and a sword sheathed at his side. Arsen knew this one well. “I apologize for the interruption, but Prince Arsen summoned us.”

Seeing the prince’s guards, the commoners scattered. A few were able to disappear in the blink of an eye. Others had to scurry away. Lysander led the group of guards, his braid slipping over his shoulder as he bowed his head first toward Arsen then Riven. Only, when it came to Riven did Lysander kneel and place a hand over his heart. He waited until Riven gave him the order to rise.

Flickering a glance to the crown prince, Lysander then addressed Arsen while hesitantly meeting his gaze. He must have heard what happened in the town square and found it safe to look at him now in front of Riven. Pity, Lysander still had a reason to be afraid. Arsen’s memory of how Emeline had complimented the guard earlier was very fresh in his mind.

“We received the letter you sent with Samael this morning and tracked her down. It wasn’t difficult. She was trying to flee, gathering resources when we caught her.”

Arsen nodded, becoming aware of the prisoner held down by the youngest guard, Quillan. A lanky but stealthy fellow, he was the one who Arsen guessed had tracked her down.

Glaring at the ground was Selene.

Her clothes were dirtied. She'd clearly put up a fight. Tawny brown hair was matted and tangled. It looked like she had a cut along her left cheek. Most likely from trying to escape, injuring herself in the process. There were restraints around her wrists, reminding him of a badly behaved wild animal. One had to be careful of cornered creatures. They always did whatever they could to escape.

Arsen smirked savagely. If his brother loved seeing what a monster he could be, then who was Arsen to deny the crown prince? He'd quell his older brother's concerns about his human with a show.

If it was to protect Emeline, then Arsen would gladly be the Devil.

.——— ———.

Instead of Wyll berating them, he now stood at Arsen's side. The entire guard was standing in a half circle, with Selene standing in the center before the wooden table. It had been filled with food earlier, and now was no different. Except the only person eating was Riven, and that was more out of his peculiar obsession with strawberries.

Caesaria sat on the other side of Riven, her expression purposefully neutral. Arsen knew she was agitated. Emeline, on the other hand, was plotting Riven's death in her mind. Samael was giving her pointers on the best way to bite a head off.

Arsen narrowed his eyes at the halfling shackled before him. "The ambush at the orphanage. Who orchestrated it?"

If Riven was surprised by news of this, he didn't show it. Rather, he stuffed another strawberry into his mouth and waited for Selene to speak.

"I can't tell you."

Hearing that, Arsen stood up. He heard Emeline asking in her mind what he was about to do, but he ignored her. She'd no doubt be angry with him about it, but this wasn't the time for mercy.

It was the time to remind Selene that he was the master of fear. He walked over to her, Wyll following his lead. The guard grabbed Selene by the throat. There was a sadness in Wyll only Arsen could pick up. The slightest press of his lips together told the prince Wyll wanted nothing to do with this. He didn't want to hurt the halfling, but his duty to Arsen came first. Selene's eyes met the prince's and the taste of fear exploded in his mouth.

He entered her mind. In it, he saw himself.

But it was different. *He* was different.

In Selene's mind, Arsen saw himself walking through a desolate town. The sky was black, but there was an ominous red glow before fire shot through the sky. Samael was lighting the town on fire, but everyone was already dead. There were corpses everywhere. Arsen walked toward her, allowing the tip of his sword to scrape against the stone walkway. He wore a menacing, deranged smile on his face, and the same black leather armor that he dressed in today. Arsen saw the bodies of the children from the orphanage scattered behind him. Blood coated the edge of the sword.

He smiled, pulling out of her mind before reaching out and taking one of Wyll's daggers from the belt he fastened around his waist. Arsen then drew his hand back.

And he thrust the blade into her side.

Precisely where Emeline had been hit with the arrow.

He leaned in, a devilish grin on his face. "I am much worse than what your pathetic fears can conjure up. I have the Devil's blood inside me. You will answer my question. One way or another."

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27

PANDEMONIUM

EMELINE



She stared, her hand motionless above Samael’s head. Emeline’s eyes were wide, stuck on the dagger lodged deep into Selene’s side.

What the actual fuck was going on?

Riven yawned, resuming his endeavor of consuming an unacceptable amount of strawberries in one sitting. Sari’s concerned gaze was on Wyll, a line forming between her brows. Wyll, however, didn’t look like he cared.

Emeline found it strange considering he and Selene had supposedly known each other for a long time at the orphanage. It was even stranger that Riven hadn’t made another move to kill anyone. He just sat there.

Eating strawberries.

Watching his brother stab a half-human like it was a normal day.

Emeline watched as Arsen leaned forward, Selene’s body trembling. Fear, pain, and hatred flashed across the woman’s face. She hunched over slightly as Arsen turned the blade, forcing an audible whimper to escape.

Seeing that, Emeline went to stand up, but the voice one chair over to the right stopped her. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. You’re alive because of my brother, but don't think for one second, the moment I decide you’re an inconvenience, I won’t kill you.”

Samael, who had taken up Arsen’s seat when he’d left, swung his head toward Riven. The dragon bared his teeth, allowing a growl to rumble through his small body. Riven eyed him but didn’t look scared.

Arsen took a step back from Selene, repeating his question. “The ambush at the orphanage. Who orchestrated it?”

She didn’t try to take the blade out, and perhaps that was for the best. Emeline assumed she’d heal faster than the typical human but not fast enough with how the blood would pour out from the wound.

Emeline's lips pressed together in a tight line, watching as Selene’s nostrils flared. Her hatred of the prince in front of her was scorching. The wooden bowl in Riven’s hands broke into fragments when his grip on the damn thing became too strong. He kept a splintered tip, barely the length of his hand.

Emeline regarded him warily. He reached to his back the same way an archer would reach for an arrow. Light began to shimmer behind him as he leaned forward. A glimmer of viridescent, glowing magic, which was beautiful at first, but Emeline quickly found it sending a wave of unease through her. She watched it grow brighter until someone else’s reaction to it distracted her.

Sari noticed the light immediately; a muscle in her jaw tensed. She forced the words out like one would rebuke a misbehaving child with slow, controlled articulation. “Your Highness. I would respectfully advise you against shooting the halfling down while Prince Arsen is trying to get information out of her.”

The glimmer dimmed, as did Riven's interest. "You think me crass. I wasn't going to kill her. Only take out an eye for looking at my brother like that."

Had it been Arsen, Emeline would have said that he couldn't go around taking people's eyes out. Actually, *no one* should be doing that. But considering she'd thrown a vase at Riven earlier, Emeline figured she was on thin enough ice as it was.

She hadn't met a unicorn, tried fae wine, or confessed her love to Jensen Ackles.

She couldn't die yet.

"Why should I tell you when you're going to kill me anyway?" Selene spat, her earlier resentment now blending with the resignation coating her voice. "You do nothing except kill humans who near the Veil and ignore us when we ask for help. More resources. More—"

Riven cut her off. "Silence."

Selene obeyed. The only audible noise infiltrating the room was her sniffling. Agonized tears slid down her face. Riven stood up, walking over to his brother's side with the wooden splinter still in his hand.

Emeline could only see half of his face, but the cold expression present was something that had been curated for centuries. Selene tried to back up, but Wyll was there with a dagger at the side of her throat.

"If you run, he will make you suffer." Wyll's level voice was as emotionless as the royalty in the room. "The crown prince is in front of you. Mind your manners."

There was…There was no way they'd make her… Emeline's thoughts drifted off as incredulity seized her.

Selene kneeled, her face screwed up in discomfort. Wyll retracted his dagger, sliding it back into the belt at his waist. Emeline could only stare in abstract horror as Selene's hand shook, placing it over her heart and bowing.

"Your. Highness." She spoke through clenched teeth.

Emeline didn't like this.

Sure. Selene had kind of fucked her over. But this was—this felt archaic. Selene wouldn't be able to hurt them. She was wounded, and she was half-human. This was overkill, and not something she could sit by and watch happen.

Emeline stood up, placing her hands on the table in front of her. “He doesn’t ‘*do nothing except kill humans*,’” she quoted the other woman, speaking louder. “I’m proof of that. Before you speak about who orchestrated the ambush, why don’t you actually *look* at me? Do I look like I’m fae?”

Selene’s expression was bitter. Emeline wasn’t trying to bait her anger; she only wanted the woman to see her for what she truly was. Emeline tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, revealing its roundedness. Instead of looking shocked, Selene scowled. “Even the smallest drop of fae—”

“Emeline’s human.” Sari stopped her before she could ramble out nonsense. “There is not a—”

She stopped suddenly, realizing her words weren’t exactly true. There was demonic blood inside Emeline right now. Arsen’s blood. It’s what likely allowed her to survive Riven’s grip for as long as she did.

The lady tried again. “You say the prince ignores your cries for help. Have you noticed that the taxes imposed haven’t risen despite Haven’s call for more? The officiates have stayed away from Scaleridge and no longer require ‘donations’ from each of the shop owners. Trade is far safer today than it was even a century ago. And why do you think that is?” Sari waved her hand from Samael to Arsen, an edge forming in her voice. “Do you think that when there’s no trouble at the Veil, they’re relaxing at the Manor? No, they’re on patrol, flying throughout the Den to keep everyone safe. To deter bandits and mercenaries from attacking travelers. This perception you have of the Second Prince is completely unwarranted. Had you done any sort of questioning or asked him at a town hall—then you would have known this, you insolent halfling.”

Emeline felt empathy for the kneeling woman, but she had to be accountable for her actions. “As a human, I understand class oppression. I see it. I understand your anger and frustration.”

She kept her voice gentler than the rest, despite the bubbling rage in her voice because she *was* upset. Selene almost had her murdered.

“But while you lack the necessary research to accuse Ar—Prince Arsen —” she hastily corrected herself, knowing that Sari was narrowing her eyes at her in silent reproach. “—What you haven’t done is apologize. I did nothing to you. And you tried to get me killed. Tried to have *him* killed. At the very least, you owe me an explanation.”

“You want an explanation?” Selene asked rather rhetorically.

Emeline recognized her tone and the expression on her face. It was the same look when one of her sailors was beyond reason. When they were so set in their ways that any sort of counseling was useless and nothing was going to change their minds.

Selene spat at the floor, blood mixed with saliva. It hit the crown prince's polished shoe, inciting a look of disgust. "The Apostasy will seek justice for—"

Riven cocked a brow, crouching to become eye level with her. He reached forward, wrapping his fingers around the hilt of the dagger at her side and angling his wrist so that it cut upward. Only to some degree, causing her more pain than damage. "How interesting that you bring them up. That's the reason I'm here." He twisted the dagger again. "I was told the Speaker frequents this area. You wouldn't happen to know his true identity, would you?"

"Why would I tell you?" Selene growled.

That amused Riven. Emeline watched as a smile formed, but it never reached his eyes. Arsen crossed his arms, taking a step back as if he knew what was about to happen. Wyll tensed but didn't step away.

"You would tell me"—Riven took the dagger out, allowing blood to pour from her wound—"because you will die either way. But I control how painful that process will be."

Sickening horror was like ice crystallizing inside the walls of Emeline's heart. It made her chest feel tight, pain laced in each breath. The blood pooled around Selene's knees, and she had to keep reminding herself that Selene was ready to have her killed. She sent the next thought to Arsen.

"This is unnecessary."

Arsen didn't look at her, but he did answer, *"If you're feeling sick, then go upstairs."*

"Riven's torturing her. She can't even win or fight back. It's—"

The ice in her chest was blistering compared to Arsen's tone. *"Be thankful that Riven decided to interfere."*

"Why would I be thankful for that?"

This time, Arsen did look at her. Instead of gold, she found obsidian. There was no light in his eyes. *"God once said that vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold for anyone who tries to kill Cain. For anyone who hurts you, my vengeance will be endless. Riven is a saint compared to how I want to hurt her for almost killing you."*

Emeline frowned at that, not knowing whether to swoon or check herself into a mental health facility. Maybe both. She shifted her attention to see Riven staring at her. His head didn't turn, but his gaze did slide over to Arsen. A contemplative scowl formed on his mouth, and whatever conclusion he came to, it pissed him off.

Without any warning, the crown prince used the dagger in his hand and slashed out toward Selene. Emeline heard a heavy thud before a rolling sort of sound traveled across the floor in her direction. She refused to look at it.

Sari sighed heavily. "Must you be so messy?"

"Clean this up," Wyll barked the order at the guards, reaching down to grab what no doubt was Selene's head.

She could have gone her entire life without knowing what it sounded like for a body to bleed out. Morbid splatters of blood hit the floor and Wyll's footsteps had a suctioning and sticky undertone to them. The metallic scent in the air almost made her gag.

Emeline averted her gaze, choosing to look at the esteemed lady. "How are you not grossed out by any of this?"

"History is bloody. I may not have seen war, but the grounds of Seaspire Castle are flooded with ghosts." She wasn't sure if Sari was kidding or not, but didn't have an opportunity to ask as the fae continued to speak. "Why did you kill her? She had information about the Apostasy, did she not?"

Riven glanced over at the guards. "Leave us."

They didn't hesitate. Disappearing with the body. Even Wyll.

Arsen walked over to the front of the table, reaching out his hand to stroke Samael's head. The dragon leaped onto the table, causing silverware and bowls to clatter to the ground. He leaned his head into Arsen's touch, keeping part of his attention on the crown prince. Tension began to thicken the silence while Emeline sat back down. A grimace fell on her face. She *really* didn't want to be stuck in a room that smelled like death.

It was Sari who broke the silence first, beginning to sound impatient. "Why did you dismiss them, Your Highness?"

Riven flicked his gaze toward her and then at Emeline, causing Arsen to stiffen almost imperceptibly. The crown prince touched his bottom lip, running his thumb over one of the rings. For a moment, he looked deep in thought, speculating on an unknown issue. Finally, he said, "Father and I send you beautiful fae from around the realm. Ladies with notable—worthy—bloodlines. You refuse them only to blood bond with a *human*?"

Sari flinched at the hard edge to his voice. Arsen remained motionless.

Like a disappointed parent, Riven persisted. “Were the ladies not enough? Did you want males too? I’ll admit I’ve had both in my bed. Sometimes at the same time. A truly fascinating experience, but you decide—a human?” He pinched the bridge of his nose like Arsen had committed a disastrous act. “Do I want to know why you decided to form a blood bond with someone of her pedigree?”

Emeline glanced around, looking pointedly for a specific item.

Riven added hastily, “If you hit me with another vase—brother be damned—I will cut your head off, too, and use your skull as a chamberpot.”

“What is a chamberpot?” Emeline wondered reproachfully.

Samael eyed Riven like he was getting ready to attack. It was Arsen’s turn to pinch the bridge of his nose, clearly over this conversation.

Sari sighed for the umpteenth time. “Your Highness, Emeline saved your brother’s life.”

Hearing that, the older Seaspire dismissed her. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s true.” Arsen didn’t look happy admitting it, but he hadn’t looked happy at all since his brother had appeared. Emeline wasn’t even sure if he was fond of Riven. “She took an iron arrow in my stead. If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t be alive.” Seeing that his brother was about to interrupt, Arsen held up a hand. “No, I’m not lying or under a spell. No, I’m not weak. Whatever trifling quip you have to say, I don’t care to hear it. She saved my life, and in turn, I saved hers.”

The silence didn’t last long. Riven took a step toward her, causing both Arsen and Samael to react. Samael’s scales around his neck rose faintly, smoke wafting from his nose in preparation. Arsen’s shoulders went taut.

“Just a nibble,” Samael bargained.

Arsen’s response was a flat, *“No.”*

“What?” Riven raised his hands like he was innocent, and yet there was still the matter of the bloodied dagger in his hand. He looked like a psycho, smiling wide. “Only wanted a closer look at the human who saved my brother and has Lady Grimwood’s loyalty.”

Sari narrowed her eyes, not buying the innocent act. “Speaking of Grimwood, have you heard from the duke? How is the situation at the border? You mentioned the Apostasy.”

“Yes, they’ve been more annoying than usual.” Riven let his hands fall at his side but didn’t let go of the dagger.

Nor did his attention leave Emeline as she felt his gaze trail over her. Whatever was going on in his mind, he still didn't approve of her. Thank God she didn't fucking care about his opinion.

"As for the duke—" Riven shrugged. "—He's dead."

Emeline saw Sari stiffen, her lips parting in horror. Dread and sorrow for her friend tightened around Emeline's throat, not allowing any words to come out.

"I jest." Riven's smile didn't reach his eyes again. "He's healthy in the physical sense. As for his state of mind, he's about had it with the sabotage and surprise attacks. They're both irregular and infrequent. Very annoying. He notified me about two key individuals. The Speaker who created this meager little resistance. And an Apostate here in Scaleridge who knew about the comings and goings of many of its key members. Said she worked in the Tav. How lucky that you tracked her down for me, Brother."

Emeline decided that she hated Riven.

There were a lot of inappropriate times when she'd made a joke, but it wasn't at the expense of someone else's dead or not-dead family member.

"That was unnecessary," Arsen pointed out.

Sari gripped the wooden table so hard, a chunk of it broke off.

Arsen didn't look away from his brother, and Emeline wished she could see Arsen's expression more clearly, but Riven was practically in front of her. His presence had been unsettling, but now it was unbearable. Truly. Part of her wondered if she should keep her mouth shut, but when had that ever lasted long?

"You asked Selene who orchestrated the attack, but…" Emeline thought of Arsen's father and what he'd done to him. What Arsen had said last night while they were alone. "You already know that Eris did this."

"*King* Eris, human." Riven's tone was bored but firm. "He wouldn't have set up an ambush to have my brother killed."

Emeline glowered at him. "He's no king to me. Especially with what—"

"Enough." Arsen held up a hand like that was enough to silence her.

She'd sooner smash the half-empty bowl of strawberries over his head. He must have heard that thought because the ghost of a smirk danced across his lips, and she found herself missing his wicked amusement. He changed when he was around his brother. He became more serious and on edge. Riven was fond of his younger brother, but did he even realize how uncomfortable Arsen was around him?

Did he even know about the abuse?

“Riven doesn’t know the extent of it,” Arsen spoke into her mind, his voice apathetic and distant. Almost clinical. *“He knows that our father is stricter with me and won’t allow me to dine with them should it upset the queen, but he doesn’t know about the beatings. The torture.”*

Emeline could only stare at him. *“Why wouldn’t you tell him?”*

“What good would come out of it? Riven values family. Why would I take that away from him? As far as he knows, the king and queen aren’t fond of me, but I’m alive. They gave me somewhere else to live. A purpose. I don’t starve or want for anything. I’m content.”

“Do they always talk among themselves now?” Riven directed the question to Sari, who looked like she still wanted to flay him alive for his completely inappropriate sense of humor. “I feel left out.”

Sari gave him a sweet smile, but her tone could have melted steel. “Then why don’t you see yourself out, Your Highness?”

Emeline bit the inside of her cheek to stop a laugh.

“Why would I do that when irritating you is far more fun? Besides, I’m still deciding what I want to do with her.” Riven gestured to Emeline, who curled her lip in distaste. “Father’s not going to be happy when he hears about this.”

“Then don’t tell him,” Arsen reflected coolly.

Riven’s brows rose in disbelief. “I know whom you have in your Manor right now. If Bloodstone or Larkspur haven’t sent a letter yet, then consider me the next Virgin Mary.”

“Wrong brother,” Samael mused thoughtfully.

Arsen placed his hand back on the table, leaning his weight into it like he was tired of standing. Emeline heard a snarl tear from Samael’s throat. She quickly realized Arsen had purposefully put his hand atop the tip of the dragon’s tail rather than the surface of the table, effectively squeezing his tail painfully.

Emeline scowled at him, slapping his forearm with the back of her hand. “Move. Seriously, it’s a wonder that he sticks around you.”

A smirk crept onto Arsen’s face. “He’s stuck with me.”

“Against my will.” Samael flicked his tail in annoyance, walking over to Emeline who welcomed him into her arms. She clutched the dragon against her chest, feeling Samael rest his head on her shoulder. He was

content to take a nap like that by the way he snuggled in close. *"Two beings held against their will by a virgin prince. Whatever shall we do, Emeline?"*

"You could always bite him," Emeline offered.

Samael huffed against her, but said nothing. Arsen eyed the dragon as he always did, with that same unreadable expression. Then he turned back to his brother, who was—to no one's surprise—staring at Emeline. Then he looked at his younger brother.

"He's attached to her, isn't he?" Riven's amusement was gone.

Arsen didn't answer immediately, pausing before giving his answer. "He's always been picky with the people he chooses to get close to."

"You say that as if you and Emeline aren't the only ones he likes," Sari said, reaching for her goblet of wine, only to frown when she realized it was empty. "He barely tolerates the rest of us."

"It's a mystery why he likes me, but of course he's going to be fond of Arsen. He's his familiar," Emeline noted easily. "It makes sense that way."

Sari began to nod in agreement when Riven started chuckling. It was a deep sound that had a manic tilt to it. Like a dark cello that would sooner strangle you with its strings than sing a lullaby.

"Both of you are so foolish. You"—he jerked his head to Sari—"even more so than the human."

Riven gave Emeline a broad smile before discarding the dagger by throwing it into the floorboard by his feet. It sank into the wood, staying upright.

Sari gave a perpetual frown. "And why am I foolish?"

"Because you know that Samael is no familiar."

The lady nodded. "He's a dragon."

"We call him that. For all intents and purposes, he's the closest sort of being to one since they died out even before I was born." Riven ignored Arsen's deathly glare, evidently enjoying another round of the chaos that his presence was bringing.

It was like a fundamental part of him needed to be inciting pandemonium. *Causing disputes*, Emeline reflected with some wariness. Did that mean that Arsen and Sari displayed certain traits inherent to their demon daddies?

What were they?

"Are you saying Samael isn't a familiar or a dragon?" Emeline's eyebrows furrowed. "If so, then what is he?"

“Riven,” Arsen warned, his voice low.

His older brother winked at him before disappearing, leaving Emeline to wonder. What was Samael if he wasn’t a dragon?

If he wasn’t a familiar, what else was there?

And where the fuck did the Crown Prince of Haven go?

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THE TASTE OF TREACHERY

EMELINE



They were kicked out in the most polite way.

Upon finding out someone near and dear to her heart had been brutally slaughtered in her own tavern, Elara wept. The tears were full of both bitterness and melancholy. Emeline could hardly blame her since grief was a misbehaving creature.

It was never predictable.

Even if Selene had been involved in a murderous plot, it didn't take away from the fact that Elara had worked closely with the woman. It did nothing to soothe the sting of mourning, and Emeline idly wondered if Arsen would ever be invited back to the Devil's Tav.

She knew that Sari had tried to apologize, but wasn't sure exactly how the conversation went. Samael and Emeline had dodged the bullet in favor of waiting with Wyll outside. She'd also gotten to know a couple of the guards better.

Lysander was wary of her, but happy to converse about the trip to Scaleridge. They hadn't seen any more bandits since yesterday. It was as if they'd disappeared and intended to stay gone.

Another guard, Quillan, was lean and muscular. Visually, he was striking, with disheveled brown hair and dark-blue eyes. He was more of a jokester compared to the other two. Lysander was second-in-command, while Quillan was neither third nor fourth. Apparently, he was the greenest soldier to join the prince's guard, which meant he was stuck with Lysander until he learned the ropes. Emeline found it both odd and fascinating.

In the military, a new recruit didn't get stuck with such high leadership right off the bat. The prince's guard was formed of a close-knit group of fae. There was camaraderie woven with trust and respect. Each of them was dedicated to each other's growth and was willing to put the work into proper training.

The rest of the guards didn't outwardly turn away from her. They looked busy getting the carriage ready to go. If they wanted to make it back before nightfall, then they had to hurry. Emeline wasn't looking forward to the trip back, knowing what awaited her at the Manor. She'd have rather stayed in Scaleridge, learning more about Dragon's Den and the community here.

"It's not safe," Samael pointed out, glancing up at her while she held him. Emeline had to dodge his horns, nearly having her eye taken out with how fast he moved. *"The Apostasy is gaining traction here despite Sen's attempts at trying to appease the town."*

Emeline leaned against the carriage, waiting for Sari and Arsen to leave the taproom. She frowned down at the dragon. Or whatever he was.

"What are you?" she inquired bluntly.

Samael leered at her before stubbornly looking away. *"Magnificent."*

"You're not a dragon."

“You’re an expert now? You didn’t even know other realms existed two weeks ago,” Samael pointed out with a huff of smoke. *“I am what I am.”*

Emeline returned his scowl. *“You know damn well that I’m repeating what Riven said. Can’t a girl be curious? If you’re not a dragon, what are you?”*

“Annoyed.”

She glowered now.

“Still annoyed,” Samael mused, adding, *“Will it bother you if I don’t tell you?”*

“Obviously.”

Samael leaped out of her arms, flapping his wings while a cackle danced through her mind. *“Then suffer.”*

“You are so like him. It’s fucking annoying,” Emeline called out after him as he soared toward the roof of the Devil’s Tav.

She was still glaring up at where he’d disappeared over the roof when Arsen and Sari came out a few moments later. Sari noticed her expression, returning it with exhausted curiosity.

“What’s wrong with your face?” the lady inquired, coming to stand with her.

Arsen didn’t join them, choosing Wyll and Lysander’s company. He must have needed to speak with them about the journey back. Or maybe he was trying to find spare coins to brighten Elara’s afternoon after a terrible start to her day.

“I’m trying to figure out what Samael is. Do you have any ideas?”

“Not a single clue,” Sari replied. Her tone was apathetic, but there was a hint of curiosity to it. “But it’s no use trying to figure it out. If Samael and Arsen have been keeping it a secret for over five hundred years, there’s no point in trying to ask. It’d be easier to befriend a widow-maker than get either of them to share information.”

Emeline forced a smile to match the easy atmosphere, but it was mechanical. One of the guards suddenly let out a disgusted noise, drawing Emeline and Sari’s attention.

“…What are we supposed to do with this? Dump it into the ocean?”

“You heard Lys.”

“And how are we supposed to casually move a dead body through the streets without inciting a riot?”

“…Uh…”

“Did you forget that traumatic deaths often mean the body will void its bowels quicker? Do you think I want to be dragging a headless shit—”

Wyll walked over to the group with a stormy expression. Emeline noted they were standing over a lumpy blanket. Dear God, was that Selene? Was there a dead person hanging out in the middle of the street?

“—For Lucifer’s sake,” Arsen growled in her mind, his thoughts pointed toward Samael, but it was evident that he’d forgotten to bring his guard up again to block her out. *“Will you burn the body?”* Then to her, he added, *“I don’t forget easily.”*

Oh. So he *wanted* her to hear him?

Rather than obsess about it, Emeline tucked away that piece of information and filed it into a cabinet in her mind labelled ‘*potential emotional damage.’*

Samael returned Arsen’s question with a simple, *“Say please.”*

“Please burn the corpse, you irritating lizard.”

There was a quiet scoff, but then she heard Samael’s wings swooping down.

Out loud, Arsen said to the group, “Move. Unless you’d like to be his dinner.”

Knowing what was about to happen, Emeline swung open the door to the carriage and promptly got inside. She could handle a lot of gross things. Wading through two inches of shit-water on deck while underway. Picking mold off sandwich bread because it was the closest thing to fresh food since an overdue at-sea replenishment. There was even the time she had to teach a younger sailor that washing laundry regularly was absolutely necessary for good hygiene.

But a human bonfire while the corpse was defecating?

Nope.

Not today, Satan.

.——— ———.

Emeline yawned, watching the waves crash against the ferry boat. She leaned her arms on the taffrail, glancing down at the water. The sun was heavy on the horizon, making her wonder if the green flash phenomenon would happen in this realm too. The breeze gently lifted the ends of her hair away from her face, and she enjoyed the familiar scent of the sea.

Laughter could be heard from where the guards sat on cargo, talking among themselves. Sari sat down, catching Emeline's eye, and gestured to an open seat next to her. Emeline smiled politely, shaking her head and placing a hand over her stomach like she was sea-sick.

She wasn't.

The fae bought the lie, shifting her attention back to the guards. Or more specifically, Wyll, who was retrieving a mint leaf to chew on while Quillan entertained everyone with a story.

With all the energy Samael had expended the last couple of days, he was below deck with Arsen. It was kind of hilarious to see the towering brute trailing after a dragon because said creature always had a knack for eating things he wasn't supposed to. It made Emeline more and more curious as to what Samael truly was.

Was he another kind of creature?

A manifestation of magic?

A long-lost secret brother cursed to take the shape of a dragon?

"You're bad at guessing, aren't you?" Samael's voice in her mind sounded busy.

The kind of busy when someone's mouth was full. Her eyes narrowed down at the water. She thought back, *"Are you eating something?"*

Samael made an agreeable noise. *"I might have found the ice box."*

"Did you eat the ferryman's meat?"

"Will you both shut up? I'm trying to sleep," Arsen entered the conversation, his voice little more than a grumble.

Emeline rolled her eyes. She headed toward the ladderwell, more than ready to see what sort of trouble Samael was getting into while the prince lazed around. It made sense that he was trying to get some rest even if the boat ride wasn't very long.

Power naps were underrated.

She started down the stairs, hearing the *creak* of the wood under her boots. The weather deck slipped from view, and she was greeted by the lower level. There was a barrel to her immediate right, along with mooring lines wrapped around a bollard. As she turned, there were two tables that came into view. Candles were lit on each one, making her wonder if magic kept the flames tame.

There were two obvious ways to go.

Forward, in the direction of the bow, or aft, toward the stern. On the ships she'd been stationed on, the mess decks were typically centerline on the main deck for accessibility. Whether it was time for chow, another brief, or a new training, Emeline knew for certain that the mess decks would be where the crew gathered like birds on a telephone line. Hopefully, whatever they had to drink was better than the sludge they'd passed off in the Navy as coffee.

A smile fell on her lips when she thought of the coffee on her last ship. More often than not, she'd discovered coffee grounds at the bottom of her cup, or the water ratio was completely off, resulting in a bitter aftertaste. What would Arsen think of that? Being served coffee that hadn't been especially cultivated and roasted to his specific tastes?

Then the smile was gone.

Why was she thinking of him?

He monopolized her thoughts already. Could she not have a moment of peace? Maybe she needed something harder to drink. A distraction, so she could reflect on earlier events and not that wicked devil. Or how she never wanted to know what corpses did immediately after death.

Laughter reverberated down the passageway to her right. Decision made. *Aft it was.* As she walked, the salty sea air mingled with a woodsy, resinous scent. It could have been from the stain and whatever else they'd used to preserve the wood.

Emeline found herself entering a large, open space. There were tables shoved against the walls while fae and halflings alike milled about. Some of the tables were full of food, but not as extravagantly as the Tavern's had been. This was more practical, and there was more fish than beef or chicken.

Monstrous sea creatures with too many eyes were served on wooden platters. And here she thought stargazy pie was traumatizing. The creatures on the platters sort of resembled anglerfish without the tiny lure over the top of their heads.

Emeline glanced away before she lost her lunch.

This had to be the mess decks.

All around the room, she spotted wooden barrels. An impish smile rose on her face. Sailors were chatting and drinking. It didn't matter if the times were different. If the beings were split between fae and human—you could always count on one thing: sailors drinking alcohol like fish to water.

Their drinking was convenient for two reasons.

One, Emeline was fully committed to sneaking a glass of what looked like fae wine. Two, finding out what the Apostasy was and why Riven was looking for someone called the Speaker in Scaleridge would be incredibly easy. Alcohol led to loose lips. A shiver of excitement danced down her spine.

Emeline was looking forward to it.

She was looking forward to experiencing the taste of a new drink and talking to people.

It’d been so long since she'd felt excited to experience something new. With her grief and depression, there was comfort in isolation. It was like basking in the sun or sliding into bed while the comforter was still warm from the dryer. The fog could be inviting. It waited at the edges of her consciousness, ready to welcome her back.

Shaking her head as if to physically rid those thoughts, Emeline strode forward. She received a few glances, but thankfully no one stopped her from heading toward the barrel everyone was crowded around.

One of the fae shouted out, “Splice the mainbrace!”

All she’d been asked was, “Ye sure you can hold yer liquor?’

Emeline had leveled him with a look and a raised brow, earning her a grin and a tin cup. She watched greedily, holding the cup underneath the spout. A ruby-black liquid began to fill but stopped halfway.

“That’s enough.” One of the sailors chuckled. “Anymore and you’ll regret it later.”

She didn’t push her luck, but a scowl did slip through. “I can hold my own.”

With a shrug, he lifted the spout and allowed the rest of her cup to be filled. She felt eyes on her and wondered if these fae knew she was fully human or were convinced that she was a halfling with little fae blood in her. The irony was that both were technically true. Even so, Arsen’s blood would eventually circulate out of her body.

And then she’d lose the ability to talk to Samael.

The thought had her stepping away from the inner circle, bringing the wine to her lips. The moment the fae alcohol met her tongue, flavor exploded on her taste buds. It was a bold citrus flavor, which surprisingly wasn’t very sweet. The touch of acidity balanced the sweetness, and as the wine slid down her throat, a slightly aromatic taste chased after it.

Cinnamon. Warm and complex, Emeline never lost the heat as it settled low in her abdomen. A smoldering flush spread across her face, but she kept nursing the wine while the gossip flowed as fast as the booze.

“Did ye hear that the crown prince was spotted today in town? Looking for the Speaker, that one.”

The one who spoke looked more fae than human. Pointed ears, long brown hair, and an unruly beard, reached the collar of his brown tunic. His breeches were black with a few darker stains which might have been wet spots from spilled wine. At least she hoped that was the case. When he spoke, his hands moved, and she could see alcohol spilling over his cup.

“Quit spilling yer drink, Roan. And you know better than to speak of the Apostasy. There’s royalty on deck,” another voice said gruffly.

“It’s not like he cares. Rumors on the docks said the Second Prince fights for us.” Roan took a big gulp of his wine, grinning. His lips were stained red. “Maybe he’ll join the Apostasy in the fight against Haven.”

To speak up or not to speak up? That was the question.

If she brought attention to herself, then they’d stop talking, right? They had to know that she wasn’t part of their normal crew. Or maybe they were too inebriated to care? Regardless of the reason, Emeline did something she *never* did.

She kept her fucking mouth shut.

“He hasn’t directly gone against the king since…” A bald fae spoke this time, his thick brows furrowed. “…ever. Ye think he’s had a change of heart?”

Roan snorted. “That devil has no heart. Davy Jones would sooner remove his perch from the eve of hurricanes and wrecks than Prince Arsen starting a war. Have ye drunk too much?”

“Yer one to talk,” Baldie retorted with a dirty look. “Word is someone was killed outside the Tav too. Thrown outside a window. Someone caught a glimpse of a body.”

“Are we surprised?” Roan glanced around theatrically, spilling his wine. Again. “Death follows the princes like remoras to sharks.” Then he spotted her, squinting. “Ye came with the royal party. Who are ye? Do you know something?”

Baldie rolled his eyes. “Ignore him. Three sheets to the wind, he is.”

Emeline’s easy smile was full of deception and false invitation. A line without a hook in the water. Unsurprisingly, she was quite nosy, and there

were often times in the military when she wanted to know the scuttlebutt without having a need to know. That meant she had to balance just enough information to make them *think* she knew what she was talking about.

“Do you think the Apostasy would care to work with the prince? The one who died was the halfling who took care of the orphanage and worked with Elara in the Tav. Pity, she was a hard worker.” Then she added on a limb, “The Speaker won’t be too happy she’s gone.”

Emeline had everyone’s attention.

Roan, bless him, reacted to the news the easiest. “The wench needn’t worry about the Speaker. He’s busy mustering in fae to become Apostates. Greenhorns for the cause of separation. What them scurvy dogs did centuries ago in the human realm.” He turned to Baldie. “Think the prince will allow us to go out again? We haven’t been on a trade run in decades.”

“The human realm is more dangerous than it used to be,” Baldie pointed out, inciting agreement among the crowd. “They have new weapons, like arrows but metal instead of wood. Magic that makes whole cities explode. The prince brings us back what we need when we ask. We needn’t be reckless for treasure. The Den provides.”

Another voice from the crowd scoffed. “Everything but representation. The mere utterance of Haven is a death sentence to more than half of us. Even this seadog doesn’t remember a time when we were free to navigate the waters beyond the borders.” As he spoke, Emeline noticed the expressions became more bitter in the crowd. “The Apostasy will free the realm and create a true Haven for all of us.”

She’d had her suspicions before, but now Emeline understood better. The Apostasy was a resistance. Like freedom fighters or patriots, they were championing war in order to bring about peace. Fuck, this place really was on the brink of civil war, especially if there were key figures placed about. The Speaker would draw in recruits, and a militia would form.

“…He’s about had it with the sabotage and surprise attacks. They’re both irregular and infrequent. Very annoying…”

Hell, there were already mentions of guerrilla warfare amidst the border, if what Riven said earlier was true. The colonists had done the same thing at the start of their revolution. This would inevitably become a war of who could outlast whom, and Emeline didn’t think the Den could survive if Haven was big enough to have the greater population and more land.

Anxiety was a guiding hand, lifting the mug to her lips and coaxing her to drink more. Drink quickly. In seconds, the rest of her wine was gone. The heat, settling low, made Emeline shift her weight from one foot to the next. The briefest spark of pleasure had her thighs clenching and a flush scavenging up her neckline.

Uh-oh.

A bit unsteady, she set the mug down on a side table, where a gruff-looking man had his eyes closed and his back against the bulkhead. His legs were thrown on the bench. One eye opened at the soft *clank* of her mug.

"Ay, lass." He chuckled, shaking his head. "I always tell them not to give the halflings a full cup, but they love to run a rig. Better go find an empty room or hope fresh air will clear yer mind."

Go find a room?

Emeline felt hot, slowly burning up inside. She nodded absently, heading back up the passageway. She stopped beside the stairs, her chest rising and falling fast. Her breathing became a bit more labored, tinged with desperation, and her breasts ached. She knew her nipples were hard with how each brush of the brassiere teased the sensitive peaks.

"What's going on?" Emeline thought, practically panting.

Alcohol had a tendency to act as a depressant, releasing endorphins and dopamine to create feelings of pleasure. It was used for escapism, a drink that she purposefully stayed away from after the miscarriage. Alcohol could be its own devil. Emeline knew she could handle wine even if she hadn't overindulged in quite some time.

But fae wine?

It tasted like an aphrodisiac, making her want to sin.

Although '*want*' felt like a poor word choice for what she truly felt. This wasn't a want at all. It was a *need*. A racing desire, flooding her body. It had her gripping the ledge of the stairs behind her as if that could help ground her. The cold press of the wood did nothing to soothe her.

There was only one person who could help her.

A devil of his own.

Emeline bit back her hesitance, waking the wicked devil with a shout in her mind.

"Arsen!"

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FINDING DAMNATION

EMELINE



Arsen’s sharp “*What?*” sent a shiver of anticipation through her.

Grumpy from being roused, he evidently wasn’t too happy about the interruption. He couldn’t have been asleep for very long. Emeline didn’t reply, too busy wondering if it was the fae wine or the husky growl of his voice making her heart pound. Her thighs pressed together, desperate for his touch.

Samael gave a half-suppressed trill. *“You let Emeline out of your sight; that’s what’s wrong.”*

If she could glare at him, she would have.

It’s not like she actively looked for trouble, only wine.

“The ferry is twenty-five meters, and the sailors wouldn’t dare harm her. My entire guard is onboard. Whatever is going on, she’s fine.” Arsen’s crankiness would have been endearing had her nerves not felt like they were smoldering with desire. He hastily added an afterthought, “*She* is *still on the boat, yes? I don’t feel like swimming with the souls today—”*

Emeline interrupted him, impatience coloring her desperation, *“I drank wine.”*

“…Are congratulations in order?”

“Fae *wine, you idiot.”*

A brief silence followed. Emeline thought he’d gone ahead and ignored her. Then she heard a door slamming so hard against the bulkhead that the crack echoed down the passageway. It was a wonder no one came running to investigate.

Then she saw him.

His dark hair was disheveled from sleep. Golden strands caught the light as he left the shadows, heading straight toward her. The sight of Arsen was like an opiate. The promise of him would ease the craving both in her soul and her body. Anticipation bloomed, her body screaming at her to go to him.

A muscle jumped in Arsen’s jaw as he came to stand in front of her, glaring down at her. There was little space between them. “Are you mad? Do you exist only to torment me?”

Mad? No.

Insatiably concupiscent? Yes.

Emeline’s eyes turned pleading. “How long does this last?”

“Do you think I’m an expert in how fae wine affects humans?” Arsen’s voice resembled a growl again. He raked his hand through his hair, disheveling it more. “I’ve never given a human wine before murdering them.”

What about before fucking them?

Arsen’s eyes darkened until only embers remained. She remembered through the hazy lust in her mind that he could *very much* hear her thoughts.

Oops. Well, if he was so upset with her, then she could go above deck and see if Lysander—

Her thoughts became disoriented as her world turned upside down. Literally.

One second, she was on her feet, trying to figure out how to take care of her needs, and in the next, she was thrown over someone's shoulder. Emeline's blood rushed to her cheeks. She may or may not have ogled his ass. In her defense, it was a nice ass. Did all fae have a nice ass like this? She wanted to squeeze it.

Before the impulse could strike her, Emeline was placed back on her feet. She stared up at Arsen with a clear look of confusion. *"How did it get dark so fast?"*

"It's the bosun's locker, you infuriating human."

There was no bite in his tone, only the faintest trace of exasperation mingled with amusement. Emeline glanced around, noting the small porthole at the back wall. The sun had almost set, and only a small trickle of dusk filtered into the small storeroom. There was little space inside, only enough room for extra lines, paints, and deckhand supplies.

Emeline's back pressed against the door. Arsen was so close that she was drowning in the scent of fresh rain. His eyes narrowed, gazing down at her with unreadable emotions.

"What if I throw you in the ocean?" he inquired with a thoughtful look on his face. "Being marked by the Devil himself, I'd say I know how to wash away a sin or two."

Pass.

Emeline's chin lifted in defiance. "Or how about I go proposition one of those guards to—"

His thumb pressed against her mouth, shutting her up. Indignation swelled inside her, but so did mischief. Her full lips softened under his touch. She parted them. Her tongue licked against the pad of his thumb, forcing him to wrench his hand away from her as if he'd touched a hot stove. Golden flecks now burned brightly in his eyes; the last embers of a fire, refusing to die.

Ignited was a hunger, dancing between their gazes.

"I have half a mind to tie you up," Arsen stated in a bland voice, fists clenching. "But I don't think leaving you here will fix your… predicament."

He paused again, scowling. It appeared that he didn't know what to do, nor did he know how long her *predicament* would last.

"Do you think you could take care of things yourself?" he asked.

Emeline frowned. "Are you asking me if I know how to masturbate?" A short laugh followed. "Of course I know how to fucking masturbate. Any woman does, considering that more than half the time, we take care of ourselves after the man is done."

Arsen's eyebrows furrowed together. "What are you saying?" There was genuine wonder tied to each word as he spoke. "Is sex not for mutual pleasure?"

She smirked at him. "Oh, you sweet summer child."

His right hand came down flat against the door with a startling *thud* above her left shoulder. Emeline's breath caught when he leaned down, eye-level with her. There was nothing sweet nor innocent found in his gaze.

"Don't think me naive because I've yet to lie with someone." The way Arsen spoke was deliberate, simmering with quiet sensuality. "I'm only trying to understand how someone would be foolish enough to let you leave the bed without taking care of you." His voice lowered into a gravel, sounding deeper and rougher. "I would take care of you. Over and over again. Until the sheets were wet with your tears. Your voice raw…"

She fucking whimpered.

A pathetic sound to her own ears.

The corners of Arsen's diabolical smile rose with malice. "How naive," he scorned. "You called my name, looking for salvation." He tilted his head, moving closer until their breaths mingled. "Only to find your damnation." Emeline felt Arsen's hand wrap around her right wrist, placing her hand against the front of her breeches. "Pull these down. I'm going to watch you bring forth your own destruction."

The embers in his eyes sparked to a roaring flame.

Emeline found herself unbuttoning the breeches and pushing them down her hips. The cool air of the storeroom glided along her exposed skin. She wore a cotton garment underneath, but that went down too. Emeline would have blushed with how slick she felt when her thighs rubbed together, but the wine threw inhibition out the porthole.

"Touch yourself." Deceptively soft, it wasn't a request.

Emeline stared back at him, her back straight. If he didn't expect her to rise to the challenge, then he was underestimating her. However, she did

hesitate with her hand hovering above the apex of her thighs.

Grief tore through the haze like a vicious animal.

She hadn't sought out physical pleasure since she lost her pregnancy. What if things were different now? Was this okay? Was it normal to feel shame for what she was about to do—and not because it was with Arsen—but because it was an act only for herself. Was she selfish? Did she deserve to feel good?

"Emeline." Her gaze lifted to meet his, not realizing that it'd dropped while guilt spiraled through her. Arsen watched her closely as he continued, "Tell me to leave, and I will."

A hot wave of embarrassment flooded over her. "Sorry, I *do* want this. I'm fine. I—" She stopped shortly, remembering who stood in front of her. Someone she'd already cried to about this and who had seen the ugly parts of her soul. At least, what she considered ugly, even if he found beauty in her jagged edges.

Emeline tried again but with a more honest approach. "I feel… guilty and ashamed for wanting this. I haven't done this since… since I lost everything."

He said nothing at first, placing his hand over the back of hers. She sucked in a sharp breath, feeling her hand come into contact with her sex. Arsen's middle finger applied pressure on hers, pushing her finger through her arousal.

"You didn't lose everything, little nightmare." His hand stayed over hers while he added, "It doesn't have to be one or the other. It's about what you choose." His voice mirrored her honesty. "You can grieve and still be allowed to seek pleasure if that's what you wish. You can do it alone, or you can let me help you. What you want and what you feel comfortable with is my priority right now."

Humor eased the discomfort in her chest as she quipped, "Where's the fae prince who wanted to kill me?"

"With the human woman who wanted to die," he replied without missing a beat. "Do you want me to leave?"

The thought of him leaving had disappointment sinking her heart into her stomach. No, she didn't want him to leave, but Emeline knew she wasn't ready for sex. She couldn't go all the way. Yet. But this was another step toward healing. She liked experiencing pleasure before it'd happened. Sex wasn't something she'd realized that she'd missed until him. *Arsen*.

If she was going to reopen the door to this part of her that had been closed off, then she wanted to do it with someone she felt safe with.

Emeline shook her head, looking at him from under her eyelashes. Vulnerability had the words stuck in her throat, but Arsen didn't need her to say it out loud.

He heard the confession in her thoughts.

The only difference between a priest and Arsen was that the former would offer mercy. This wicked devil wouldn't. His boot came into contact with hers, widening her stance and allowing him better access. His hand was still atop hers, breathtakingly aware of how she moved her nimble fingers.

Emeline shivered at the charge of excitement. She slid her finger over her clit, stroking it gently back and forth. It was like stoking a flame that hadn't been lit in such a long time. Emeline tilted her head back as the pressure grew firmer. She found Arsen's free hand sliding between the back of her head and the wooden door. Eyes half-mast, she wanted to kiss him.

She was already drunk on wine and his proximity. Why not this as well? But as she leaned forward, she found she couldn't move far. Arsen's fingers tangled in the curls, holding her back. His stern expression said it all.

He wouldn't kiss her like this.

Arsen's index and middle finger encouraged hers to stroke harder, coaxing a moan from her lips. She was getting wetter. Her heart beat faster, and her pulse started racing. Emeline's body felt like it was overheating.

Gravelly words were uttered in the short distance between them. "You don't understand how badly I want to sink into you. How desperate I am to feel you clench around my fingers."

"No one's stopping you," she shot back, hearing her own impetuosity come alive. "Please touch me."

Arsen swallowed visibly. "I am touching you."

Emeline tried to move, wanting to grab his hand, but he wouldn't let her. "You know what I mean."

"I do," he agreed. Her breathing changed, becoming more labored. "And I'm learning what you like, little nightmare. Every flutter of your heart. Every time your pulse jumps. Like when you touch here?" He moved her hand so that the pad of her finger brushed against her clit with delicious torment. "You bite your lip. And you look at me like you want more."

She glared, but it was weak. “Why would you need to learn what I like?”

“So that when you’re not under the influence of fae wine, I know…” Arsen began his promise while her fingers moved in a slow, repetitive motion underneath his. “…exactly how to be your ruin one day.”

Emeline bit her lip, trying to fight another moan from escaping. An action that the heathen in front of her clearly didn’t approve of because he shifted his grasp, forcing one of her fingers inside her. She couldn’t stop the noise that time. Arsen didn’t allow any part of him inside her, but she was keenly aware of him too.

The way his lips were parted, and a shaky, inaudible breath left him. How his hips had subconsciously pressed closer, trapping their hands between them. She could feel his cock straining hard against his breeches at her hip. The heat of him, long and thick. Emeline wanted to know what it’d be like to ride him. To place her hands on his broad shoulders and feel his hands on her waist. A tortured noise escaped the prince. The sound was deafening when the only things to be heard were the waves crashing against the boat, her soft pants, and the even softer *squelching* that hinted how badly she wanted him.

“Faster,” Arsen reflected, never moving to touch her clit. Instead, he pressed down on the back of her hand so the heel of her palm added the friction she needed. “I know you’re close.”

Emeline pressed her lips together for a brief moment. The comment caught her off guard. “You can’t possibly know that.”

He chuckled, the sound an octave lower, or perhaps it was the wine messing with her head again. Regardless, another shiver traveled down to the base of her spine, where her orgasm was steadily building.

“Your scent is driving me fucking insane,” he admitted. Arsen let out a hum of approval when she started to swirl her finger inside, stroking her inner wall while using her palm to brush against her clit. Emeline still needed more than just her hand, but Arsen’s words were luring the orgasm out. “*You* drive me fucking insane.”

“Wow,” Emeline remarked in a breathy tone. “You really know how to make a girl feel special, don’t you?”

“No.” Arsen leaned in until she knew that it would only take the slightest movement forward and then their lips would touch. “This is a first for us both.”

Her first time finding pleasure since her loss. His first time encouraging pleasure *ever*. It was that bit of knowledge that made carnal pleasure consume her. It was like the tide, rolling over her in waves. Her back arched, her release washing over her. A desperation for more left her wanting. Emeline felt herself clench around her fingers, and even in the throes of her orgasm, she still felt a bit unsatisfied.

Was it the fae wine?

Was something wrong with her senses?

She just came. Why did she still feel like she needed more?

Arsen tugged on her hand gently. Her cheeks flushed, but he didn't look shy or agitated in the slightest. His own arousal aside, Arsen looked unaffected by her insatiable appetite. "You were right."

"Me? About what?"

"The wine," he clarified, wrapping his graceful fingers around her wrist and raising her hand. She saw her fingers glistening in the low light, and, mortified, she wanted to rip her hand away. He wouldn't let her. "It's not the aphrodisiac you think it is."

Emeline tugged on her hand again. "Can we have this conversation when my breeches aren't pulled down?"

"No, I quite like the view."

He said that, and yet he'd never looked down. Never saw more than what he felt privy to with her being under the influence.

Arsen continued, "When I drink, I relax. I become more honest, and my guard is down. Fae wine is all about release. It brings to the front what you want most. Hidden desires that you don't even realize yourself until it's too late. You won't feel completely satisfied until you give the wine what it wants." The corner of his lip rose, a sense of victory coming from him. "It's why you called out to me. You *want* me."

Stubbornly, she looked away. "We already know that we're physically attracted to each other. I thought that was evident that night in the kitchen."

Arsen made a low hum of agreement but didn't press. Instead, he brought up another subject. "We're not even, you know."

Not even? She looked back at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You drank my blood," he pointed out with the other half of his smile appearing. "Don't you think it's not fair that only you got a taste?"

Emeline blinked. "You want to drink from me? I thought fae didn't have to drink blood?"

“We’re not controlled by it like lesser demons. But don’t worry, I always make sure to settle my scores.” There was a glint of mischief in his gleaming eyes.

Would it hurt? How would it feel to be bitten like that? The vampire novels she’d read always made it feel like a… The words died in her throat when Arsen brought her hand closer to him. He wanted a taste, but it wasn’t her blood that he was after.

Warmth filled her face as Arsen bent his head, his tongue trailing from her palm to the tips of her fingers. His nostrils flared as he savored her, wrapping his mouth around one finger. He fucking *moaned.*

“I knew you’d taste fucking delicious,” the thought barged into her mind.

Desire seared hotter than ever. Burning and unyielding.

She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to—

Arsen briskly let go. He stumbled back, his canines bared in annoyance, but it wasn’t directed at her. No, Arsen stared at her the way Hades must have when he’d found Persephone in the meadow. The way Pygmalion looked upon his ivory sculpture for the first time, becoming so enamored that Aphrodite brought it to life.

It wasn’t contempt that had Arsen pulling back.

It was restraint.

One hand gripped the shelf, *cracking* it under the pressure. His chest rose and fell fast. He glanced away from her, visibly trying to calm himself down. She pulled up her breeches, looking at him with concern.

A scraping noise pawed against the door.

“If you two are done mating, we have an issue.” Samael’s voice was more bored than overly concerned. Perhaps even a little disgruntled. *“Sen, you’re not going to be happy.”*

Arsen looked thankful for the distraction. Emeline tried not to notice his strained erection, but it was hard. Literally.

“Humans,” Samael grumbled with no doubt a roll of his eyes.

Emeline backed away from the door, opening it for the snarky dragon. He walked in, immediately sneezing from the dust. Emeline picked him up, and he pointed his wing toward the porthole. She frowned, brushing past Arsen to have a look.

It shouldn’t have taken them long at all to get to the other side, but Emeline couldn’t see any sight of it. She glimpsed the darkening skies but

didn’t see any birds. This close to land, she should have been able to spot trees or at least the docks.

Unless they weren’t close to land.

She felt Arsen at her back and turned her head. “What’s going on?”

He wasn’t looking up at the sky.

He was staring down.

Emeline followed his gaze. For a moment, she thought it was bioluminescent plankton on the crests of the waves, flashing to life as they crashed into the ferry. She’d seen them plenty of times on deployment. Microscopic marine organisms that emitted a blue-green light when disturbed. It was meant to be a defense mechanism to startle predators.

But these… beings were larger.

These were souls.

Ghosts latched onto the side of the ferry, their spectral figures mostly see-through, but the edges of them glowed.

“Are you doing this?” she asked morbidly.

The returning look she received could have shriveled her on the spot. “No, I had my hands full.”

Samael snorted, a small puff of smoke escaping his nose. *“You know what this means, don’t you?”*

“It’s a diversion,” Arsen guessed. “But why?”

This was a distraction? From who?

“Riven?” Emeline’s shoulders tensed. “Can he do this? What’s he planning?”

Arsen shook his head once, a rueful smile forming. “Knowing that Sam and I would be tired. The extra wine conveniently onboard, knowing sailors best. Counting on you to be lured by it with everyone else drinking and betting that I would be distracted dealing with you.” A flicker of emotion crossed his face. “Sam, you already went on the weather deck, yes? What’s everyone doing?”

“Before I ate half of a siren? They were listening to her.” Samael huffed again. *“You know I don’t like them. Too fishy.”*

“A siren this far in? Or are we far out?” Arsen murmured to himself. Louder, he said, “I need to get us back to land quickly. If Riven’s trying to delay us, then that means he’s at the Manor, doing something I wouldn’t approve of.”

Emeline watched him leave, with Sam jumping onto his back. She was left in the storeroom, completely fucking confused. Why was Riven trying to delay them? What was at the Manor? What was he looking for?

Did he not come to Scaleridge for rumors of the Apostasy?

With a sigh, she glanced back at the ghosts, holding the ship captive. Emeline felt confusion and sadness eviscerate her. It was sad to see them suffering in the afterlife. Weren't they supposed to find peace? If Hell existed, then Heaven must too.

Trapped in this realm, Emeline wondered if these people had died at sea and that's why they couldn't leave. Abruptly, she stilled, eyes focusing down at one of the ghosts closest to where the porthole was.

She saw glowing edges of dark curls she knew the feel of.

Emeline recognized him.

Luis.

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SEA OF LOST SOULS

EMELINE



Her hands were full, carrying a mess of rope and wood. Emeline's quick footsteps caught everyone's attention. Sari looked dazed, rubbing her temples. Wyll and Lysander were currently getting the verbal ass-chewing of their lives, and their only reprieve was because Arsen turned around to spot her with a ladder. The rest of the guard stared curiously at her, along with a few deckhands. It appeared that while she was

searching the storeroom for a rope ladder, Arsen was reprimanding everyone for falling prey to a siren.

By the forecastle, it was a murder scene with glittering scales everywhere. Emeline briefly wondered if they'd shucked what was left of the creature overboard after Samael was done with it. Blood would dirty the hull and attract other sea creatures. Particularly, ones with sharp teeth. Not helpful considering she needed to get close to the water.

Emeline turned away from the group only to collide against a hard chest. Anger flared, and she glared up at the prince. "I hate it when you do that."

"I hate it when I take my eyes off you for two seconds, and you find trouble," he snapped back, eyeing the ladder in her arms. "Do I want to know?"

"I saw Luis," Emeline retorted.

Understanding trickled into his expression, but he didn't speak.

She tried again. "I have to see him."

"You did. From the porthole," he deadpanned.

Emeline stepped to the side, brushing past him. "I have to talk to him."

Arsen waited until she was by the starboard quarter, trying to find a spot to rig the ladder to reply, "Why? You know he was responsible—"

"I know what *you* told me," Emeline interrupted, seeing his expression become guarded. Realizing how that could be misconstrued, she clarified before there could be a misunderstanding. "I believe you when you say that he knew about Robaire and Haven, but what I don't know is *why*." Her voice softened. "I need to know, Arsen."

Samael leaped onto the wooden railing, staring down at the surface of the water. *"Those souls would drag you under, Emeline. You don't know if the human you knew is the same. Death changes people. He could be angry that you survived and he didn't."*

"He wasn't just someone I used to know, Samael." Frustrated, she placed both hands on the railing and lifted herself up to swing a leg over. The fae wine loosened Emeline's hold on the truth she kept close to her heart, but she felt ready to say it out loud. "He was almost the father of my child. I have to know if everything I knew about him was a lie or not. I don't expect you to understand, but I expect you not to get in my way."

She forgot about fae hearing until Sari's sharp breath caught her attention. Emeline didn't want to meet her eyes, feeling once again like she

was unbalanced and not because she was perched precariously on a ledge. There were too many racing thoughts in her mind, and they all had to do with Luis.

Did he know?

Was he someone who could risk everyone's lives for money?

Why did he do it?

Was it the wine forcing her to act more recklessly than normal? Arsen turned to a sailor she recognized. It was the ferryman they'd met only yesterday, but it felt like a lifetime ago with how much everything had changed. His red brows scrunched together at the sight of her. It dawned on Emeline that she probably looked like a crazy person. How else would you describe someone wanting to go overboard to talk to ghosts?

"Pull into port." To Wyll, Arsen said, "We'll join everyone at the Manor. Hang back if Riven's set on destruction, but I don't think he'd go as far as to destroy the Manor."

Wyll cocked an eyebrow. He didn't sass back with deckhands and the ferryman present, but Emeline knew him well enough to understand that look. '*Are you sure about that? He is* your *brother,'* the look read.

"Aye, Captain," Wyll remarked in a dry tone before repeating Arsen's orders to the rest of the guards.

Emeline looked at Arsen now, waiting to see what he'd do.

She didn't expect the shove that came next.

Her back hit the water, a flurry of bubbles flying past her mouth as she screamed obscenities into the void. That's what it felt like. A blackhole. With the sun set, the water was pitch black. All she could see was the glowing forms above the surface and against the boat. Before panic could set in, a hand grabbed her around the arm, seamlessly lifting her out of the water.

She spluttered, coughing as Arsen bent down more and picked her up bridal style. Her wrath could have impressed Hell with how ready she was to tear the prince apart. "Was that necessary?"

"Yes," he said simply, shrugging one shoulder. "You annoyed me."

"*You* annoy me."

"I made you come, so I think I deserve a pass."

"I made *myself* come—"

A feminine cough cut her off. Looking up, Emeline saw Sari smirking, and Quillan, who was giving her two thumbs up.

It was Quillan who spoke next. “Only making sure you didn’t die, Emeline.” To Arsen, he gave a salute with two fingers. “Your Highness. We’ll see you on land.”

The guard ducked his head out of sight, but his laugh traveled in the wind, followed by Sari’s. Emeline’s face heated up and she pushed her wet hair back from her face. Right. She could deal with her mortification and Sari’s endless teasing later.

But first, how was Arsen standing? She leaned over, noticing that he was walking on the surface of the water. Was he related to Jesus?

“The opposite.” Samael had his wings spread open, letting the sea breeze glide along his body to keep himself in the air. *“Lucifer is more of a father to him than God.”*

If that was the case, then Lucifer was a shit father, too, if he allowed Eris to torture Arsen. Centerline, where the ship’s main mast met the hull, Emeline spotted a ghostly figure traveling toward them. His body was half submerged in the water.

“Luis?” she called out, hesitantly. She let her right arm fall to Arsen’s chest, absently gripping the fabric there. “Is that you, Luis?”

An affectionate smile spread across the ghost’s mouth. It was eerie, seeing the waves go through his translucent body. His eyes were an incandescent white with no pupils or irises. For as different as he looked now, that smile was all Luis.

“Hey, Em.”

A sob tore from her throat at the nickname. Tears fell down her cheeks, the warmth of them mixing with the saltwater dripping down from her hair. “Hey, Lu.” She sniffed, clearing her throat. “Is it true? Did you know about the fae before we left Spain?”

He nodded. “I did.”

“Why?” she cried out, leaning forward and ignoring Arsen’s grip tightening on her. “Why did you let us sail out? Is everyone with you? Why were you stopping the boat with all the other ghosts?”

Luis gave her a sad smile. “Souls lost at sea serve Leviathan. Our crew found peace and moved on. But I couldn’t without telling you that I’m sorry.” Beside them, Samael growled unhappily. The ghost didn’t tear his eyes from Emeline. “It doesn’t fix or change what happened. I won’t have the opportunity to rebuild our trust, but I need you to know why I did it.”

Arsen distracted her for a moment as he uttered an unintelligible phrase under his breath. It wasn't English, and without any warning, the ferryboat took off, presumably toward land. Almost as if someone had opened an ox-skin bag full of stormy winds, but Emeline knew it was Arsen channeling Leviathan's power. She'd have to ask later how he and Riven's gifts differed.

Luis must have taken Emeline's silence for anger, causing him to apologize again. "When Robaire found me, it was a few weeks after our night together. We were supposed to go out for drinks, but you said you had a stomach bug and didn't feel like going out. So I asked *mamá* to make *salmorejo* so I could take some to you."

Emeline remembered that night. "The cold tomato soup. I went to heat it on the stove, and you tried to smack me with a wooden spoon." Samael growled louder. "Not hard, Sam. It was playful."

"I don't like him," the dragon retorted.

"*You don't like anyone,"* Emeline shot back. "*Now hush, please."*

Smoke escaped, intertwining with the sea breeze, but he stayed quiet.

Luis nodded, a short laugh escaping him. The sound of it made her heart clench painfully. He was dead, and the knowledge that he was never just a text or call away again hurt.

"Yes, the cold tomato soup." A somber mood crept over him. "When you were getting the bowls out, I used the *baño*. That's when I saw it. The pregnancy tests in the trash. The half empty bottle of prenatal vitamins in the medicine cupboard. It made sense then why you didn't want to go out drinking."

Emeline opened her mouth to speak, but Luis held up a hand. "*Por favor*. Let me get through this. I need to make sure you understand." She wiped her tears as he continued. "I knew it had to be mine. You weren't seeing anyone else, and even if you were, you would have told me. We were friends first, Em. When I found out that you were pregnant, I wasn't sure if you wanted to be together. I tried to kiss you that night before I left, but you turned your face away."

She could feel Arsen pulling her closer against his chest. It felt possessive, but Emeline didn't have the time to scrutinize it with Luis actively talking.

"I didn't mind. Honest. But I knew if we were to co-parent the child instead of being together in a romantic relationship, then that meant you

might want to go back to the United States. If you wanted the child to grow up in America and us not wed, then flights and visas would be expensive." Luis took a deep breath, which was almost laughable because he was a ghost. He didn't need to breathe. But as quickly as that urge to smile appeared, it left. "When Robaire promised gold, I agreed to this plan…so I could stay by both your sides. Yours and our child's."

Emeline started crying again, a piece of her heart shattering forever.

She couldn't see him with how blurred her vision was, but she could see the glowing outline of him as she wept. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I lost the baby, Lu. I miscarried. The baby didn't even survive to ten weeks. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Arsen said quietly, pressing his lips briefly against the top of her head.

"He's right. I don't like him. I hate the creature holding you. He had me ripped apart by sharks, which was traumatizing and very painful, for the record," Luis reflected, disdain coating his tone. "But he is right. I wouldn't have blamed you, Em. I wish you would have told me. We could have mourned together."

All she could do was apologize again. Over and over, like a broken record, while Arsen held onto her. Even Samael was there, trying to ease her discomfort as he flew in close.

Luis spoke up again, drawing her attention as the edges of his form began to turn more white than blue. "I don't blame you, Em. I'm thankful that he saved you from the wreck. Whatever has happened since I've died"—he gestured to Arsen and Samael—"I'm glad you've found a place where you belong. A place with people you can be honest with. You deserve to be happy, Em."

She wanted to say more, but in the moment, the words were stuck in her throat. Luis gave her one more affectionate smile. The happy-go-lucky kind that she knew him for. And then he closed his eyes. Luis disappeared with the next wave crashing through him, the dark water staring back at her with no sign he'd been there to begin with.

It startled Emeline, causing her to call out for him. She wasn't ready to say goodbye. She didn't want him to leave. But it wasn't her choice.

"He found peace," Arsen explained before she could try to jump in the water. "He's gone."

It was like reliving his death all over again.

But now she knew that Luis hadn’t damned the crew for the same greed as Gabriel or Arlo. He’d wanted to be able to visit the United States to see their child and apply for a visa. Both of which were expensive. His intentions were good, but she wished he’d communicated better instead of hiding the fact that he knew.

Emeline was holding him accountable, but she also had to hold herself responsible too. If she’d told Luis, then things could have turned out differently. They could have had more conversations about raising the child. Maybe she could have stayed with his family for a few months out of the year to make sure that he nurtured a familial relationship and she wasn’t monopolizing their kid.

More *what-ifs* and *what-could-bes*.

But if none of that had happened, then she never would have met Arsen or Samael. She and Sari wouldn’t have become friends, and the camaraderie she had with Wyll wouldn’t exist. She didn’t regret meeting them. Not for a moment. Emeline regretted that her crew had to die for all of this to occur, but she couldn’t waste time on that. It wasn’t her sin to bear. Emeline especially didn’t regret what had happened earlier or what was changing between her and Arsen.

“Is this the part where I tell you that I am listening, so when you say something damning in your mind, you won't get upset at me?” Arsen inquired shamelessly.

She turned her head, glowering. “A little privacy would be nice.”

“Not interested.” Arsen’s tone was blunt. To Samael, he asked, “Think that siren gave you enough energy to give us a ride back?”

“No. But eating the Tavern and the ferry’s meat supply did well enough,” Samael noted smugly.

He flew away from them as he shifted forms. Emeline watched as he grew in size, knowing she’d never get used to it. His scales darkened, and the playful, cute aspects of him hardened into a creature who could bring the realm to its knees. His eyes sharpened, and he was scarier than anything in the water. Emeline felt she could say that, staring at a dragon who could level an orphanage with only his tail.

Or whatever he actually was.

Magnificent did come to mind as Arsen stepped onto his tail to walk up his back. An act that Samael turned around to bare his fangs at, but it wasn’t like Arsen could disappear and reappear on his back. He was holding her

after all. When they were closer to Samael's neck, the prince put her down. He snapped his fingers and her clothes were dry.

"You couldn't do that before?"

Arsen smirked down at her. "No. You were cold and kept leaning closer to me."

"Because you were dry and warm."

He shrugged. "I'm an opportunist."

"You're annoying."

"Would you rather swim with the sharks and other creatures your human mind wouldn't be able to comprehend?"

She'd seen those fish on the platters. God knows what lurked in the water. Emeline shivered at the thought and then listened to Arsen direct her on how to sit. Samael's scales were warm but not hot to the touch. The fae sat behind her, caging her with his thighs and instructing her to lean down close to the dragon; otherwise, the wind would send her flying back.

When she asked why he didn't have to lean down, Arsen didn't bother answering. Right. He wasn't human. He didn't have to worry about being ripped off the dragon because of strong winds.

Once Samael was higher in the air, she was thankful for the warmth of his scales. She'd have frozen had it not been for him. Even though it was night, the view was still beautiful. Emeline caught glimpses of trees and small villages in the distance with torches whose flames danced in the dark. A few times, she caught sight of blue lights in the trees. Arsen explained that souls lurked in the woods all throughout the Den. Some good. Some bad.

Dragon's Den housed more spirits and souls than devilish creatures like widow-makers. Lucifer had ensured they inhabited Haven and not the Den as a snub toward the ruling kingdom.

It made Emeline wonder why Lucifer hadn't killed Eris yet if he detested him so much. Why keep the king alive? Why put Arsen through all of this?

What was Lucifer planning?

.——— ———.

The Manor wasn't on fire.

Always a good sign. However, Emeline wasn't sure if the plague known as Riven had already swept through. Samael descended in front of the Manor, while Arsen scanned the area. She wasn't sure if he saw anything unusual, but it didn't look like anything was amiss. No shouting. No servants panicking.

Only an empty carriage waited by the stone steps. Sari and the guards were already inside, likely having made it to the Manor long before they did. Arsen did tell her at the start of the flight that they would be going slower, so she didn't get motion sickness. Did they forget she was a sailor? She'd ridden on big boats before. Samael threatened to eat her if she got sick on him, but it sounded similar to Arsen's empty threats. Though he did look genuinely affronted at being compared to a boat.

Near the entrance, guards wore silver armor. The air felt heavy with tension, but before she could ask what was wrong, Arsen disappeared. He reappeared on the ground, looking up at her expectantly. Was she supposed to slide down? Jump?

Sure, if she wanted to break a leg.

"Humans," Samael said loftily with a roll of his golden eyes. *"Such fragile creatures."*

Emeline snorted inwardly. *"Real funny coming from the dragon who needs a plush pillow wherever he—Ah!"*

The not-so-little asshole cut her off by turning on his side, forcing her to slide down his scales. Emeline would have face-planted had it not been for the prince wrapping an arm around her waist. Samael shifted to his smaller form, walking toward them with his head held high like he could do no wrong.

"Samael, stay close to her." Arsen was all business, letting go of her and taking purposeful strides toward the main door.

The guards bowed their heads, placing a hand over their hearts as they stepped to the side. Emeline guessed they didn't notice anything wrong with the Second Prince. To them, he must have looked like he always did. Apathetic. They didn't see how his shoulders were rigid, burdened with apprehension. His clenched jaw forced the vein in his neck to be visible. Even his eyes were darker than usual, but that hadn't changed since the ferryboat when he brought her to Luis.

A pang of grief hit her.

She was so used to pushing it away that it was almost instinctual to suppress it again. But it was okay to feel sad. There was no right or wrong way to feel. So Emeline allowed herself to lament about Luis's death while following Arsen into the Manor with Samael by her side.

She felt the guards' contempt in their stares as she walked past. *That* she did ignore. These were Eris's men. She would never have a place here if they held the same beliefs as the king.

"You don't have any idea what your brother could be doing here?" Emeline inquired of Arsen. They started to climb the grand staircase, noting the eerie silence.

The prince sounded distracted as he shook his head. *"It sounds like our father has him hunting the leaders of the Apostasy."*

"He doesn't have other fae for that? Doesn't seem like something a crown prince should concern himself with, right?"

Arsen stopped on the staircase, turning his head to look down at her. His eyes were bright again but with a need for her to understand. *"When Riven wants something, there's no stopping him. Our father raised him to be a monster, and, while he does care about his family, that's where his magnanimity stops. Riven always gets what he wants because he doesn't care what he needs to do to accomplish his task."*

Emeline pursed her lip slightly. *"What's his deal with family? Out of everything, why is family where he draws the line?"*

"He slaughtered so many families as a child that it fucked him up," Arsen stated matter-of-factly. *"He watched mothers hold their dying children. Fathers trying to protect their family from a disease that couldn't be stopped. He watched brothers weep over each other. Riven saw the grief of humanity and has since wanted our family to treasure each other like the humans who perished, but that will never happen."*

Arsen kept walking, but Emeline didn't. She looked over at Samael, who glanced up at her when he felt her stare. She asked, *"That sounds like guilt, does it not? If Riven knew about what Eris has done—wouldn't that change his mind on family?"*

"It would. But for as isolated and alone as Sen grew up, his opinion on the matter still hasn't changed."

Emeline raised an eyebrow, continuing to walk up the stairs. *"And what opinion is that?"*

“No one deserves to know what it’s like to be hated by the ones who made you. Eris and Liora’s love is contingent on how Riven performs in his role as the crown prince,” Samael explained.

Emeline reached the top step, but instead of replying to Samael about what a fucking tool their father was and how she wasn’t a fan of the queen, she was distracted by the stained glass. She recalled how the angel had soared high above the flames. Stunning black wings splattered with blood, sprouted from the angel’s back. The glass had depicted Lucifer’s fall by showing him rising above Hell as its new ruler. Not as a fallen angel, but as a leader.

“Someone whose light couldn’t be extinguished,” Emeline murmured, causing Arsen to stop dead in his tracks and look back at her.

There was a split second where he only stared at her before his eyes narrowed, darkening like the seas they’d just come from.

“What did you say?” he demanded, rounding on her.

Unbothered, Emeline repeated it louder, “The first day I was here, the words came to me, as if they’d been whispered from the angel in the glass.” She pointed up at the window. “Wyll distracted me. But I remember it now. Only something seems off… Has it always been like that?”

While she couldn’t remember what the angel had been wearing previously, it now wore a black uniform with a high collar. Two rows of golden buttons decorated the front. What really caught her attention was the glorious white cape billowing from behind the angel. The shoulders were decorated with what looked like a dragon scale pattern, and there was a star on either side below the shoulders.

A long sword was held in the angel’s grasp, the handle gold while the blade was a gleaming silver. One that looked like Arsen’s tattoo on his neck. This no longer looked like an angel rising to lead.

Instead, it looked as if the angel was preparing for war.

Arsen held out his arm but never took his eyes off the stained glass. Samael leaped, grabbing onto his arm, and the prince brought him to his chest. He held the dragon close, his expression becoming more and more grave as the seconds ticked by.

The dragon’s words cut through both their minds next. *“The time to stand idly by is gone, Sen. He’s telling you it’s time to fight. The prophecy will come true. You will be the reason the king’s reign ends. And his undoing.”*

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31

THE SUMMONING

EMELINE



Trying to find Riven was like an infernal game of hide-and-seek. Pleasant enough unless the person hiding was basically a sociopath with the ability to spread disease, death, and destruction. He made Arsen and Samael look angelic, and that was its own feat. They'd looked everywhere just in case Riven was trying not to be found.

The three court ladies had been in the middle of dinner when Arsen and Emeline appeared. Sabine and Lucetta had blatantly ignored Emeline, greeting the prince with seductive smiles. Emeline ignored the green monster stirring in her chest.

Wyll stood dutifully nearby, having no clue about Riven being in the vicinity. He'd stayed closer to Sari after finding out and only argued a little bit when Arsen told him to stay put. Emeline was beginning to doubt that Riven was here at all, but the prince wasn't convinced. He'd sent Samael out to patrol the nearby grounds.

A familiar sight had greeted them both when they'd stepped into his study.

Madam Viera was by a bookcase, holding an ancient-looking grimoire with a neutral expression. For a brief moment, Emeline thought she saw relief warm the older fae's frosty exterior, but it was gone quicker than a hummingbird's wingbeat.

"You took your time coming back." Her tone sounded familial and disapproving in the same note. Then those cold eyes turned somber. "Wyll told me about your address to the public." Her eyes flashed to Emeline's as the door closed behind her. "I see the human is still alive."

The word *'unfortunately'* was on the tip of said human's tongue.

But that wasn't the case anymore. She'd had a rather interesting experience with demonic wine. And ridden a dragon. There was more Emeline wanted to experience. What had a hot blush settling on her cheeks was the fact that she wanted to experience them with the devil beside her—and the new friends she'd made along the way.

"Happy to give you a helping hand whenever you need it, little nightmare," Arsen drawled in a low, musing voice.

The quiet rasp in his voice had her remembering how brilliantly he'd helped her earlier. Emeline felt the surge of embarrassment as it passed over her, knowing the nosy little shit was listening.

It caused her to lash out. "You don't have to listen to my thoughts all the time, you *nosy little*—" She stopped short, remembering whom she was standing in front of.

But Madam Viera wasn't looking at her.

She was looking at Arsen.

At the easy grin on his face, making him look more boyish despite the jagged scars. At the glimmer in his eyes, which spoke of his light that could

never be extinguished. Not by his father nor the torture he suffered. Madam Viera was staring at the ease of his movements and how relaxed he was as he stood by Emeline's side.

Emeline knew what she was looking at because she saw the change too.

It was subtle, but to think, only a week ago he'd had his hand around her throat and was delighted by the thought of ending her life.

"You formed a blood bond with her."

No doubt or hesitation lurked in Madam Viera's voice now. Serious gray eyes flitted between the two of them. Emeline prepared for the scolding of a lifetime while the fae put the book back onto its shelf, but it never came.

Instead, Madam Viera said, "When he said it would be with someone I didn't expect, I suppose he meant it."

A beat of silence passed.

"Who are you talking about, Viera?" Arsen looked at the Madam oddly. "You can't mean Lucifer."

Was that normal?

Emeline balked. "You're friends with Lucifer?"

A wry smile formed on Madam Viera's expression. "Do you believe the Devil has friends?"

If Arsen was capable of empathy and not slaughtering every human he saw, then anything was possible. The wicked devil leered at her, hearing her rampant thoughts. She shrugged her shoulders, glancing away.

Arsen was capable of everything except privacy.

Before either of them could answer the caretaker, the prince stiffened. His shoulders squared as another bout of tension rolled into the room. Emeline took a half-step closer to him, close enough to feel the heat radiate from his body. Both fae suddenly whipped their heads toward the door, causing Emeline to feel as though Riven was about to rush through. That's the only person who could unsettle them both, right?

No one walked in. Or barged in, for that matter.

"What's going on?" Emeline asked thoughtfully.

"I can feel Riven drawing near."

"That's good, isn't it? At least we know he's not trying to sneak up on us," she reasoned.

Arsen shook his head once, speaking aloud, "You'll learn that when Riven wants an audience, it's never a good thing."

“About the crown prince,” Madam Viera began, clasping her hands tightly together in front of herself. “I regret to inform you that your brother found out about the Apostasy spy. I didn’t find out he knew until after you’d left. With you expected back last night, I was going to wait to tell you.”

The prince arched a brow. “Has he been snooping around longer than we realized?”

She continued, “Prince Riven has his own agenda from the king. I don’t know the specifics. He went after the Manor’s spy upon his return from Scaleridge.”

“You mean the servant who left recently?”

“The messenger bound for Haven. One of your father’s guards found his letters in his wife’s room here at the Manor. The guard notified the crown prince before me.”

Arsen sighed, as if he knew exactly who was involved and what was about to happen. The fae prince faced Emeline, surprising her with the grim look on his face. “Is there any point in asking you to stay here? Away from the entrance?”

“Do you like wasting your time?” she countered with a sardonic smile.

No humor danced in his voice. “With what I know about you, this will affect you more than anyone here.”

Emeline felt the heat first. It blossomed in her chest, making her skin prickle with unease. Panic snaked itself around her throat, closing down on her like a vise. She swallowed, trying to quell the rising anxiety even as it tried to steal her breath away.

“This has to do with that pregnant servant, doesn’t it? The one from dinner a couple of nights ago.”

What was her name?

“Gisela,” Arsen answered the unspoken question. His gaze dropped to her neck where she knew her pulse was racing. Could he hear it? Probably. “Her husband is a messenger. Travels often… Back and forth between Haven. He has the perfect cover, and I’ve suspected it for a while now, which is why I allowed Draven to have his daughter stay here.”

Emeline frowned at that. Her thoughts shined a new light on Arsen’s supposed hospitality. It wasn’t through an act of pure kindness that Arsen had allowed the pregnant fae to stay in the Manor. It was the ability to have collateral disguised as goodwill motivating him.

“I told you before. I have never been the hero,” he pointed out, unabashedly listening in on her again. His next words were out loud. “With what Viera said, it’s safe to say that my brother plans on torturing them for more information.”

“Them?” Her eyes widened before her frown deepened into a scowl. “Riven would torture someone who’s expecting? Who’s pregnant?”

Bile rose up in her throat.

“Not physically. I don’t think.”

“As if that makes it any better.” Emeline snapped her gaze to Madam Viera’s. “This can’t happen. He can’t. What happened to babies being precious for the kingdom? I thought it was difficult for fae to conceive.”

“Riven is the crown prince,” she replied smoothly. Madam Viera bowed her head toward Arsen. “As his younger brother, you are expected to assist him, Your Highness.”

Arsen stared at Emeline despite the Madam speaking to him. Nothing was said. Nothing more needed to be said. If Riven was willing to torture people and make a spectacle out of it, then how was he fit to lead? Was it any surprise that there was a growing resistance against the crown when they committed terrible acts?

With everything she had learned about the royal family, Riven’s actions were derived from what he’d been taught growing up. Eris created him to be as ruthless and merciless as he was. But Eris didn’t raise Arsen. Arsen *wasn’t* his father.

As soon as the thought escaped her mind, Arsen disappeared.

Only the faint trace of fresh rain lingered in the air.

Emeline clenched her fists, pressing her lips together in a tight line. This was fucking archaic. All of it. She headed for the door, pausing with her hand over the handle at the sound of Madam Viera’s voice cutting through the air.

“Lucifer has always believed in free will.” The fae’s words were Delphic. Her voice was soft despite the warning that followed next. “Be careful that your will does not lead to your ruin.”

.——— ———.

She found him in the main foyer, waiting.

Sari and the other ladies of the court were standing at the top of the stairs, overlooking what was about to happen. A few paces behind Arsen on the lower floor were Gisela and her father. Emeline watched as Mr. Draven placed a hand on his daughter's shoulder. Seeing the cook with a solemn expression had her heart thudding against her chest.

Emeline couldn't see Gisela's face, but she could see the nerves getting to the fae as she kept shifting her weight. Arsen's arms were crossed, and while he looked relaxed—almost bored—he wasn't. The chatter in her mind confirmed that.

"Your brother flipped me off. Are you certain that I can't eat him? Not even a nibble? Would both his arms count as a nibble?" Samael's voice was misleading.

While he sounded playful, Emeline knew he was serious if given permission. At this rate, she would happily give him permission to eat Riven whole.

Arsen's quiet scoff broke through her thoughts. *"His blood would make you sick."*

"He's nearing the Manor," Samael said in lieu of arguing further. *"I hope you have a plan."*

"Plans don't work with Riven."

Emeline stepped closer to the stairs, only to spot Arsen's glare directed at her. His eyes were slitted, more narrow than usual. Was he seeing what Samael saw? His eyes had always leaned toward serpentine, but they looked *exactly* like the dragon's now. He didn't answer, looking back toward the front door.

Was that supposed to be a warning to stay put?

He said nothing, and with the added silence, Emeline picked up on the quiet chatter coming from the ladies.

Sabine whispered first. "The crown prince hasn't picked a bride yet. Perhaps you or I will leave this dreadful place on his arm instead of the younger brother."

Lucetta scoffed quietly. "I'd rather be ignored by my husband than deal with a rake. Can you imagine what the court would think? They'd believe I couldn't properly entertain my husband, and then my reputation would be ruined."

"You say that, but no one's left his bed unsatisfied," Sabine said wickedly, no doubt referring to Riven.

“If the Second Prince would allow us into his bed, then I’m sure—”

Emeline couldn’t stand it anymore. The sound of Sari’s chastising fell in the space between Emeline and the other ladies.

“Your subjects face certain death, and you wonder instead how to bed the princes. Neither of you deserve to rule when you can’t even behave properly. Quit acting like a pair of lynxes in heat.”

Thank God someone had a shred of decency in this fucking place. As Emeline passed Draven and his daughter, she ignored the stares on her back and the ones that joined them. The cook should be yelling at Cliff about burning the soup or chopping carrots incorrectly, not wondering if more of his family was going to die again.

He’d already lost his parents.

Was he going to be forced to watch what family he had left die too?

Emeline wasn’t standing behind Arsen when the doors flew open, cracking against the wall loudly enough to make her flinch. She was standing beside him. Arsen only put an arm out in front of her when a body tumbled in.

The fae appeared to be around her age. Shoulder-length dark hair was muddied and tangled. His features had the delicacy of his kind, but hardened from whatever he’d endured since Riven had found him. Almost swollen shut, his brown eyes were burning with shame and hatred. Blood and more dirt caked against his fair skin. He wore a uniform not unlike the ones Emeline had seen the other servants in, but he also wore a brown satchel across his body.

For letters, no doubt.

And walking nonchalantly in behind him was the crown prince.

Riven wore the same silver cloak she’d seen him in before. As he crossed the threshold, fabric turned to glistening water, falling to the ground around him. Emeline noted it seeped into the wooden floor, not leaving a trace of a puddle behind him. His hair was windswept, a grin spreading across his face at seeing his younger brother.

“I’m visiting,” he pointed out with every expectation to be praised. “You said I never visit. Now I am. Aren’t you happy to see me?”

Arsen’s lip twitched as if he did find his brother funny, but he was too aware of the circumstances to fully appreciate it. “Care to tell me why you’re here?”

“You’re getting sloppy. You had an informant right here under your nose.”

Riven reached for his back again, and this time, Sari wouldn’t be able to stop him from whatever he was doing. The light behind him shimmered until green magic formed a bow. It was beautiful and deadly.

The limbs of the bow were jagged metal with sharp edges and intricate runes. The riser had a black cross-stitched pattern. Emeline wondered if he wielded his bow like a sword in close combat. She noticed the string matched the silver of his cloak, and it caught the light no matter which way it turned.

An arrow made of Riven’s magic formed in his other hand as he approached the defeated fae on the ground. The trepidation Riven always inspired in her manifested when she saw the arrow. Not because she’d been shot recently, but because of the magic swirling around the black tip. Emeline felt a wave of nausea roll through her. Something very basic and integral to her being screamed at her to run.

“It’s Leraie’s magic. Don’t get close to it,” Arsen informed her, lowering his arm with some reluctance.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” she remarked dryly.

Samael’s claws scraped against the floor, but he didn’t come fully inside. He was staring at Riven’s back with indifference. Completely apathetic to the other fae prince.

Arsen sighed heavily. “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. Did you lack the foresight to think that I might be gathering information on my own?”

Why did that sound familiar?

Riven’s smile was full of scorn. “Good fae have died because of these Apostates.”

With a glint of malice in his eyes, the crown prince drove the arrow into the male’s neck. It sank straight into his carotid artery, moving through muscle and cartilage like a hot knife slicing through butter.

Nothing cut as deeply as the heart-wrenching scream that came from Gisela seeing her beloved clutch his throat.

Arsen didn’t move, and Emeline was too stunned to. The injured fae’s hands were turning black with necrosis. It darkened his nails, slowly spreading from his fingertips to his palms. Plague swept through the male,

causing blighted spots to appear on his skin. Blood dripped from his nose before his eyes rolled back in his head.

Gisela screamed again, trying to run forward, but Mr. Draven was stopping her. His arms carefully wrapped around her front. “Ela—*Ela*, you need to stop,” her father hissed, pulling her back. “He’s gone.”

The smile on Riven’s face was its own disease. It brought an onslaught of symptoms. Chills. Shortness of breath. Chest pain. It was like one of those bad infomercials flooding the television channels at 3 a.m.

“He wasn’t going to say anything I don’t already know,” Riven began pleasantly, snapping his fingers. The arrow shattered into several pieces of light before disappearing. It caused the fae to bleed out, but instead of free-flowing blood—it was more of a thick sludge.

Riven persisted, eyeing the daughter briefly and then the cook. “Which one of you has the answers I need? What will it take?” His head cocked like a predator, eyes narrowing at the cook. “If I came all the way here for nothing, then I’m going to be very annoyed.”

Arsen stepped into Riven’s line of sight, his thoughts heading to Samael first, *“You know what to do.”*

Samael’s expression grew cruel, a snarl rippling through the Manor. Even small, he was a terrifying little thing.

Riven glanced back at the dragon, his indifference never changing. He looked to Arsen for an answer. “Change of heart, Brother? I always thought Samael liked me.”

Emeline didn’t think there was any truth to that. Samael’s shoulders lowered to the ground, prepared to make a quick escape if need be. When golden eyes met hers, she realized what Arsen’s plan was.

“If Riv goes on a killing spree, you get out of here,” Arsen confirmed her thoughts.

She lifted her chin in defiance. *“I’m not leaving you. Either of you.”*

Arsen raised his eyebrows, staring at his brother. “Samael prefers it when you don’t waste food.” Gisela let out another wail against her father, leading the younger prince to grimace. “I will deal with these two, Riven. You may go now.”

“I may go now,” he repeated the words spoken like they were in a language he didn’t recognize. “I will leave when *I* decide to. Or perhaps when I have my answers.”

“Then ask for them,” Emeline said boldly. She resisted the urge to shift closer to Arsen when Riven’s heavy gaze landed on her. He looked at her like she was a bug that had no business addressing him, and he was considering squashing her. Good thing she was used to it from years of experience with entitled leadership. “Gisela is expecting. You can’t hurt her.”

The way Riven’s brows rose in disbelief reminded her of his brother. “Who are you to make demands of me? You’re a human who has absolutely no idea—”

Self-preservation wasn’t something Emeline excelled at, and she wouldn’t start trying now. Not when she knew—in the very marrow of her bones—that she never wanted *anyone* to experience the same loss she had. Gisela would grieve her husband, but not her pregnancy. Draven would not lose his whole family again.

“I know that your realm is on the brink of civil war,” Emeline began, drawing strength from Arsen and Samael being nearby. If she was going to confront Riven, at least she could advocate for the humanity in Draven and Gisela. She steeled her voice as she continued, “I know the entire court abused your brother while you did nothing but watch.”

Riven’s gaze darkened. Arsen remained purposefully apathetic.

She wouldn’t tell Arsen’s secrets, but she had an idea of what Riven had to have seen. “Can you honestly tell me you didn’t notice? The family meals he couldn’t be a part of? How he had to cook his own meals growing up? The isolation? You mean to tell me you noticed *none* of it?”

“It’s futile when Riven doesn’t want to see the truth,” Arsen reflected.

Emeline agreed to some extent, but she had to try.

“Arsen has always preferred to be alone,” Riven said in a dismissive tone. “Fae don’t care about the same things as humans. Don’t try to—”

“If that was the case then why would Lucifer give him Samael? Why give Arsen someone who would never leave him? Never abandon him for the sake of a kingdom’s stupid duties and laws,” Emeline interrupted him again, ignoring the panic striking her when Riven’s arrow reappeared in his grasp. “If you love your brother as much as you say you do, then you can trust him to carry out your tasks. He’ll get the information you want, and no more death needs to be had here.”

Samael was growling, venom dripping from his teeth, down his muzzle, and onto the floor. She thought he looked like a rabid dog with his body

shaking.

He instantly took offense to the dog comment. *“For your sake, I’m going to ignore that.”*

“Emeline, you don’t have to defend me,” Arsen murmured lightly.

She landed a fierce glare on him. *“Don’t think I’m not irritated you knew about Gisela’s husband. With Riven so close, you can’t tell me you didn’t count on him figuring everything out eventually. It may have been more quickly than you saw coming, but it still crossed your mind. I know it did. You’re smarter than that; don’t play me for a fool. Being human doesn’t mean I’m stupid.”*

“Just reckless,” he mused.

Instead of looking upset, Riven’s expression cleared. A smile broke out on his face. His lip rings caught the light, and the edges of his smile were sharper than the flash of canines. The arrow never disappeared from his grasp. Wyll, standing off to the side, noticed and took a step closer to Arsen. Riven tracked the movement.

“It appears that you have been gone too long. Your Manor is infested with halflings. Then you address Scaleridge with a declaration of devotion.” Riven gestured to her. “You allow a human to speak on your behalf.” He *tsked*. “You need to be reminded of who you are. Which family you belong to. Your role as a prince of this realm and your duty to Haven.”

“Sam.” Arsen’s voice was curt, but Emeline thought she heard a tinge of panic.

Samael crept closer, keeping a wide berth between himself and the crown prince, but it wasn’t necessary.

“Viera,” Riven called out, “stand before me.”

In the blink of an eye, the caretaker appeared. She bowed her head before Riven, placing a hand over her heart. “Your H—” She choked on the word, glancing down at the arrow lodged into her abdomen.

The entire Manor shook.

Candles extinguished overhead in the grand chandelier as it swung from side to side. Standing there, cloaked in darkness, Emeline could barely make out Riven’s silhouette. Moonlight teased the doorway. It helped that Samael lit the nearby drapery on fire, causing light to dance across the harsh elegance of Riven’s features.

“Consider this a consequence for failing to properly raise my brother while he lived away from the castle.” Riven pulled the arrow out with a

sickening sound, pointing it in Sari’s direction.

Emeline watched as Wyll drew his daggers. Thankfully, Riven either didn’t see it or he pointedly ignored it. Madam Viera was unnaturally still as she held a hand to her abdomen. The fabric there was already soaked with blood. She looked paler in the firelight. Emeline wanted to go to her, but Samael stood before her with his back to her. His scales were raised like hackles around his neck.

“You are being summoned to New Haven immediately. You will report there in a week’s time,” Riven stated firmly, speaking loudly enough that the deep timbre of his voice echoed in the foyer. Sari gave a stiff nod of understanding. Then his arrow shattered, sweeping his arm toward Arsen. “And you, baby brother, will join her. Whatever infernal blood bond you’ve forged with the human has evidently corrupted your ability to think clearly. Regarding the marriage trial, I’m making the decision for you.”

The next words speared through Emeline worse than any arrow.

“A week from now, you will wed Lady Grimwood. Father and Mother will be in attendance.” Riven gestured to Emeline. His voice lowered. “If you don’t, I will see to it personally that the human suffers a painful death.”

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32

A LOOMING STORM

EMELINE



After Riven’s declaration, he’d instructed Sabine and Lucetta to leave the Manor with him. Emeline couldn’t be certain if the two ladies were happy because the marriage trials were officially over or if it was because they were about to spend the ride back to Haven with the crown prince.

Arsen and Wyll had stayed with Gisela and Mr. Draven as they dealt with not only the dead fae, but the interrogation of the widow.

Emeline wanted no part in it for several reasons.

One, she could recognize that she was tapped out. She was still grieving Luis and the rest of her crew, barely able to be present for herself, and Gisela deserved more than the ghost of empathy. Arsen's indifferent attitude toward the situation didn't help. At least the pregnant servant had Wyll and Lysander, who'd stayed by her side. Emeline wondered if Gisela's husband and Lysander were good friends. They'd have seen each other regularly, both working at the Manor.

Reason number two, the fae was expecting.

Call her selfish. Call her tactless. Emeline was absolutely useless when her thoughts were so clouded by grief and fear. Arsen snarled at her to take a walk when she froze up after Riven left. His face screwed up like he'd tasted something absolutely horrid, and she was more than happy to oblige, not wanting to be in the same room.

When it came to Madam Viera, Riven hadn't inflicted disease into her wound. Apparently he knew he was pissing Arsen off enough tonight. Fatally wounding his nanny and caretaker was where he drew the line. Sari had disappeared with the Madam to heal her without everyone crowding.

That left Emeline and Samael together.

Left to their own devices, which, according to Wyll, was a catastrophe waiting to happen. Arsen didn't hesitate, assigning a guard to babysit them. Really, the one who needed the babysitter was Quillan, but Arsen had chosen him.

"You haven't eaten, right? What do you like to eat?" he inquired, leading her down the stairs to where several servants worked with pinched expressions on their faces.

They likely knew what had transpired.

"I'm not picky, but I don't like seafood." Emeline didn't understand how he could eat. "How are you hungry after today?"

Quillan's blue eyes glittered with ghastly delight. A few pieces of his brown hair fell forward over his eyebrows when he leaned toward her. "I've seen Samael eat several of my kind. Some while they were still alive and he picked them off slowly. If you ever stomach that, then you can stomach anything."

“Would you care for a demonstration?” Samael asked innocently, lifting his head and baring his teeth at the guard in a deranged dragon-esque smile.

“Why’s he looking at me? I make it a point for Samael not to notice me,” Quillan said wryly, dodging a servant carrying a platter full of sliced meats.

Emeline wasn’t one to turn down food, but there was something sad about seeing the table where she and Sari had talked for the first time and where she’d chatted to Mr. Draven about all the foods she’d eaten in her travels.

“Samael is offering to eat you,” Emeline observed casually, ignoring how the guard took several steps back before suggesting, “Why don’t we get something to go?”

“Like a picnic?”

“Anywhere’s better than here.”

Quillan shrugged. “Leave it to me.”

.——— ———.

“You know what doesn’t make sense?”

Quillan glanced at her expectantly from where he sat, perched on a bale of hay by the stables. The ridiculous sandwich he’d made from everything he could get his greedy hands on was barely staying put together. Bits of lettuce and tomato had already fallen out. It was too big for his mouth, and that was saying a lot considering he didn’t shut up.

“Hmm?” He pretended to think, lowering his sandwich to his plate. “Lots of things don’t make sense lately. Why Prince Riven didn’t disembowel you for speaking out earlier? Why Samael, who scares the sin out of almost every fae in this realm, lets you hold him? Or maybe the better question is how I’ve never seen Prince Arsen romantically involved with someone, and then out of nowhere, he’s got a human arguing about who made her come.”

Emeline raised an eyebrow, ripping off a piece of warm bread. “You don’t hold back much, do you?”

“Ask your question,” Quillan replied dryly, taking a bite that left remnants of the food scattered all around his mouth.

She shook her head, amused. “It’s about what Riven said earlier. Him deciding to marry Sari off to Arsen. Why are the marriage trials such a big deal?”

“Jealous?”

“Hardly.” It was the truth. Sari didn’t want to be with Arsen anymore than Arsen wanted to be with her. “Also, Riven killed that messenger pretty quickly without torturing him more in front of Gisela. Do you think there was a deeper purpose to that?”

Quillan didn’t answer immediately, chewing his food thoughtfully. “You ask a lot of questions. And address the royal family very informally, which is odd.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious.”

“I’m still new to the prince’s guard. Not a captain. Yet.” Quillan grinned at the thought with an innocence to his eyes she’d never seen among the other guards. “Marriages in the royal family are never for love. Duty comes first in every capacity. Duke Grimwood’s estate is near the border, and he can be a very powerful enemy or ally. Lady Caesaria is able to heal and shift her appearance. The duke’s powers come more from the demon Astaroth’s affinity for knowledge. He has the largest library that’s been passed down from generation to generation, with some books thought to be written by Astaroth himself.”

Quillan let her digest the information while he took another big bite. Then he added, “I’ve heard from the guards at Seaspire Castle that the king is mad with envy, wanting to know what spells the Grimwood family may be hiding. Their family was the one who gave King Eris some spell to split the realms way back in the old days. I don’t know much about it, to be honest.”

That was an interesting piece of information.

So it was a Grimwood ancestor who told Eris about the sacrificial spell which led to Arsen being killed and then reborn. Emeline wondered if Sari knew that.

“If that’s the case, then why bother with the trials at all? If Sari was the obvious choice, then why not make Arsen marry her sooner?”

“Politics.” Quillan shrugged. “Duke Bloodstone and Duchess Larkspur would have had a fit if their children were never considered for the role.” His voice lowered conspiratorially, eyes shining brighter. “The duchess already has it out for Prince Arsen because of how he treated her eldest

daughter. Think he said something rude in front of the court. The duchess believes Arsen owes his marriage vow to the Larkspur family for the disrespect."

"And what of Bloodstone?"

"Duke Bloodstone is power-hungry, but he's more isolated in Haven from the rest of the royals. I doubt King Eris is too concerned about him."

Emeline squinted at him, bringing the bread to her mouth. It was cold now from waiting to eat but still delicious. Flaky on the outside, but dense and warm on the inside. "You're kind of smart, aren't you?"

Quillan balked at the insinuation. "Kind of?"

"How do you know all this?"

"By watching, of course. Servants and guards always know what goes on in the minds of royals. Most of us are smart enough to keep our mouths shut." He winked at her, earning a low growl from the dragon beside her. "But you're a dead woman walking. If you don't run soon, King Eris will kill you. He doesn't only hate humans—he loves making them suffer."

That wasn't surprising, but she wasn't planning on running.

Quillan continued as she picked away at her bread, "Knowing how fond Prince Riven is of his younger brother, I think by ending the trials now and telling the king of the upcoming nuptials, he's protecting Prince Arsen."

"While securing Duke Grimwood's loyalty."

"Naturally. Royals have a lot of rules. Makes me glad to be a guard," Quillan finished, devouring the rest of his sandwich. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I can't believe you get all this good food here."

Emeline frowned. "Where did you come from?"

"My family's from a small village outside the Woods of Wisteria. Closer to the drylands than Seaspire Castle or the border. Lots of nasty creatures roam in Haven, and we were always being attacked by wraiths."

"Wraiths?"

"Those lost souls that were latching onto the boat? Most of them were fresh. Humans and fae alike who died for one reason or another." Quillan shrugged like death was no big deal. "You'll find that the sea never discriminates who dies in its waters."

Or maybe it was because death *was* Arsen's shadow. One of the sailors had drunkenly mentioned that death follows the princes like remoras to sharks. Maybe there was some truth to it, or the ruling family was especially bloody.

He continued to explain, “Wraiths are what souls become when they’ve given up hope at finding peace. They become addicted to pain and only live to cause suffering.” He shivered as if a chill had gone down his spine. “It’s also very bad luck to talk about them. If we could talk about something else, that’d be great.”

“Riven killed the messenger pretty quickly, don’t you think?” Emeline asked the question again because it was nagging at her. “Then he left. Do you think he had any intention of killing Gisela and Mr. Draven?”

Quillan nodded, not hesitating to say, “What surprised me is that he attacked Madam Viera. She’s well-respected in Haven and Dragon’s Den. I’m not sure exactly how old she is, but she’s been around for a very long time.”

“Why would he, then? Attack her?”

He shrugged again. “Maybe to show Prince Arsen that he was serious?”

“If that was the case, wouldn’t he attack me? Rather than the Madam?”

The guard pointed to Samael, who was watching him back. The dragon’s lip curled up, showing his venomous fangs in warning. “You had him to protect you. No one’s ever won and fought against a dragon before.”

Probably because they didn’t exist. Emeline gave Samael a pointed look, wondering what he was yet again.

“Shall I repeat it for you? Mag-nif-i-cent,” Samael said slowly, in a way that made her feel inexplicably dumb. Emeline didn’t dignify his answer with a response, choosing to eye the guard again.

There was something else she wanted to know.

“What if Arsen doesn’t marry Sari in a week’s time? What if he doesn’t go to New Haven at all?” Emeline tried to reason it for herself. “They can’t do anything to him, right? He’s a prince.”

Quillan stared at her. A sad smile formed on his lips, making her heart race a bit faster. “There’s only one outcome for someone who dares to defy the king and crown prince.”

“And what’s that?”

“Death.”

.——— ———.

“Stop pacing. It’s disgustingly human.”

Emeline ignored the sleepy creature lying at the foot of her bed. Ever since she'd told Quillan she was turning in for the night and didn't need a babysitter, he'd fucked off somewhere else. It was suspiciously in the direction of the kitchen, which made her heart hurt a bit. How rough was his home life back in Haven that he resource guarded?

"He's not a dog," Samael pointed out, amused.

True. But he ate like one.

"About what Quillan said… Do you think he was right? About Riven?" Emeline inquired, recalling how Samael hadn't said anything earlier when the guard was speaking of the crown prince's intentions. "Do you think Riven is trying to protect Arsen by marrying him off?"

"Yes," Samael replied, lifting his head. The candles at her bedside tables made his scales glimmer in the low light. He exhaled deeply, gazing at her with a strange intensity. *"Don't mistake Sen's actions today in the square as brave or inspiring. He shouldn't have done it because it's something that I would do. He was never meant to be impulsive."*

Emeline scowled at his words. "Aren't you the one who's always telling him to fight back against Eris? You're a hypocrite."

Wicked amusement sparkled in Samael's eyes. He bared his teeth in the dragon equivalent of a wolfish smile. *"I am deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand me?"*

She went back to pacing.

"God, you two are so annoying. Are you allergic to clear answers?" she snapped, her shoulders weighed down with tension.

"Your God has nothing to do with it. I imagine he has his hands full with humanity and using his angels to prove to everyone that his creations aren't easily swayed by the Devil."

Emeline stopped dead in her tracks, somehow surprised that God existed, even though she accepted a dragon so easily. "He's real?"

"If the Devil is, why wouldn't God be real? There cannot be peace without war. Good without evil. One cannot know love if they do not know hate."

There was an edge to his voice at the end, causing Emeline to furrow her brow. What was he upset about now?

She knew why *she* was. The thought of God existing infuriated her. Samael must have noticed. He chose to ask what troubled her.

With the anger burning hot in her chest, Emeline's voice came out sharper than she'd intended it to. "Because fuck him."

"…Bold words against the being responsible for creation." Samael trilled, rolling over onto his back. He stretched, wings flaring out before turning back over. *"Care to explain or have you always turned away from religion?"*

She crossed her arms, feeling it necessary to rub her hands up and down to stave off the approaching anxiety. "God was always the reason. When they couldn't explain why I lost my pregnancy, it always came out to be His fault. One of the doctors told me it was God's plan. A nearby nurse told me that God has His reasons and I should trust in Him." A harsh laugh escaped her. Fingernails dug into flesh, but she couldn't feel the sting. "For what reason did God plan to take my baby? Why would He want me or anyone else to feel this sort of pain? The kind that no one should ever have to feel. Why? Why *me*?"

The last word was brittle on her tongue.

Samael let out a low rumble of displeasure, eyes serious. *"If you want to be with child, Sen could help you."*

All the heat in her chest went to her face at the implication. The incredulous shout of, *"SAM,"* echoed in the large room. While the dragon was cackling like the little shit-stirrer he was, a new voice entered her mind. One which sounded both exhausted and defeated.

"Why are you yelling?"

Emeline swallowed nervously. *"Have you been listening to our conversation?"*

"No." Arsen's voice continued to be flat. *"I had a few things to handle while you gallivanted—"*

"Don't get snippy with me because you're stressed out about having to deal with the fallout of your psycho brother's recent transgressions. You told me to take a walk instead of staying, so I did," she snarked back defensively. When her irritation quickly cooled, Emeline felt more hollow than satisfied. Rather than continue to hurl spite at him, she softened her tone and extended an olive branch. *"I know that it's been a long day for both of us. You, especially, with your brother coming in and out of your life as he pleases. Is there anything that I can do to help?"*

Arsen was silent.

That silence grew until she sat down on the bed, equally defeated, and convinced he wouldn't answer her again.

Until he did. *"Will you still be awake in a few hours? I need to check in on Caesaria and Viera. Her wound wasn't serious considering Riven didn't use his magic on her, but stab wounds are tricky for Caesaria. Then I need to look over a few documents from New Haven and the crown. After that, I'll need to ensure Gisela's things are loaded onto a carriage. She's going to stay with a friend near Ironclaw while Draven stays here. It shouldn't take long with how little she has."*

Emeline's eyebrows scrunched together, hearing the never-ending list. That sounded like it would take all night, and it was already late. Almost midnight, according to the nearby grandfather clock. Arsen was making every problem his. And while it inherently was, he needed to delegate tonight; otherwise, he was going to burn out. A common experience in her military career.

Reason gave her courage.

"Have Wyll check in on Sari and Madam Viera. If she's been healing her this entire time, then I'm sure he's worried about both of them. It would be good for Wyll and Sari. You can see Madam Viera in the morning after you've rested. As for Gisela and Mr. Draven, have Lysander oversee the operation. I bet she's going to want to see a familiar face. Your presence would make her uncomfortable even if it's not warranted."

Emeline bit her lip, thinking out loud, "You don't have to do everything alone, Arsen. You have people who would take your hand if you reached out for help. All it takes is a little trust and vulnerability."

His reply was quiet. *"Not trusting people is what has kept me alive, little nightmare."*

"Alive but not living," Emeline clarified, continuing to speak aloud. "You're not alone anymore. Take care of your paperwork, but only if it's time-sensitive. You've done enough for today. I'll be here when you're ready.

"Me too. If anyone cares," Samael noted sarcastically, but there wasn't any bite to his tone.

Emeline smiled sweetly. She reached for one of the pillows before hissing out, "Oh, trust me. I haven't forgotten about you, or the comment you made earlier."

While Emeline chased and tried to whack the mysterious creature with a pillow, she thought about what she'd said to Arsen.

You're not alone anymore.

There was a fragile truth lingering on her tongue as if her words were an aftertaste she hadn't decided if she enjoyed or not. Her time in the fae realm was a fresh start to what should have been an end. Her stay here was already on borrowed time. But instead of looking forward to one day trying to get back to the human realm, Emeline wanted to stay in the Den where she didn't feel as alone.

Slowly, she was coming to terms with her grief and understanding how to cope with losing her pregnancy. It was something she would never forget. The recovery would only ever be physical. Emeline wished in the deepest parts of her heart that no one else would ever have to know what it felt like to lose a pregnancy. To lose a child. To feel a grief so immeasurable and insatiable that each breath felt like it was stolen before it left her lungs.

But that wasn't realistic.

Whether it was a medical mystery or God's fucking plan, the fact of the matter was that miscarriages were common. They only appeared to be rare because no one wanted to broach what society considered a taboo subject. It infuriated her to know there was a clear lack of support for women's health in the world, but she couldn't win the fight by herself.

Emeline had to focus on what she *could* control.

For starters, she was able to control how she lived with the knowledge of what *could have been* had the pregnancy been sustainable. Giving herself the grace to seek happiness or pleasure didn't mean she was over the loss—or didn't care.

It meant that she was ready to start healing.

And healing came with its own set of challenges. It reopened painful wounds. Examined complicated emotions a little too closely for her liking. She'd already had a taste of what that felt like when she'd opened up to Arsen. With him by her side… it had been painful, but her grief wasn't ugly.

It was tragic.

Another tragedy was living, knowing that one event had completely changed her. For better or for worse, Emeline's trauma had taken the shape of who she used to be and molded her into someone new. Her trauma gave her a new perspective and new fears to face.

What was she afraid of?

What about Gisela's presence both unsettled and scared her?

Why did—even now—the mere mention of Gisela and her condition inspire fear?

It thundered at the edge of her consciousness like a looming storm on the horizon. Would she allow herself to be swept into the sea and drown in familiar waves of turmoil? Would she let the lightning strike her until she was numb from self-accusations?

The answer came quickly.

It came from the memory of Arsen's calm reminder, carrying the storm away before it could reach her shores.

There is no right or wrong way to feel. You just do.

Whatever it was that scared her about Gisela, Arsen and Samael would help her figure it out. Maybe understanding her fear would be the next step in healing.

Arsen's voice found her again as a knock broke through her train of thought, "*Open the door, little nightmare.*"

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33

FINICKY LITTLE TRAITOR

ARSEN



Despite being alive, Arsen thought about death a lot.

Sometimes it was how he would die. By his father’s hand? His own suicidal tendencies disguised as recklessness? The idealizations had stopped when Samael hatched, but those kinds of feelings never truly left. They tore into his soul, reminding him that he was broken and

replaceable. But in all the ways he'd thought he'd die, there was one similarity. What he wanted out of death was the same.

Arsen wanted peace.

He wanted to be able to let his guard down more than anything.

Looking at Emeline with the candlelight flickering behind her, he wondered if this was what death was supposed to feel like. Warm. Safe. Looking at her felt like coming home. Arsen trailed his eyes from the dark wavy hair, tousled from chasing the dragon around, down to hazel eyes. Her gaze was curious and inviting.

The opposite of how she used to look at him.

Did she even realize how the corners of her lips tilted up at the sight of him?

Arsen didn't dare think about how that blue silk robe would be the death of him. The chemise underneath caressed curves he'd held before. Breasts he'd felt—

"Arsen," Emeline called his name in a tone which hinted it wasn't the first time. Her head tilted, a lock of hair falling against her cheek. His fingers itched to brush it away. "Is everything okay?"

"Fine." He moved past her, finding a smug creature resting at the edge of her bed. "Don't you look comfortable?"

Samael huffed, feigning annoyance, but his voice was full of ridicule and for his mind only. *"Is home not meant to be a comfort?"*

The prince's lip curled in dismay, but the door closing had him turning toward her.

"How's everyone doing? Sari? Madam Viera?"

Arsen wondered if she cared about what happened to Gisela or if the pregnant fae was off-limits. He remembered the way her fear had flooded him earlier, almost causing him to retch. What about her was—

"Arsen."

He blinked. "Yes?"

A frown replaced the faint smile from earlier. "What's wrong?"

There was a lot wrong. But instead of creating a tragic soliloquy of the mind, he said it out loud for her to hear. "The kingdom is becoming unstable. The Den can't win a battle, let alone a war—and war isn't something I want for this place. You know as well as I do who will suffer."

Emeline nodded, her frown deepening. "The innocent."

"Precisely. The ones fighting for equality have romanticized war."

“There is nothing romantic about watching the people you love die.” His shoulders relaxed a bit, feeling comforted by the fact that she understood. It didn’t last long when she asked, “Why is Riven first in line for the throne when you would make a better king?”

His eyebrows rose while Samael let out a quiet trill. They both looked to the dragon, who answered her question. *“Lucifer asks the same question. Ruling is Arsen’s destiny, but he has no desire to fight.”*

“I never wanted to lead,” Arsen remarked in a dry tone. “I’m fine here. Guarding the Veil means I’m far away from the king and queen.”

Emeline said nothing, piquing his curiosity. Not one to miss an opportunity, he tilted his head imperceptibly and listened.

“I get not wanting to lead. It’s a big responsibility. How many times was I tasked with leading a project or taking care of a group of sailors—not because I wanted to, but because I was the most capable? It’s like that here too. Arsen might not want to lead, but he’s capable of what the others aren’t. Empathy.”

“You think too highly of me.” Arsen shook his head, ignoring the warmth in his chest at her words. “And you”—he looked back at Samael—“would do well not to repeat the words of a raving heretic.”

The mark on his left bicep burned with reproach. As quickly as it’d appeared, it was gone, but it was a reminder that the old man was always aware of him.

Of course he would be.

Arsen was his weapon after all.

“Yeah, well. I’d prefer the company of the Devil over God.”

Samael didn’t appear surprised by that, nor did he have a witty comment to make. Arsen’s eyebrows drew together, wondering what he’d missed the past few hours. The silence made his little nightmare uncomfortable, allowing for the truths to spill freely from her mouth.

“When humans don’t have an explanation, they turn to faith. When I lost my pregnancy, they’d said it was part of God’s divine plan.” An edge formed in her voice, sharpening with each word. “Fuck Him and His plans.”

Arsen looked at Samael. The fae could sense the utter joy trickling down the bond like a gentle rain. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“You are too,” the creature said with mock innocence. *“You can’t fool me.”*

No, he couldn’t. Whatever he denied to himself, Samael would see through it. There was no fooling him because of what he was.

Rather than continue standing, Emeline walked over to her bedside and sat down. She patted the bed, looking at him expectantly. “Come sit. Stop standing there like a weirdo.”

Being called a *weirdo* was not something he ever expected to happen. Not from a human woman and not in his own manor.

Sitting with her was also the last thing he wanted to do.

And yet he walked over like an obedient pet and sat next to her on the bed. Their bodies were turned toward each other. Emeline shifted, sitting so that one foot was tucked underneath her. Arsen feigned indifference, but didn’t stop himself from leaning closer.

He forced a mocking smile. “I would implore you not to speak ill of God. I already have to protect you from enough fae. Adding the Creator of Life would be an inconvenience.”

“The only thing God has created for me is a lot of trauma. But”—she shrugged, an impish smile spreading across her lips—“trauma made me funny, so I’ll live with it.”

Arsen stared at her intently. She was resorting to her usual coping mechanism of dark humor. He didn’t want that. He wanted to trail his eyes over every piece of her soul, the parts she bared to him of her own free will. He wanted moments, the vulnerable kind. Not these ones that had her walls rising unbeknownst to herself.

“You’re staring again.” Emeline leaned back a little to look at Samael. “Is there something wrong with him?”

“A lot.”

Because he was such a gracious prince, Arsen ignored the dragon. “Is there something wrong with *you*?”

Emeline balked. “Me?”

“Yes.”

She gazed at him speculatively. “Are you trying to ask if I’m okay?” When he inclined his head, her eyes softened. “I’m f—” She bit the inside of her cheek, taking a deep breath. It made her body faintly shudder. “Stressed out. Worried. I don’t want to cause trouble for you—”

“I don’t believe that. You’re a menace.”

His quip startled a laugh out of her, and her amusement flowed into her voice. “How can you be worried about me when your brother wants to force

you into a marriage of convenience for the kingdom?”

“It won’t happen.”

Arsen was sure of it.

Emeline didn’t appear to be. Her lips pursed slightly, a contemplative look spreading across her face. Shamelessly, he listened to her think.

“Riven didn’t make it sound like it was a suggestion. Is he going to fight his brother on it? But the king and queen will be there. How does Sari feel about this? At least Wyll is with her. I’m sure she’s tired and upset.”

“Instead of wondering how everyone else is feeling,” Arsen pressed, narrowing his eyes, “tell me more. Earlier, you were afraid when Gisela was around. Why? What about her scared you? She can barely use her magic to influence the world around her; she’s harmless.”

Emeline stiffened.

An inclination to take her in his arms spread through him again. He didn’t hate it, but he didn’t like how strong the urge was. If Arsen were to have fae wine, he knew that he wouldn’t be craving the freedom the drink gave him. Instead, the drink would have him calling out to her.

“I don’t understand it either,” Emeline began, her voice barely above a whisper. The candlelight flickered, and he heard her heart begin to race. Before he could ask her what she was thinking, she spoke aloud, “I don’t know what about her brings up these feelings… I keep wanting to ignore them and pretend they don’t exist.”

Arsen frowned, inciting another emotion in her voice when she continued.

“It’s dumb, I know—I don’t—” Shame had her stumbling over her words.

This time, he couldn’t stop himself.

Arsen’s fingers brushed against her cheek. Her face warmed under his touch, but he kept his expressionless. Emeline wouldn’t know that his heart was racing faster than hers was. She wouldn’t know that it was taking an unimaginable level of restraint not to put her on her back and have another taste. This time, straight from the source.

Emeline didn’t know that because, if she did, then she’d realize this entire time she’d held all the power. Since the moment her tortured gaze had mirrored his own, Arsen had wanted her. He had wanted to learn more. The moment she’d smiled at that pathetic male human and had acted like nothing was wrong—his soul had called out to hers.

His heart had demanded he take her with them.

Arsen swallowed hard, aware of Samael coming beside them. The impulsive creature sought comfort, placing his head on Emeline's lap and nuzzling his face against her abdomen. Her lips parted in surprise, eyebrows furrowing.

"Samael, what's gotten into you?"

"I am what I am," Samael replied. *"I am deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Only you can understand me."*

Emeline leaned into Arsen's palm, gazing up at him with the stars in her eyes. Constellations of green and amber flecks he wanted to memorize. "What does he mean?"

A cold, detached smile played on his lips. "This will be a long story." He dropped his hand from her face, sounding resigned to his own ears. "Lie down, little nightmare, and I'll tell you a tale about a boy who didn't want to live anymore. And the devils who saved him."

.——— ———.

The boy ran.

His child-sized footfalls barely made any noise in the night. His chest burned from exertion, and the hunger cramps were making his side ache with each step. Exhaustion threatened to turn the fog into darkness, but he couldn't give in.

Not yet.

Not like this.

If he was going to die, then it would be on no one else's terms except his own.

The full moon was high in the sky, casting light across rocky cliffs. He could hear the sounds of the waves crashing against the rocks. It was foreboding, like the weeping prophet's euphonies. They called to him, welcoming him to the fathoms below, where the creatures hidden underneath the surface would feast on his body. Except he wasn't tasked with warning the people of the Southern Kingdom to submit to Babylon, but a scorned child born out of *wedlāc*.

He wouldn't have to worry about becoming a wraith. Leviathan wouldn't own his soul because he'd find peace in oblivion. Water would fill his lungs and his stomach, and he was happy for it.

Drowning would be easy compared to the nine days he'd spent tied and collared to a chair. Where his father had cursed his existence, reminding him that he was worthless to the kingdom unless he could protect it from the one who sought to destroy it through him.

It only stopped when the king was called away to attend to one of Riven's academic lessons. His brother's misbehavior drew the king's attention away. Then the boy had seized his chance, using the last of his power to break the chains.

And then he ran.

Straight to the cliffs where he planned to take his own life.

There were no tears. Only acceptance. And yet the boy still stopped at the edge. His bare feet, bloodied and bruised, felt the stab of the uneven rocks. His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths that wanted to turn into sobs.

But he wouldn't cry.

He refused to.

Standing there on the cliffs, the boy pushed down the grief, burrowing it into the marrow of his bones. He shoved aside three decades of anger and focused on resentment. His longing. His despair. The boy let out a scream that echoed and danced between the cliffs and the water.

It's not fair, he thought bitterly, sniffling. He fought against the emotional turmoil almost bringing him to his knees. *Thirty years together and still they refuse to accept me. They refuse the blood in me, and my own father means to break me. I won't.*

Those last two words tore from him in another scream.

The boy screamed until his voice was rough, and his small hands hit the wet ground. Sharp stones cut into his palms, and he knew the water on the cliffs mingled with his blood. He could feel the sting of salt water against open wounds. His knees were no better. Earlier, he'd collapsed on the spiral stone stairs near the dungeon, splitting open his right kneecap when he'd caught the edge.

His whole body hurt, but the ache in his spirit split deeper.

His entire soul mourned.

What was the point of living when there was nothing and no one to live for? Dust and shadows had more of a purpose than he did. Who would notice his absence unless it was Riven, seeking him out when he was bored? What was the point in all of this?

The boy laughed humorlessly, his gaunt features twisting into a rueful smile. He ignored the hoarse pain in his throat as he crawled to the edge. He looked down at the waves, feeling as turbulent as the sea. They mirrored his push and pull as he fought between craving his father's approval and accepting that his father would never want him.

Maybe if he left the castle, he could find his mother.

Mothers had to love their children. They had to. He saw it when Queen Liora looked upon Riven in quiet moments. He heard it when the servants talked about their own children. A mother's love was unconditional.

His mother was out there.

Did he have a name? One his mother would give him? Was there a chance he'd no longer be known as *'the spare'*?

More resentment bubbled inside him, drowning out the quiet longing. He shouted down at the water, ignoring the worsening sea state. "Why did you save me? Why? Why me? Why make me suffer—" His voice choked as the ugly truth of it all spilled from his throat. "He tortures me and says you don't care. He says saving me was a whim, and I am nothing. Was this your plan? Do you mean for me to suffer?"

All of his questions had his awareness slipping. Or maybe it was because he hadn't eaten or drunk anything in more than a week. Regardless of the reason, the boy was falling. One wrong move against the slick surface and he'd fallen over the edge. The wind whipped past his face. He reached toward the rocks like he was eager for death.

Perhaps he was.

No one can understand the pain and grief I feel. Not when I hate myself this much. I've done everything they ask, and they will never accept me for who I am. No one knows what it's like to live in a fog every day. To drown in it and hope that Death will pay a visit.

A roar pierced the air, startling him, but it wasn't the waves.

It was a creature, the same color as the ocean, exploding from the surface. The double coating of scales was like chainmail shining in the moonlight. It was so enormous that the boy couldn't see all of its face at once. His frail body hit what he thought was the sea serpent's muzzle, and then he felt the wind rushing past him in another direction. He flew upward before being thrown onto the rocky cliffs he'd recently slipped off.

Pain ravaged him as his right side took the brunt of the impact. Bones cracked, and pained whimpers were forced out of him. He rolled onto his

back, only catching a glimpse of a tail before it disappeared again.

Leviathan.

What had made the Devil of the Sea appear?

“Someone who doesn’t want you dead over a measly fall,” a deep, masculine voice mused somewhere off to the side.

The boy ignored the pain, pushing himself up into a sitting position. His vision blurred, but he struggled to focus on a figure kneeling before him. He was dressed in scaled armor like that of a knight. The scales themselves were midnight, matching the stranger’s dark hair tumbling over his shoulders and the thick beard adorning his face.

A frown fell over the boy’s features. Dismay curled his lip. “Who are *you*?”

“I’ve killed greater creatures over lesser manners.” His ears weren’t pointed. Was he human? The mark on his arm burned briefly. “No, foolish boy. I am not one of God’s ridiculous creations. I am the Morning Star. The Light-Bringer. I am Lucifer.”

“You have too many names,” the boy murmured, still frowning. “How can you have so many names, and I’m only known as The Spare Prince?”

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed. Golden and glowing, his voice sounded deeper with spite. “Has that fool not given you a name?”

The boy swallowed, refusing to allow grief to rear its unwanted head. “I don’t need a name.”

“Yes, you do, and stop pretending that you’re strong when my sea devil saved you from death not moments ago. You look like you’ve never seen a loaf of bread before.”

At the mention, the boy’s stomach rumbled with dissatisfaction. Eyeing him, Lucifer waved his hand. A silver tray appeared, one full of fruits, bread, and slices of meat. A goblet of water appeared beside it. The boy’s mouth watered, but he turned his head away.

Surprisingly, it caused Lucifer to let out a boisterous laugh. “Now, boy. I know quite a bit about pride, but this is not the time. Eat. Drink—”

Before he could continue, the boy dug in. The bread was soft and warm. He shoved a tender cut of meat into his mouth, savoring the taste. All the while, Lucifer waited for him to finish.

“More.”

“Drink the water, or you’ll get sick,” Lucifer snapped, wagging a finger toward him. “This is the only time I’ll be nice, you brat. You don’t order the

Devil around."

The boy huffed but listened. He didn't realize how thirsty he was until the water soothed his throat. He was breathing quickly, practically inhaling the meal.

"Good. Now, tell me, what have I missed in the blink of an eye?"

They sat across from each other, while the boy explained everything. The torture. The abuse. His home life. With each revelation, Lucifer's wrath and rage grew in his eyes. By the end, the gold in them was far brighter than anything the boy had ever seen. It was molten, casting a hue on the tops of his cheeks.

"Victory will taste so sweet when the king's reign ends, and you become the reason for his undoing," Lucifer said savagely, standing. "Rise."

He didn't want to, ready to lick the tray clean from how hungry he still was, but the boy did as he said. He stood patiently in tattered, wet clothes as Lucifer gazed down at him.

"You are someone whose light cannot be extinguished. Your name will be that of a warrior's. *Arsen*, the Crown Prince of Hell, should you accept your title when the time comes."

Having a name filled his chest with a warmth he was unaccustomed to. He did his best to appear indifferent, but he wasn't fooling anyone. Especially not the King of Hell.

"Listen to me well, Arsen. You do not kneel to the whims of fae. You will incite fear, and use it to your advantage. You, Arsen, are *my* creation," Lucifer snarled, making the boy shudder in fear for the first time.

The angel's hand shot toward him.

Arsen didn't have time to react until it was too late. Until Lucifer's hand was already in his chest, ripping out his heart. Arsen's eyes widened, staring in shock as the organ beat in Lucifer's hand. Heart walls peeled away, revealing an egg covered in golden scales. It was enormous, easily five times bigger than any serpent egg he'd ever come across.

What was left of his heart flew back into his chest. The wound sealed, as if an angel hadn't ripped out his heart, but the entire event was painless. Arsen could feel his heart beating steadily in his chest again, but felt his earlier meal was about to make another appearance.

"What is this?" he asked blandly, trying not to puke.

Lucifer encouraged him to take the large egg, and Arsen felt rather protective of it. Whatever it was had come from his heart. For all intents

and purposes, this *was* his heart.

“You will call him Samael. An angel of death and a prince of demons, as you are. Samael will be as venomous as your grief and hatred. He will hatch when you are strong enough to protect him. Because if he dies, then so will you, *Heres*. Raise him well, and you both will be unstoppable in this fool’s kingdom.”

Then, before Arsen could ask anymore, his world went dark.

.——— ———.

They were both lying on the bed, facing each other. Arsen’s armor was discarded by the bedside, and he was holding Emeline. She was crying. The human was crying *for* him. Samael was at her other side, his head resting on her waist. They locked eyes briefly.

“Samael is your heart,” Emeline realized, wiping away her tears. He nodded as Samael nudged her, crawling to climb in between them. He practically purred under her hand as she continued, “I mean, I know how, but…” She paused. “Well, this explains your fascination with ripping hearts out. Exactly like your demon daddy. Sari told me that you respected Samael’s wishes like they were your own—but—imagine if she knew just how right she was about that.”

Arsen’s lip quirked up, amused. He was nothing like Lucifer. “Fickle as Sam is, everything good about me is because of him.”

It was the exact statement he’d made to her after she’d revealed her miscarriage to him.

“Fickle. The comment about not being able to fool him.” Emeline glared over at the smug dragon. “Let me guess… because you can’t fool your own heart. Ha. Ha.” Her voice was flat. “Fucking hilarious.”

“Look who finally has all the pieces of the puzzle. All except one.” Samael’s voice was as proud as it was smug, causing a feral grin to spread across Arsen’s face.

Whatever metaphor he’d used, it irritated Emeline enough for her to snark back, “Then give me the last one. What else am I missing?”

“The reason why Arsen listened to his heart when it said to save you instead of leaving you to die. That—” Samael proceeded to jump out of bed and head toward the door. Arsen used his magic to open it for the creature

before hearing him in both their minds, "*—is something I will not explain to you. I'll leave that for the emotionally-constipated virgin, as you say.*"

A growl ripped from Arsen's throat. He was about to remind Sam about the dragon's complete lack of experience when Arsen recalled that such urges didn't come to the finicky little traitor. All Samael cared about was killing and eating widow-makers because he enjoyed the spicy taste in his mouth from the venom.

He looked back at Emeline to see her staring at him warily. Crying had tired her out, and he could tell her head hurt from how she complained about the pain in her thoughts. They both were well aware of the question lingering between them. But Arsen wasn't ready to shed light on truths he'd barely had the time to acknowledge.

She knew what Riven only suspected. He wasn't sure how Riven could possibly know, but his brother was full of secrets. Unpredictable and uncontrollable as the plagues he created.

Arsen got lost in his head, thinking about the upcoming summoning. It wasn't until the firelight crackled before going out, that he realized Emeline wasn't staring at him anymore. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but it was long enough for her to fall asleep. Her chest rose and fell with slow breaths as he laid his head down on the pillow across from her. Emeline never stirred while he pulled the blanket over her shoulders.

She'd given him the space to think, as he often tried to do for her. She wasn't forcing any information out of him, and her knowing didn't incite panic. If Samael was nearby in moments like this, he'd nuzzle close to her. Wanting comfort.

In reality, the reason why Samael wanted to be close to her was not only because he'd come to enjoy her company in his sentience, but because it was Arsen's desire for comfort that kept the creature by her side.

Things would change now that his little nightmare was aware she'd tamed his heart. *The fucking traitor*. She'd have more questions, and he'd have more dodgy answers. That would be the game he played until he figured out what to do about his brother and the marriage ceremony in New Haven.

Arsen closed his eyes, pulling her closer.

That was tomorrow's problem.

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34

CHEATER, CHEATER, HUMAN EATER

EMELINE



The blanket was warm and cozy.

Her pillow smelled woodsy and a bit like citrus. The familiar scent of fresh rain. She burrowed her face into the heat, trying to figure out what springtime scent she'd chosen from the *Mercadona*. Were they having a sale soon? She needed to stock up if this was a seasonal scent.

But wait.

It was autumn.

Emeline’s eyebrows scrunched together in confusion. She stiffened in surprise as the *pillow* wrapped its arms around her. Did she get drunk and buy one of those self-hugging therapy pillows? How much money was in her account? A low growl of approval rumbled from the pillow, nuzzling its face against the crook of her neck.

Okay.

She was, arguably, not the brightest crayon in the package. But she wouldn’t have bought a kinky, growling, self-hugging, warm pillow without at least remembering it. Right?

Emeline’s eyes shot open, noticing immediately that it wasn’t the blankets warming her up. It was the lean yet muscular body of a fae prince, who left no space between them. She felt his face against her neck, inhaling her scent with another pleased rumble shaking his chest.

For fuck’s sake—he was like a cat.

And she was no better, about to rub herself all over him. It was criminal to smell so heavenly when he was sin incarnate. Too many questions ran through her mind, breaking the hold lust had on her.

One, why was Arsen in her bed?

Two, why was he *cuddling* her?

Three, do kinky, growling, self-hugging pillows actually exist?

There was a market for everything, no matter how niche the product. If she ever went back to the human realm, maybe she’d patent it and become rich. Before she could do something she’d regret—like get used to being held by the wicked devil—Emeline carefully turned away from him, onto her other side.

Unfortunately, an arm snaked around her front, hauling her back against his chest. She froze, waiting to see if he’d woken up. He hadn’t.

His breathing was even. Deep inhales and exhales left him as he slept soundly. Bemusement crept into her. Not only did he have a tight hold on her, but there wasn’t a single part of her that wasn’t touching him. The right side of her head used his bicep as a pillow. The entire length of her back and legs were pressed against him. In fact, his left knee had slid between her thighs, and now she was annoyingly aware of how muscular his thighs were.

What fucking workouts did he do?

Training? Was riding finicky dragons a workout?

Where the fuck was Samael?

Emeline wanted to call out to the creature, but she didn't want to wake Arsen. A quiet, disgruntled noise left her, causing the prince to bring up his hand. The back of his knuckles skimmed the underside of her breasts as he placed his hand against the expanse of her sternum. The chemise did nothing to hide the warmth of his hand splayed out.

Had his hand always been so large? She was quite familiar with those fingers. But she wanted—

Stop.

Where was the eject button?

Emeline shivered as her nipples pebbled under the thin nightgown. She wanted to let out another noise of frustration. Things were already confusing between Arsen and her. The last thing she needed to add into the mix was morning sex.

Or whatever this was.

Emeline shifted slightly, but it accomplished nothing. If her body was a siren's call, then Arsen was a helpless sailor. No matter how she readjusted herself, trying to get out of his grip, Arsen acted like a fucking koala. She wasn't supposed to be the tree to climb; *he was*.

She grimaced as another realization hit her.

Another problem had risen. *Literally.*

Emeline could feel his cock pressed firmly against her ass. She tried to move, but his hips pressed forward against her. She went still again, swallowing hard. She counted his steady breaths; her heart was pounding with both anticipation and reproach.

Non-consensual cuddling was going on the damn list.

Her thighs squeezed together…or at least they tried to, but Arsen's thigh was lodged in between hers. Temptation whispered to roll her hips back against him. To feel the length of him twitch against her behind. She wanted to hear the hitch in his breath and the sleep-ridden sound of his moans.

Emeline cursed silently. Heat pooled in her lower abdomen, her pussy clenching around nothing. She was about to give up and shout when his name got stuck in her throat instead. She glanced down, unable to see it, but knowing what was happening beneath the covers.

His hand had moved from her sternum down to her outer thigh. Fingers glided across the hem of her chemise, finding bare skin. It was a slow torment, yet too fast for him to be fully conscious of what he was doing. A

slave to unbidden wants, the prince's hand slid up, bringing the hem of the nightgown over her hips.

Was now a bad time to say that she'd forgone underwear?

Arsen's hand skimmed over her breast, causing her to shudder when her nipple brushed against his palm. Feeling her shake, Arsen took her breast in his hand, squeezing and kneading it as another quiet noise of approval escaped him. Emeline was absently aware of her lower half grinding against his thigh. Lust had a firm grip on her, and it demanded more friction.

Fuck, this was getting out of hand, and Arsen wasn't even awake.

"Arsen," she called out, breathless, but loud. Emeline's next words were almost caught in her throat when his hips pressed firmly against her, "Wake up, you idiot."

An annoyed, sleepy huff erupted behind her. "Shut up, and go back to sleep."

What the—Indignation snapped at her heels. "Says the fae whose hand is groping my breast and has his cock pressing against my ass."

He squeezed her breast as if confirming it for himself. She continued, her patience nonexistent. "Yes, congratulations. That's a breast, you—vir—" She inhaled sharply when he pinched her nipple. "Arsen!"

Without any warning, he brought his thigh closer against her core. A shadow loomed over her. Arsen had risen to his forearm, but he never let go of her breast. Rather, he circled her nipple with the pad of his thumb, lazily brushing over the stiff peak. Like he was learning what made her shiver and drove her hips to jerk forward.

She glared up at him. "Are you done?"

"No," he mused pleasantly.

"Arsen—" The bastard lay back down, shifting so that her head was back on the pillow, freeing his right arm. That free hand slipped underneath her chemise, finding her other breast. Now two hands massaged her, making her pulse race. "—What are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he drawled, pushing his thigh closer to her traitorous hips, which were steadily grinding against him now. He pinched both nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, eliciting a whimper from her. "I didn't think I'd have to teach you what foreplay is."

"Smart-ass," she gritted out.

"Mhm," he replied absently before lowering his voice. "Do me a favor and stop pretending like you don't enjoy this—" When she opened her

mouth to argue, he added, “Do you think that I can’t feel your heat against my thigh? I can scent your arousal, little nightmare. You’re desperate for me.”

Cheeks flushing, Emeline snapped back, “I am not.”

Arsen let out a husky chuckle, his voice still rough from sleep. Evidently, he was still waking up and not in the mood to argue the obvious. Emeline wasn’t sure why she was denying it, but maybe denial was the last shred of common sense she was clinging to.

If she gave herself to him, how much would he take?

Of course, that common sense left the room when Arsen’s left hand drifted down the front of her stomach. It was slow and purposeful. Emeline knew exactly where his hand was going, and instead of stopping…she arched her back. She pushed her ass against his cock, feeling his hips jerk slightly in surprise.

Did he expect her to convince him that they should stop? They were both consenting, albeit recklessly stupid adults. Her dry spell wasn’t five hundred years, but it was long enough.

Arsen squeezed her breast while his middle finger dove through her arousal. His cock hardened, clearly enjoying how wet she was for him. He trailed his finger, gathering her arousal before bringing it up to her clit. She turned her face into the pillow.

“No.” His voice was clipped. “I want to hear you.”

The pillow disappeared. It was just *gone*, and she did what felt natural —rested her head against his shoulder.

Arsen’s head dipped down, his voice right next to her ear. “If you want to come this morning, you’ll let me hear you.”

His touch was the swipe of a match, lighting a fire inside her. Emeline arched her back against him as he made slow, teasing circles around her clit. Never quite touching her where she needed him, but purposeful enough that she knew he was fucking with her.

“Louder,” he purred, brushing his lips against the outer shell of her ear. “Or I will make you suffer, little nightmare.”

Emeline bit the inside of her cheek, allowing the pain to ground her when pleasure threatened to sweep her away. “Arsen?”

She allowed her voice to come out airy and breathy, like she was completely under his spell. He paused his ministrations, waiting for her to continue. With his hands occupied, there was no parry to her vindictiveness.

When he felt her hand reach back, palming his clothed erection, Arsen let his forehead fall against her. “*Fuck*, Emeline.”

The honeyed sound of her name on his tongue was her undoing as always. She was bolder, finding his waistband. Her hand slipped underneath the fabric and slid down to his hard, thick length. Arsen’s breathing grew ragged. Two fingers dipped into her, his teasing impeded by his own frenzied lust.

Emeline cried out when his fingers curled in her. He moaned when she swiped a finger over the head of his cock, smearing the bead of pre-cum.

It was a game of push and pull which led to mutual self-destruction. If he stopped pumping his fingers in and out of her, she stopped too. If he teased her, spreading his fingers to form a vee inside her, then she stroked the sensitive underside of his cock right where the crown met his shaft. Eventually, she couldn’t take it anymore.

His name was a litany.

A repetitive prayer, begging for release.

“That’s it.” Arsen’s hips gave shallow thrusts into her hand, encouraging her. “Come, little nightmare. Let me feel that pretty pussy clench around my fingers.”

Without any warning, he added a third finger and pressed the heel of his palm against her clit. Emeline felt the coiling at the base of her spine the moment her legs started to tingle and go numb.

“Arsen,” she pleaded, the siren no longer in control of the sailor. She’d trusted him with her trauma and her body before. Now she was giving him her honesty. Her vulnerability. Her sanity. “I need you. *Please*.”

He added more pressure against her clit. “I’ve got you.”

“Inside me,” she hastily clarified.

Before she could say more, his fingers were gone.

Emeline turned around to look at him—glare, really—but he was gone.

Outrage seethed through her until she was forced onto her back. She felt strong hands spread her thighs far apart. Enough so that she was perfectly on display for him with nothing to hide. Emeline knew her pelvic muscles were going to feel the ache later, but she didn’t have long to feel embarrassed.

Arsen’s mouth was on her.

His tongue speared her entrance, devouring her with the greed of a feral creature. Emeline shouted his name, squirming under his touch, but she

couldn’t move away. Her legs were over his shoulders in an instant, and the vibrations of his moans against her pussy drove her equally as wild. Arsen wasn’t just eating her out; he was devouring her.

Consuming her and taking everything she had to offer and more. One of her hands reached down, raking through his soft hair. Her other hand gripped the sheets tightly, eyes squeezing shut. Pleasure was a rip current, sending her over the edge. She didn’t last long.

Not when his tongue flattened, dragging up her pussy.

Not when his lips wrapped around her clit, sucking it, and flicking his tongue over the sensitive bundle of nerves repeatedly.

And not when he swirled his tongue or slid his finger into her.

Emeline came with a scream, the coil finally *snapping*. Her hips arched off the bed. Strong hands slammed her down against the mattress as Arsen licked her, making her legs shake. He didn’t stop when she cried out from oversensitivity. Only when she had a thought that amused him, *“Doesn't the fucker have to breathe?”*

“No,” he answered smugly, and she knew he was kidding when he said, *“I’ll happily die between your pretty thighs, little nightmare.”*

Breathing quickly, Emeline’s legs were almost numb as she gripped the covers and pulled the blanket off of them. Arsen’s hair was disheveled from her hands. His lips glistened with her arousal as he smirked at her. She watched as his tongue dragged across his lower lip, savoring the taste of her. A blush rose from her chest to settle on her cheeks.

She sat up and beckoned him forward. “Let me take care of you too.”

“You don’t have to,” he murmured back, shaking his head.

Emeline gave him a flat stare. “I *want* to.”

He rose onto his knees, giving her a full view of his rumpled shirt and undone breeches. She opened her mouth to say more, but then she noticed a darker spot of fabric where the head of his cock was. He wasn’t as hard as he had been, but the length of him still strained against the fabric.

She stared at him, awestruck. “You came… from… oral?”

“Don’t underestimate how much I enjoy the taste of you,” Arsen murmured unashamedly, eyes glinting with a promise of more. He didn’t look embarrassed in the slightest. Still hungry, if anything. “I did promise tears. Lie back.”

Before she could reject him and say that she valued her sanity and didn’t need to be tongue-fucked into next year, Emeline heard footsteps

outside the door. If she could hear them, then she knew Arsen definitely could. Rather than disappear, he grabbed her ankle and *yanked* her down. Emeline fell back onto her elbows.

He used magic to pull the thick covers over himself, entirely hidden from view as the door swung open. Caesaria entered, wearing the same clothes from yesterday. She looked tired, but Emeline couldn't focus on Sari too much when Arsen was lightly biting her inner thigh in different spots. She innocently reached under the covers to pull his hair, but he stopped her easily enough. His tongue dragged against the inside of her palm. For fuck's sake, he was already insatiable.

"Sari," Emeline greeted, resisting the urge to clench her thighs.

She forced a smile like a certain *asshole* wasn't inching toward her center.

His laugh caressed her mind, an unexpected warmth of affection in his tone. *"That's quite rude. But continue calling me awful names. The thought of punishing you is making me hard."*

"Fucking exhausted," Sari grumbled, coming to stand by the bed. "I'm looking for Arsen. He wasn't in his bedroom, but Samael was. Grumpy bastard almost tried to bite me when I asked where his owner was." She shook her head, her braids falling over her shoulder. "Have you seen him this morning?"

Uh.

Well.

She had an idea.

"No…" Emeline started awkwardly, trying to think of an excuse, and not about how she was going to kill him for putting her in this situation. The bastard could disappear or turn into shadows, and instead, he chose to torture her.

Sari raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. She sniffed the air. "Right. Well, when he decides to get his head out from between your legs, do make sure to tell him that he has royal duties and responsibilities to attend to that don't include fucking his blood-bonded human. For example, figuring out this mess Riven put us in." Emeline winced, knowing she was right. "Oh and—*you*"—the fae pointed her finger at the blanket—"are a deplorable fae to be betrothed to for cheating on me less than twelve hours after our marriage proclamation."

“You’ll get over it,” Arsen said, his voice muffled by the fabric. “Or you won’t. Matters little to me when we won’t be getting married.”

Emeline wanted to find a nice hole, crawl into it, and die.

She went to kick Arsen, but he disappeared. *Son of a bitch.*

As if knowing he was gone, Sari lifted her chin and looked down her nose. “In the spirit of our transparent friendship, I can’t deny that I’m a little jealous you told Arsen about your miscarriage and not me.” She held up her hand before Emeline could counter, saying, “But I understand why you did. Actually, I don’t. He’s not good with feelings.”

That wasn’t true.

She thought Arsen was surprisingly great with feelings.

“And eating your—”

Emeline shouted at him through their bond, *“Privacy, now. Or else I’m never letting you touch me again, you nosy little shit.”*

“You’re talking to him, aren’t you? You look like you just ate something bad,” Sari reflected in a dry tone.

“He’s nosy,” Emeline shot back before shaking her head. “And he’s been helping me process my emotions. I think…” She didn’t know how to word this without sounding like a conceited bitch. “Um…”

“…You think you know him better than we do,” Sari finished.

Emeline winced. “Yes?”

Rather than look miffed, Sari appeared speculative. “I’m inclined to say it’s not true, but Samael likes you when he hates everyone, so anything is possible, I suppose. Nevertheless, that is a conversation for Arsen and I to have. Right now—this—is about you.” The fae crossed her arms, clearing her throat and looking every bit the awkward royal who didn’t know how to deal with said feelings. “Are you okay?”

“Still in my post-orgasm bliss; thanks for interrupting.”

“Gross.”

She shrugged. “You asked.”

“He’s like my brother.”

“Well you’re about to get married to your brother.” Emeline bit her lip to keep from laughing. It wasn’t funny, but also—it was. Her humor was as fucked up as she was. “Any ideas?”

Sari nodded seriously. “I have a plan.”

Emeline’s back straightened. “Really?” When Sari nodded, she pressed for information, “What are you going to do? Cut off Riven’s head? Stake

him? Silver bullet?”

“Not quite.” The court lady smiled confidently. “I’m going to say no.”

That was it?

God, they were so fucked.

.——— ———.

The bathing chamber could hold a small crowd, so there was no issue when Sari joined Emeline in the large bath. It reminded her of the onsens she’d visited in Hakone. A town full of hot springs and some of the most delicious food she’d ever tried. When she’d mentioned needing to soak and forget, Sari had all but ripped her own attire off. Guiltily, Emeline was reminded that she wasn’t the only one with troubles.

That was another tough pill to swallow.

Her problems weren’t everyone’s problems, and while they felt world-ending, she had to make a decision. Be a good friend, or be selfish and hide away. Emeline needed to have compassion without comparing her problems to others’. While a forced marriage might not have been on the same level —in her opinion—as pregnancy loss, it was still a problem. It was still an issue that her friend was facing.

The old Emeline would have ignored the elephant in the room. She would have drifted off into the fog, smiling in relief when the numbness found her. But that wasn’t her anymore. Emeline acknowledged her feelings and compartmentalized without suppressing them for good. She gave her feelings the time and space to grieve without allowing them to consume her.

She wanted to be better.

And it started with being present.

“I heard from one of the guards that your father has a large library. One of your ancestors was responsible for the spell that split the realms,” Emeline said, treading lightly. She was stepping out of the giant bath, reaching for a white cloth to dry herself off. “The king wants access to those libraries. How do you think he’ll take you saying no to the ceremony?”

Sari frowned, following her out of the water. She reached for a towel as she answered, “In any case, if Arsen and I were to marry, he wouldn’t be allowed in. Only those with Grimwood blood can enter. Otherwise, there’s a barrier no diluted blood of Leviathan’s can get through.”

“Sounds like he’s shit out of luck then.”

“He is,” Sari replied, but she didn’t sound convinced. Her voice grew colder. “Unless he demands that Arsen and I produce an heir, and then he makes the child as cold and heartless as Riven.”

Emeline wanted to contend that no one was heartless enough to steal babies, but Eris had sacrificed one—his own son—for personal gain.

Sari continued when Emeline didn’t say anything, “At least we know what he wants.”

“We do?”

“It’s what everyone craves once they’ve had a taste of it.” Sari wrapped her towel around her body, giving Emeline a bone-chilling glance. “More power.”

That wasn’t terrifying at all.

Time to change the subject.

“How is Madam Viera?” Guilt pinched her, remembering the fae had almost died. “You were healing her all night, weren’t you?”

“I was, but at least Wyll was there to help.”

“He can heal?”

“No, but his presence gives me strength,” Sari admitted, unexpectedly reserved. Sapphire eyes dulled faintly, lost in memory. “Viera only had a flesh wound, but it took time to heal her… oddities aside.” She shook her head. “We need to get dressed. I’m starving.”

Right. Real breakfast.

Only Arsen had eaten this morning.

Emeline donned a mauve-colored dress, with long sleeves and a fitted corset. Sari informed her it was called a *‘kirtle,’* which most peasants wore daily. Hers differed from the commoners because of the gold lacework detailing the bodice. Sari changed into something similar, but—to no one’s surprise—it was a deep shade of blue.

A knock at the door had anticipation flaring to life inside her. Emeline walked over, only for her expression to fall.

Wyll, dressed in typical guardsman attire, stared back blandly at her. “I take offense to that.”

“Good,” Emeline retorted, adding, “It’s not like you came here to see me.”

“Is that Wyll?”

The guard in front of her noticeably perked up.

Emeline snorted inwardly. “I take offense to that.” Then she became cognizant of what that meant. “If you’re surprised she’s with me, then you really *are* here to see me.”

Wyll didn’t take his eyes off the court lady standing behind Emeline. Sari was taller than her. It was unsurprising that he could see her as the door opened wider.

“Yes.” He stepped to the side, allowing Emeline to see Quillan and Lysander waiting down the corridor.

The brown-haired guard was talking animatedly to his superior with an apple in his hand. Half a loaf of bread in the other. Wyll finally tore his gaze from Sari to look at the pair before staring back at Emeline. “His Royal Highness”—his voice hardened—“has decided that we leave for New Haven immediately.”

Sari inhaled sharply, coming to stand beside her. “We’re going? Truly?”

Wyll nodded once. His lilac eyes held a sliver of torture that buried itself inside of Emeline. Anyone could see Wyll and Sari cared about each other more than just life long friends. Arsen and Sari getting married—even temporarily—wouldn’t fix anything.

Eris would want a Grimwood heir to raise himself in order to get access to the ancient library. The king’s entire plan was beginning to emerge, laying itself flat on the table for her to see. Riven had orchestrated them all like chess pieces to make sure he got what he wanted from his little brother.

Wyll’s voice drew her from her rising vehemence.

“Lys, Quill, you, me, this annoying human, and Arsen will be going. Viera will stay here to oversee the Manor and heal from her wounds,” he explained, gesturing to the others with a sweep of his arm. “It will take a few days to get there if we make haste. We’re to attend a ball in five days, and then the following night will be the ceremony.”

“Arsen’s truly alright with this?” Sari asked, her voice tinged with more desperation.

Emeline placed a hand on her arm, feeling how tense she was. Sari kept asking the same questions as if Wyll was going to change his answer to be what she wanted to hear. Unfortunately, it sounded like the Second Prince had made up his mind. They were going to New Haven, where the king and queen would be waiting for them.

Did they know yet that Arsen was blood-bonded to a human?

Riven likely told them. He'd threatened her life if Arsen didn't go to New Haven. Truly, her life was still in danger simply by going.

Was there any way out of this that didn't end with her death?

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35

IT’S TIME TO LIVE

EMELINE



The journey to New Haven was incredibly dull.

Which was a good thing, Emeline supposed, but there was an underlying tension within the carriage. Sari had barely spoken, her eyes distant, while Emeline prattled on about nothing and everything.

Books she enjoyed, one of them featuring serial killers falling in love. The concept of movies and how they were like magic in a box that had

come alive. Places she'd been and how she had a personal vendetta against department stores during the holiday season when the same song was played over and over again.

Emeline had even gone on to describe the nostalgia of the '90s. The world being less digital and more analog was hard to convey—more so when Sari didn't give a shit about the human realm. It wasn't that she disliked humans *per se,* but rather there was no interest in a society without magic.

Instead of Sari, it was Arsen who listened to her.

The prince was in the air with Samael, but kept a pulse on her thoughts. He asked her question after question after question. Why did she enjoy such books? Movies? What did she miss about the human realm while being in Haven? What would she do if she never went back? That question had silenced her for a bit, until Samael started cracking jokes at Arsen's expense.

At some point, Sari noticed she'd been talking with Arsen rather than continuing their conversation out loud. Was it because she'd started grinning out of nowhere. or was it because of the prominent blush sweeping her cheeks when Arsen mentioned their bedroom activity from a few days ago?

"Can you ask him how far away we are?" Sari interjected, stopping Arsen's tirade of how he was superior to Jensen Ackles. "The sun will set in a few hours. Maybe we can stop for today?"

"Tell her we won't be stopping. We can make it to New Haven before nightfall and find an inn on the outskirts. The Traitor's Forest is nearing. It becomes unpredictable close to dusk," Arsen informed her, his tone firm.

Emeline stared back at Sari, seeing the small kindle of hope in her eyes. Despite being so confident back at the Manor, reality was setting in for all of them. Sari was losing hope. Anxiety was an invasive weed, sprouting from the cracks in Emeline's heart. Its roots fed from the worry and fear growing in her heart.

What is it? Samael growled, reacting to the fear. *Do you see something?*

She bit the inside of her cheek, trying to stop more weeds from slipping through by grounding herself. *"Can we hold off until tomorrow morning? Her hand is being forced, and she's played the part this long. I feel like this is the least we can do."*

“It’s not as if the arrangement wasn’t mutually beneficial,” Arsen retorted defensively.

Samael sounded smug as he noted, *“I’m enjoying this.”*

“What exactly are you so proud of?” The prince’s voice was rife with suspicion.

“She said ‘we,’” the dragon-like creature reflected in a haughty tone. *“You did well to share pleasure with her. Now she believes—”*

If only the carriage cushion could absorb her so she could shrivel and die. Emeline cut off Samael by speaking aloud. “Yes. We’re stopping for today.”

The windows of the carriage had been down, allowing for the other guards to hear. Wyll was to their immediate left, with Quillan out of sight and Lysander leading the front.

Hearing Emeline, Wyll pulled on the reins to slow Smoke. He bent his head to peer at them, so both ladies could see his bleak scowl. “Arsen wouldn’t agree to that. This area is dangerous around nightfall.”

Sari’s expression fell. Guilt and regret bled into Wyll’s eyes, but his mouth tightened with resolve. Sari’s safety mattered to him enough that he’d lose the last night they had together. Emeline wasn’t a fan of that form of self-sacrifice.

“Tell him that you agree.” It was nothing short of a demand. *“We’re camping tonight.”*

Arsen scoffed quietly. *“If I do, what do I get out of this?”*

“Your friends being happy?”

“Not interested.”

Emeline’s lips pressed together in frustration. *“Arsen.”* He purred her name in response, but there was a mocking edge to it. He was always the opportunist. She tried again, *“You can ask me one question, and I’ll answer honestly.”*

“Five,” Samael countered.

Her scowl deepened. *“Whose side are you on?”*

“The one with more information about you.”

Arsen chuckled, his baritone voice dancing through her mind. *“Give her a break. Three questions with honest answers and we’ll camp out in the woods tonight.”*

That sounded like a good deal. But…

“Where’s the catch?”

“No catch, little nightmare.”

Maybe she would regret this, but Emeline was more concerned with ensuring Sari’s happiness—at least for a little while longer. Besides, there wasn’t much she wouldn’t tell him freely.

“Fine. You have a deal.”

Nothing happened immediately.

It took a few anxious heartbeats for the horses to suddenly come to a stop. Lysander’s swear carried in the light breeze, encouraging Sari’s eyes to widen in surprise. Wyll mirrored the lady’s expression, but suspicion quickly replaced it.

His eyes slid toward Emeline, narrowing in accusation. “Is this your doing?”

Emeline smiled innocently, raising her hands in a ‘*Who knows?’* gesture. “Do you really think there’s anyone who can tell Arsen what to do?”

“Yes,” Samael interjected smugly, *“I do it often.”*

The carriage door opened to reveal Quillan. Blue eyes were twinkling with amusement, and there was a searing grin on his face, which had Emeline wondering what was going on. Wyll clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth in annoyance, but he encouraged Smoke forward to join the rest of the party at the front.

“His Highness says that we will make camp here, but we need to get off the main path. There’s a dirt road leading into the woods that he thinks will take us to a good spot to set up.” Quillan opened the door wider, holding his hand out for Sari first. “Lady Grimwood. Your immediate guards will be Sir Lysander and Sir Wyll.”

Emeline frowned. “Escorted? Are the woods that dangerous?”

Quillan leered over at her, idly helping Sari out of the carriage. He then stared at her with a pursed frown. “You don’t know much about the Den, do you?”

“What gave it away? The part where I was kidnapped and forced to stay, or the part where I’ve only been here for a couple of weeks?” Emeline snarked back, ignoring his outstretched hand. She exited the carriage.

Quillan’s grin turned devilish, setting her on edge. Sari lifted her skirt to hurry to the front, evidently more interested in the next course of action than their familial bickering. Emeline crossed her arms, staring at Quillan. The guard leaned back against the carriage door as it closed. Her looming

apprehension didn’t stem from fear but from Quillan being the type to stir the pot.

“Forced to stay?” he repeated wryly, his grin spreading wider. “The screaming from your chambers this morning suggests otherwise—”

He stopped dead, seeing her cheeks heat with embarrassment. He doubled over, laughing at her expense, but the promise of murder in her eyes had him jogging over to where the rest of the group was standing. Emeline cursed, lifting her skirts to chase after him.

The cheeky brat stood next to Lysander, using the dark-haired fae as a physical shield against her wrath. He pointed to her. “Lys, *you* guard the human. I’ll take care of Lady Grimwood’s safety with Wyll. The feral creature is trying to kill me.”

The corners of Lysander’s lips rose before he wrapped an arm around the younger fae’s head and forced his body into an awkward bend. Lysander ruffled Quillan’s hair with his knuckles in a way that was so like an older brother; it almost made Emeline forget she wanted to kill him.

Almost.

“Who are you to give *me* orders, Quill?” Lysander ignored the fae’s protests, adding, “You’re still a decade away from passing your first century.”

Wyll cleared his throat, crossing his arms as he glowered at the two males. He stood in between Sari and Arsen, with the prince off to his left, farther from where Emeline stood. Wyll gazed at the two with the look of a tired father who desperately needed a break from his misbehaving kids.

“Have you both lost your minds between the Manor and here?” he chastised, a muscle in his jaw clenching. “Get your bearings together. You both need to be on your best behavior around the king and crown prince. Any inferiority is a reflection of Prince Arsen and will result in our deaths—”

“The prince wouldn’t allow that,” Quillan interrupted, straightening out when Lysander let him go. He ran a hand absently through his brown hair, looking at Arsen with a respectful nod, though amusement was still twinkling in his eyes. “We’re His Highness’s favorites. Why else would we accompany him on such an important journey?”

Emeline shifted her attention to Arsen, realizing that he’d been staring at her when their gazes briefly met. The prince raised an eyebrow at

Quillan, shared amusement linking the two. “You should be more worried about Samael. He’s getting hungry.”

Hearing that, Quillan and Lysander looked around nervously. Where was Samael? Before she could think to ask, Emeline noticed Wyll’s stare on Sari, who fussed quietly with a stray piece of thread on the front of her bodice. The act was borne from nerves and uncertainty. Wyll’s expression grew somber, looking as if he wanted to say so much more than what he thought was appropriate.

Frustration rattled Emeline. But what could she do? Quillan was right earlier to say that she didn’t know much about the Den—or even Haven, for that matter. She hadn’t exactly had a chance to breathe in the last couple of weeks, struggling with processing her own grief and circumstances, but it was true that she wanted to know more now.

Emeline wanted to learn about the different towns and the dynamics between them all. Like how Scaleridge was created to be a sanctuary from New Haven. How Ironclaw had originally been the second town to be established, but its population grew too quickly for the infrastructure. She wanted to know what it was like for the fae and halflings to flee from an oppressive rule and the sensitive balance between the Den and Haven. She wanted to understand court intricacies and how the Seaspires, Bloodstones, Grimwoods, and Larkspurs all worked together, despite trying to undermine each other for the throne.

Emeline was curious about how the prince’s personal guard was chosen. Sure, they’d all become a small family somehow, but where were the details? What was it like to come from such an abusive living situation and foster a group of people who considered each other family? The trust might be a one-way street for Arsen, but it was evident that Quillan and Lysander felt comfortable enough to joke around in front of him.

Why did he choose Quillan if he was so young by fae standards?

Why did Lysander act like a big brother when he was second-in-command?

How did Wyll manage the guards while barely managing his own struggles? Playing the dutiful royal guard while pretending the love of his life wasn’t marrying the prince he was sworn to protect couldn’t be easy.

More than anything, Emeline wanted to know what life was like *here*. The different creatures, the spirits, the cultures, and… she wanted to know what it was like to live again. She wanted it so much that her chest

physically ached. Emeline had been wishing for death for so long that wanting to live was a foreign experience. It brought out a new pain. A yearning that dissipated the fog.

And what exactly was she yearning for?

Golden eyes met hers as Emeline realized she'd subconsciously turned her gaze toward Arsen. Her pulse jumped, and she quickly looked away, knowing that her heart had begun to race. Needing the distraction, Emeline focused back in on the conversation.

"The dirt path will lead into the forest," Lysander began, a line forming between his eyebrows, "but come nightfall, we'll have to worry about spirits, mercenaries, thieves, and Lucifer knows what else."

Wyll nodded, his lips pressing tightly together before the words he wanted to say tumbled out. Emeline looked at Sari, noticing she was pointedly still not adding to the conversation. She resisted the urge to sigh, still unsure how to comfort her friend.

Instead of fussing over it, she asked a question aloud. "Would thieves really try to attack? Wouldn't that be stupid?"

"Didn't say they were smart thieves," Lysander pointed out. "But it's not the mercenaries or thieves we have to worry about. It's the spirits."

"Like woodland spirits?" Emeline thought back to the *kodama* figures she'd seen around her time in Japan. "Aren't they supposed to protect the forest and be nice?"

Quillan snorted. "No. You might see some fresh souls, but the ones outside New Haven are typically angry spirits turning into wraiths, or they're those evil bastards already."

"Why would the souls be angry?"

No one answered Emeline's question at first.

An awkward silence fell among the group until Arsen broke it.

"When Haven thought the Den's population was getting out of control, death was the answer," Arsen explained flatly, his voice devoid of emotion. "Hundreds of fae were slaughtered, and now their spirits seek retribution."

Emeline didn't even know what to say with that new piece of information.

Haven didn't sound like much of a sanctuary. She was only beginning to find out how bloody the kingdom's history truly was.

.——— ———.

She crouched before a berry bush, pointing to it while looking at Arsen, who was busy sharpening a stick with a midnight blade. “Can I eat these?”

Arsen eyed the small, dark berries with ovate-green leaves. The sun was already set behind the trees, and only shadows danced across his face. “You can.” As she reached for them, he added, “But you will die.”

Emeline pulled her hand back so fast she fell back on her ass. He smirked, walking past her and absently glancing up at the trees. She followed his gaze, only to see a darker shadow taking off into the sky. Samael was off antagonizing smaller prey, while his other *fae* half was doing the exact same thing.

“That’s nightshade,” Arsen began to explain, his back to her, eyes searching the forest. The trees here were as large as Californian Redwoods, making Emeline feel impossibly small. “If you thought the tension between Wyll and Caesaria is enough to upset your stomach, those berries will have you doubling over in pain from now till sunrise.”

She stood up, dusting her hands off. She regarded the Prince with skepticism. “Is that why you volunteered us to look for food?”

“No, Quillan is hunting for food.”

“I thought Lysander told him to get firewood?”

Arsen shook his head. “Quillan has a one-track mind, and it’s food. Wyll knows to gather firewood, while Lysander keeps Quillan out of trouble.”

“How *old* is he?”

“Who?” Arsen turned around to face her. “Quillan?” When she nodded, Arsen thought about it. “In his seventies, I believe.”

She balked, joining him on the mindless path they’d set out to take. It felt more like a stroll than hunting, but it was nice to walk around after spending the past few days in a carriage. “And that’s considered young for the fae?”

“He’s less—*fae*,” Arsen corrected, seeing her glare. He clarified. “Quillan’s aging slowed at puberty, but fae with… less potent bloodlines… still live for hundreds of years. It’s different with royalty, as our aging slows when we’re still children and then slows down even more after puberty.”

Emeline nodded easily. This was now her new normal. “So he’s like an adolescent by fae standards. A teenager who looks like he’s in his early 20s.”

Arsen shrugged, as if her human colloquial terms were nuanced.

That made sense. Sort of.

But something else didn't.

"The first day we walked around Scaleridge, you said that if it weren't for Riven, then the families would have been forced apart like the realm. The fae and the human couples. Why would your brother put in the effort to keep them together but then hate humans?"

"For the same reason I put in the effort to guard the Veil and murder humans as I see fit. He and I fight different battles with the king, but we have our own beliefs. Riven values family above all else. Fae or human—it doesn't matter." Arsen let out a deep sigh, inspecting the stake he'd made in the time they'd been away from the group. He turned it over in his hand, speaking aloud as he did so. "I want to say it was the grief that fucked with his head at such a young age. He would have looked like a human at ten years of age. And he walked the earth alone, spreading disease and watching thousands of people die."

That was sad. Not exactly the sort of fun a child should be having. It led her to think his experience should have made Riven want to be a better person. Right?

"He thinks he is one," Arsen answered her question, listening to her thoughts. Surprise, surprise. His lips twitched, fighting a smile before he said, "Riven believes he *is* doing the right thing in trying to keep his family together. A marriage between royals further cements my place in court, rather than only being known as the spare. In his mind, there is absolutely nothing wrong with his plan."

Emeline tried to sound casual as she asked, "Do you think his plan is good?"

"Are you asking if I want to marry Caesaria?"

Not in so many words. And not so directly.

Emeline nodded stiffly, refusing to look at him until he stepped in front of her. The stake he'd been working on made a soft *thud* against the forest floor, startling her. She looked up at him as his thumb and forefinger gripped her chin.

She couldn't look away.

Arsen's golden eyes burned brightly as he murmured, "Caesaria's not the one that I want."

The question didn't have to be asked.

The answer didn't have to be spoken.

Emeline swallowed and kept walking, ignoring the hollow feeling in her chest that grew with each step she took away from him. They'd enter New Haven tomorrow, and then what? There would be a party for their arrival, and the next day, Arsen and Sari would be married.

Emeline was already struggling with her grief. She couldn't add heartbreak into the mix too. Even if the thought of Sari marrying him made her sick.

Samael landing on a tree branch overhead caught her attention. She was about to ask him why he was glaring when his words sliced through her mind.

"You are both morons and I'm offended that I grace the two of you with my time," he snapped impatiently.

Emeline scowled at him. "You are quite literally his heart. You have to give him your time. But why are you pissed at me?"

Arsen rolled his eyes but stayed silent, knowing that if there was something Samael wanted to say—there was no stopping him from speaking his mind.

"I've heard you both in my head like tragic monologues, and I don't enjoy the theater nor those magic boxes which tell stories." Samael bent his head, revealing his sharp teeth in a silent snarl. His attention was on Emeline first. *"You want to stay here. With us. You're struggling with the realization, but that is what is happening inside your human mind. You care about us, and you don't want to leave."*

Samael jerked his head to face the bemused devil beside her. *"You have no clue how to deal with your father tomorrow. You hate the king as much as you wish for Emeline to stay in the Den. Which, if you weren't completely aware, is an immeasurable amount. Stand up to your father before the wedding, and declare that you will not wed someone who isn't your choice. If your brother values family above all, if he cares about you as much as he says he does, then he will side with you. The king will not wager losing two heirs even if he despises one of them."*

Annoyance flickered in Arsen's eyes, hinting to her that this wasn't the first time Samael had pestered him about this.

"Sam," Emeline snapped, her fists clenching by her side. "That was mean."

"It's the truth," The no-nonsense creature retorted. *"And I refuse to listen to the both of you being pathetic in my mind. It's giving me a*

headache.”

The chaotic little shit wasn’t wrong. “I do want to stay,” she admitted, glancing over at Arsen, who wore a carefully blank expression. “But there’s no guarantee I’ll be alive a few days from now. Riven used me to get you to New Haven. Who’s to say that he won’t continue using me to get to you, Arsen? Maybe it’s best if I…”

“Leave?”

Samael looked down at the ground, exasperated. *“Lucifer save these two morons.”*

Emeline shot him an irritated glance. “Excuse the fuck out of me for not wanting to be the reason why you two are miserable.”

“You’re excused,” Samael said flatly.

Arsen huffed, clearing his throat to stop a laugh. “If you want to leave, I’ll bring you past the Veil. I’ll bring you back to the human realm.”

“You would?” Emeline eyed him, not believing him for a moment. A bit of fear stroked her vulnerability as she asked, “Why?”

His nostrils flared, a reactive anger flickering across his face for a moment. Was it the scent of her fear putting him off again? Without any explanation, understanding appeared to bloom across his expression, but he answered her question with one of his own. “When you care about someone, isn’t it only natural to put their wellbeing above your own happiness?”

There was an innocence in his question that broke her heart as much as it put it back together. The sincerity in his voice was liquid gold, healing the cracks like *kintsugi*.

Emeline smiled, blinking back the tears that pricked her eyes. “Yes… That’s what people do when they care about someone else. The happiness of their partner comes first.” She cleared her throat, her voice becoming firmer. “And it’s about fucking time someone put *you* first.”

She glanced over at Samael, seeing approval in his eyes as he met her harsh stare. Emeline raised her voice. “We’ll go to New Haven as planned. And if the king so much as raises a hand to either of you, I’m burning this fucking place to the ground.”

It was time to start living.

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36

PROMISES MADE IN THE DARK

EMELINE



Her back hit the tree as wings soared high above with enough force that the leaves fell around them. Emeline’s eyes flashed with surprise, staring up at Arsen. The uneven groove of the bark bit into her back. Enough that it was uncomfortable but not painful. The scent of fresh rain and the earthiness of the forest filled her nose. She gripped his forearms in surprise, her nails sinking into his black leather armor.

“What are you doing?” she asked sharply, feigning annoyance.

It was a lot better than admitting she was overly aware of how his body fit against hers despite the armor partially getting in the way. She knew how soft his hair was. Knew how it felt when his hands gripped her thighs, spreading her legs before he devoured her. Those same hands were in different places now. One gripped her waist so she didn’t fall, and the other was on her face, pushing his fingers into the softness of her cheeks.

“You are infuriating,” he breathed, matching her tone, but his annoyance was genuine. “You decide you want to live *now*? The night before we meet *real* evil?”

Emeline smacked his hand back from her face. Indignation coated her voice as she glared up at him. “Oh, *I’m sorry* that it took me so long to find my fucking will to live. Why don’t you go find some spatial awareness? I *will* bite you.”

Arsen bent his face closer to hers. “Don’t tempt me, little nightmare. I do like it rough.”

Her chin tilted up in defiance, her gaze unwavering. “And how would you know that when you’ve never had sex?”

Emeline smirked, declaring herself the winner of their spat before waiting for his response. That smile quickly fell, seeing the challenge brighten Arsen’s eyes. He leaned in closer, their breaths mingling with each other.

Her heart began to race, mind going hazy with desire.

She wanted to kiss him.

The grip on her waist tightening imperceptibly was the only tell that he *knew*. His cheek brushed against hers as his lips tickled the shell of her ear. The sound of the forest died as she waited for him to say something.

He whispered, “If I didn’t heal so quickly, I might still have your nail marks on my back. Knowing that I wanted to eat your pussy until your back bowed and your nails drew blood is *exactly* how I know that I like it rough, my vicious little nightmare.”

Oh fuck.

Emeline cleared her throat, turning her head away from him as her pulse quickened. The bastard pulled his head back, a smug expression on his face. No doubt, he could hear her heart fluttering a mile a minute. She needed to get back to safer conversation where she wasn’t reminded of his wicked tongue.

“Why do you call me that?”

“Call you what?”

“Don’t be daft.” Emeline’s scowl grew. She placed a hand on his chest, pushing him with little effort. He took a step back from her as she asked again, “Why do you call me ‘*little nightmare*’?”

Arsen’s head tilted slightly to the side as if considering whether or not to tell her. Her eyes narrowed at him, thinking after everything they’d talked about, all the whispered secrets in the night—why was he hesitating now?

“I’m not hesitating.” Arsen couldn’t make the words sound like the truth if he tried. They were empty, sinking into the ground as the tension around them weighed heavier than his lies. A hint of frustration replaced his haughty demeanor. “It’s… a habit to try and understand how the information will benefit you and how…”

“…It’ll put you at a disadvantage,” she finished.

Arsen nodded, raising his hand to rub his neck. Emeline was stuck on the gesture, finding it so unlike him to give any indication that he was uncomfortable or anxious. When she noticed, he stopped and went back to crossing his arms. There was a tightness around his mouth that hadn’t been there before, but she wasn’t deterred.

Comfort and vulnerability were akin to a death sentence in Arsen’s world. He might feel more at ease with her than most, but she couldn’t expect five hundred plus years of trauma to disappear because they’d become a little intimate with each other. Even so, Emeline wanted to work toward a future where he could tell her things without wondering how she’d use them against him.

“And what if I never do?” Arsen challenged, stepping closer again like there was a gravitational pull always drawing him to her. Emeline felt it, too, meeting him step for step until their bodies were almost touching. “You believe there’s good in me when everything good about me is *Samael*. The first slaughter of New Haven was in 1691. It took less than a century from the time New Haven was established for overpopulation to be an issue from the sheer amount of fae who travelled from Haven to the Den.”

“Then Haven must not be as lovely as everyone pretends it to be,” she remarked warily.

He gave no indication of agreeing or disagreeing with her. Instead, she could hear the self-hatred imbued in his voice as he snapped back, “Do you

know what I did when the first report came in? Nothing. I didn't do a damned thing."

Emeline's brows furrowed.

Arsen continued, his speech flowing faster like he was desperate to get the words out before they stayed trapped inside him. "1824. This ritual slaughter was worse than the first. It involved Ironclaw, and guess what I did when the second report came in?"

The question was rhetorical but Emeline knew the answer.

Nothing.

He did nothing.

But anger and resentment didn't flare at his words. She'd seen with her own eyes his quiet rebellion. The way he spoke with sincerity to the fae in Scaleridge. The monument of Samael in the fountain. How they gifted flowers named after the dragon for the most important milestones in their life.

Something about her wanting to work toward a future with him had triggered his anger. Or was anger the smokescreen? His shoulders stiffened. Emeline might not have realized it were it not for the fact that she was close to him. Her eyes narrowed into daggers, going straight for his throat.

"While the slaughters were happening, where exactly were you?" When he swallowed, Emeline asked another question. "And where was Samael?"

Silence fell between them.

The wind danced through the forest. Leaves rustled, scraping against the forest floor. The air was heavy, almost humid like there was a storm coming, but there hadn't been a cloud in the sky earlier. Even now, when night would soon fall, the stars peeked through the treetops. They watched, twinkling against the darkening sky with anticipation. It was as if the fates themselves were waiting to hear what Arsen would say next.

"Samael was ripping apart my father's guards in the first slaughter," he said begrudgingly. "In the second, Samael burned part of his army to ash."

Emeline didn't break her gaze as she pushed her forefinger against his chest. "And where—" Arsen wouldn't feel it with the armor, but she knew he could sense her intention. Her nail pushed into the durable material. "—the fuck—" Her voice grew harder. "—were *you*?"

Samael's snicker in her mind only riled her up. She was about to let them both have it when he acknowledged the other part of her question.

“Standing in the throne room at Seaspire, waiting for it to be over,” Arsen said blithely.

This time, she didn’t say anything. It didn’t sound like a lie, but she knew the prince spoke in half-truths. She knew better now.

“What aren’t you saying?”

Arsen’s eyes sparked with annoyance. “Eris’s fear of Lucifer stops him from killing me, but it doesn’t stop him from holding me hostage. He had armed guards placed around me. Arrows aimed at every part of my body, ready to maim me if I so much as breathed too deeply.”

“Then you didn’t do ‘*nothing*.’” Emeline placed her hands on her hips, still glaring with a mixture of exasperation and frustration. “You forget that I know you, Arsen. I might not know much about Haven or the Den, but I’ve been by your side more often than not. You haven’t let me into your head, but you told me your secrets yourself.” Frustrated tears pricked the corners of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She wasn’t angry anymore, only confused with the way he’d acted the past few hours. “But you just tried to push me away. Again. Why?” Her voice softened. “I deserve to know that much. What *scared* you?”

His chest rose and fell with labored breaths. “Because we’re about to see my fucking father, Emeline.” His use of her name had her eyes widening. “I want you nowhere near him, but I’m too fucking selfish to have left you at the Manor.”

“You don’t leave me anywhere,” she corrected in a hostile tone. Her nose wrinkled at the notion. “It would have been my decision to come. And let’s not pretend that I wouldn’t have found a way here myself, even if I had to bribe Quillan with food to hide me in one of the carriage trunks.”

Arsen didn’t laugh as a protective flame stoked to life. “You need to stop being so reckless.”

“You need to stop being a fucking idiot, thinking that you can push me away because we’re headed straight into danger. Newsflash, asshole, I’ve been in danger since the moment I stepped onto the *Serenity* and entered restricted waters willingly.” The truth clawed itself out of her throat. She was done living on the sidelines of her own life. “I’m going with you into New Haven tomorrow because I want to be by your side.”

It was as close to a declaration of her feelings as he was going to get right now. Arsen’s gaze searched hers, clearly looking for deception. Doubt. Maybe regret. She wouldn’t give it to him. Instead, she allowed him to see

the vulnerability in a sea of grief. An admission through the fog and the full breath of honesty that was scarce in his world.

The blood roaring in her ears drowned out what he said next. But she saw his mouth form the words while his hand cupped her cheek. Felt the promise when his lips crashed against hers.

I can't lose you.

.——— ———.

What was left of his heart flew back into his chest. The wound sealed, as if an angel hadn't ripped out his heart, but the entire event was painless. Arsen could feel his heart beating steadily in his chest again, but felt his earlier meal was about to make another appearance.

"What is this?" he asked blandly, trying not to puke.

Lucifer encouraged him to take the large egg, and Arsen felt rather protective of it. Whatever it was had come from his heart. For all intents and purposes, this *was* his heart.

"You will call him Samael. An angel of death and a prince of demons, as you are. Samael will be as venomous as your grief and hatred. He will hatch when you are strong enough to protect him. Because if he dies, then so will you, *Heres*. Raise him well, and you both will be unstoppable in this fool's kingdom."

Arsen frowned at it but held the egg close to his chest. It was unnerving, but he could hear the creature's heartbeat inside the egg. It was in tune with his own.

He looked back up at the Morning Star. "But I don't want war. Or to be a prince. I don't want to be alive."

"That's why you'll have Samael." Lucifer gestured to the egg, then stroked his beard in a speculative manner. "He will be your companion and know your heart best."

"No one should have to know what this feels like," Arsen reflected despondently, the sorrow in his voice unimaginable for a child as young as him. But he'd been through so much in his short time in Haven, and enough was enough. "Take Samael back. He might know my heart best, but he won't understand."

This creature wouldn't understand what it was like to crave a love that would never be received. Love, freely given. How much more did he have

to prove himself so that his father recognized he was worthy of his title as a prince of Haven? In a few more years, he'd be able to keep up with Riven. Or if his father didn't want him around at all, then Arsen could go find his mother.

He'd always wanted to know what she was like.

She'd be happy to see him.

"You believe there will never be anyone to understand your grief?" Lucifer arched an eyebrow. "Not even He who was cast out of Heaven?"

"No." Arsen's tone went flat. "Because you knew what it was like to be loved once. To be the favorite son. I have never belonged anywhere."

The ground trembled at his words.

Arsen whirled around, seeing the edges of the cliff erode abruptly. Sharp stones tumbled into the sea, crashing against the surface of the water and other jagged protrusions. The sound of rocks crashing reminded him that he should be dead, and his body wouldn't have made nearly as much noise with how starved he was.

He turned back to Lucifer. "What did you do?"

"Extended the realm," the angel said casually, as if it didn't take divine power to do so. "You will have Dragon's Den, where your heart can roam free."

"Splendid. I still want to die," Arsen replied with fake enthusiasm.

Lucifer leveled him with a look more disapproving than Eris could have ever mustered, and yet it was far more fatherly than anything he'd seen before. "I did not save your life only for you to be an ungrateful little brat."

"I didn't ask you to save my life at all. I won't say thank you," Arsen retorted, tilting his chin up with defiance.

He waited for the hit that never came.

Lucifer only stared at him.

His bravado crumbled like the rocks behind him. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Arsen waited for him to speak. It took fifteen passing heartbeats before Lucifer opened his mouth begrudgingly. "What if I make you a promise?"

The fae arched an eyebrow. "How do I know you won't break it?"

"Because unlike that pitiful excuse for a king, in Hell—our word means *everything*. Speak carefully, and not without great consideration. What you say as a prince and my heir should not be taken lightly. Always weigh what

you have to say against how it will benefit you. Silence can be just as powerful, *Heres*."

Arsen nodded slowly, realizing he did tend to have a smart mouth. It got him beaten more than praised. Maybe when it mattered most, he ought to be careful about the words he allowed out.

Lucifer continued, seeing the understanding spread across the young prince's face. "One day, you will meet someone. She will understand your grief, as it mirrors her own. A desperation for love with nowhere to go. A kindred soul, one who will fight to stay by your side. She will help you find your will again."

His lip curled in disgust. "Are you speaking of fate? Like a soulmate?"

Now it was Lucifer's turn to look equally, if not more, disgusted. "Soulmate? That is a revolting notion the Father created in his idealistic nonsense—" They both ignored the thunder crackling overhead. "—No. I will not have some otherworldly connection binding you both together through fate. If you love her, it is because you *choose* to. Same with her. I have always believed in free will." Lucifer's voice lowered. "But take caution that your free will does not lead to your ruin, young prince. If you want to meet her one day, you must live."

Arsen swallowed hard. To be loved was priceless, and to think that there was someone out there who could come to love him while drowning in grief seemed… impossible. He couldn't comprehend it.

"How will I know who this fae is? When the time comes, how will I recognize her?"

Lucifer's smile was wicked. "Your heart will recognize her first. Listen to him."

Arsen placed a hand over his heart, allowing the egg to drop slightly in his arm. He could feel the quickening *thump-thump-thump* as he mulled the angel's words over. "I don't understand how my heart will know."

Lucifer straightened, taking a step back from the fae. He snapped his fingers, a demon appearing by his side. A female with pitch-black eyes bowed at the waist to Lucifer. Her brown hair was tightly pinned back into an elegant hairstyle, while the dress she wore was utilitarian black. It was practical and simple. Under the moonlight, her skin was alabaster white, appearing to glow faintly.

"Amy. You will watch over the prince carefully. Raise him, protect him, and remind him that he is royalty. He'll accept his duty as the Prince of Hell

one day.”

Arsen glanced at the uptight demon with skepticism heavy in his gaze. “I’d reject his order if I were you. Everyone wants to kill me.”

Amy clicked her tongue in disapproval. “Have faith, prince. If the Morning Star hasn’t killed you for such an unruly mouth, then there may be hope for you yet.”

There was irony in a demon telling him to have faith.

Lucifer sent her a sideways glance, likely thinking the same, before snapping his fingers again. The glow in her skin dulled to a fair color as she closed her eyes, re-opening them to reveal gray ones. Her ears sharpened to points.

“Faith, huh…” Lucifer rubbed his hand over his face. “So be it. Amy, you will assume the name Madam *Viera* while watching over him as his nanny. A strong name, which means faith. Take good care of this brat, but don’t coddle him. I don’t need the little knave coming back to Hell as a spoiled good-for-nothing.”

Madam Viera bowed obediently, eyes sharpening. “I will not fail.”

Arsen hugged the egg closer to his chest, uneasiness stirring in his chest. “I meant what I said. I don’t care about becoming king and taking over the realm one day. I… I just want to be happy.”

Lucifer stared at him, saying nothing for a few long moments. Arsen remembered what he’d said moments ago. Words had great meaning, and it was his responsibility to pick them carefully.

He tried again. “Riven is the crown prince. I don’t want him to die. He’s strong. He wouldn’t abdicate the throne regardless of whether I’m the true heir or not. He likes the power associated with the throne.”

“You are still a child,” Lucifer said gruffly, shaking his head. “Make your choices when the time comes.” He took a step back, the outline of his form transcending into smoke. “And when that time comes, *Heres*… Do *not* hesitate. I will be listening.”

The Devil disappeared, and Arsen looked at Madam Viera, still bewildered by the entire interaction. “He said that I’ll find someone. Someone to understand what it’s like to… to feel like I do.”

A gentle smile fell on the demon’s face before she kneeled before him. “Lucifer believes in free will.” The Madam put her hand on his frail shoulder, eyes softening. “And that’s why you won’t remember any of this. Not until you choose each other.”

His vision began to darken, but Arsen didn’t feel fear. He only clutched the egg closer, refusing to let it go even as oblivion took him.

If there was someone out there who would fight for him, he’d find her.

And then he’d fight to keep her by his side.

.——— ———.

The kiss became unrestrained.

Arsen’s gentle hold on her waist became punishing as he gripped her harder. The hand cupping her cheek now slid to the nape of her neck, drawing her closer. Emeline’s mind was reeling as her desperation matched his. She tilted her head, parting her lips as his tongue slid into her mouth. Rising onto the balls of her feet, her fingers burrowed into his hair.

The prince moaned at the taste of her, and she let out a small, needy noise of her own. His hand on her hip dropped as he bent down, wrapping his hand around the back of her thigh. Emeline caught the hint, surprise flitting through her when he lifted her with one hand. She wrapped her legs around his waist, the fabric of the dress an issue until the hem ripped at the bottom.

Surprise gave into lust as the kiss deepened.

Emeline didn’t realize he’d walked them toward the tree until her back met the familiar bark again. She didn’t care, only focusing on him and what the vision had revealed. They weren’t soulmates, but they were navigating their grief and trauma together. And instead of allowing it to drown them, they’d found the will to fight against the currents dragging them down. Together, they broke the surface. Wanting to live when everyone else wanted to break them was an impossible storm they were willing to brace together.

Arsen’s hips ground into hers, his mouth swallowing every moan. His talented tongue slid against hers. *Of course he was a good kisser.* She felt the corners of his lips turn up in a smirk, inciting a rebellious streak in her. She bit down on his bottom lip, not expecting the husky growl it aroused.

Why was that hot?

She tugged at the belts strapped against his chest. He was wearing too many layers, and she wanted him. He held her hips against the tree with his, sliding the hand that wasn’t at her neck, underneath her skirt. His touch was searing, leaving a trail of heat before finding the fabric at her hip. He

hooked two fingers into it, about to rip it, when a new voice pierced the night.

“Hello, this is me making my presence known so I don’t get scarred twice tonight,” Quillan called out loudly, his voice sounding as if it were a few meters from the path they’d been on before they’d started arguing. “The food is cooked and Lysander won’t let me eat until you’re both back at camp. I’m not above facing certain death for a hot meal.”

Arsen didn't fucking care about Quillan interrupting. His grip on her became possessive. Emeline placed a hand on his chest, causing him to break the kiss. They were both breathing harder than before.

His eyes never left her lips.

She, however, was stuck on what Quillan had said.

“Did he say scarred *twice*?” She half-whispered, half-hissed.

Arsen smirked wickedly down at her. “Sounds as if Wyll had a great time gathering firewood, and Caesaria found another wood—”

She smacked his shoulder. “Don’t *even*.”

He snickered, letting her down without taking his hands off her waist. Their gazes met with a quiet understanding. More needed to be said. A proper discussion. But time wasn’t on their side. *Especially* with Quillan’s obnoxious footsteps growing purposefully louder.

“I meant what I said. Or thought,” Arsen corrected, his voice lowering so quietly she had to struggle to hear. “In the vision.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“For you—” He leaned down, his lips brushing against hers as he promised, “I will fight. I’ve always believed that nightmares are the dreams you can’t forget. I knew from the moment I stared up at you below the water’s surface that I would never be able to forget you.”

The nickname. *Little nightmare.*

Emeline opened her mouth to speak when Quillan appeared beside them. “Dinner time. And no, Your Highness, Emeline is not on the menu. Shall I escort you both as directed by Sir Lysander, therefore any murderous inclination should be directed at him?”

Arsen looked like he wanted to kill Quillan with the flat expression on his face. Saving the guard’s life, Emeline murmured that she was starting to get hungry. But Arsen knew better when her mind was still wrapped up in his promise.

She made her own to him and his heart.

The prince wouldn’t be the only one fighting tomorrow.
Samael’s roar through the forest was his promise, joining theirs.

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HELL'S NEWLYWEDS

EMELINE



Arsen cocked an eyebrow. "What was it you said to me?"

Emeline smirked, watching Sari's expression pinch with annoyance. She mimicked the fae, pointing to Sari in the same way she'd done to Arsen when he was under the blankets days ago. "You're a deplorable fae to be betrothed to for cheating—" She changed the words to fit the situation better. "—with his personal guard, no less."

Wyll rolled his eyes. “You two are perfect for each other.”

“Truly.” Sari’s tone was dry.

Neither statement sounded much like a compliment, but Emeline took it as one, grinning. They all sat around the campfire now, with quilts from the carriage spread for the royals. She could still feel Arsen’s lips on hers and the way he’d held her close. It crossed her mind that she wasn’t the only one still thinking about it when Arsen looked at her expectantly to join him. She’d become aware then that Wyll and Sari were sharing their own quilt, while each guard took a spot between the pairs. Quillan was situated between Emeline and Wyll. Lysander sat opposite, between Arsen and Sari.

The animal Quillan and Lysander caught earlier tasted good enough, but Emeline had gone nauseous at the sight of a two-headed hog-looking creature. They’d eaten the creature with food collected from the forest. Spruce tips, which were surprisingly savory. Berries, Arsen had assured her wouldn’t kill her. Though Quillan had smirked when the prince mentioned she’d almost tried to eat nightshade. Emeline thanked her incredible time as a scout—where the girlhood focused more on selling cookies—for her impeccable survival skills.

Everyone looked at her like she was crazy until she explained the sexist corporation, going down a rabbit hole of *down with the patriarchy.* Everyone continued to look at her, baffled, except for Arsen, whose gaze held a touch of warmth instead.

Lysander cleared his throat, glancing over at Wyll first, then the prince. “No one else is going to mention it, so excuse me for the lack of manners, but—” He pointed to his right, where Sari and Wyll were. “You both are fucking.” Then he pointed to his left, where Emeline and Arsen sat. “You both are fucking.”

Quillan jumped in, pointing at both couples. “And the prince and lady are supposed to be getting married in less than forty-eight hours.”

Lysander nodded his agreement, then pointed between himself and the younger guard. “What exactly is our role here now?”

Arsen leaned back on his elbows, stretching out his long legs with a nonchalant shrug. “Do what you normally do. Make sure I don’t die.”

Quillan snorted, reaching over the dwindling fire for another piece of meat. “Duly noted, Your Highness. But that’s difficult to promise when you both are going against Prince Riven’s orders. He’ll be rather upset, and when the Crown Prince is unhappy, the doting king isn’t happy either.”

Doting? Emeline barely contained the hate on her tongue for this *king*.

"He wouldn't kill his son, though…" Lysander trailed off, unsure.

"He would." Arsen's voice was firm, drawing everyone's attention.

Samael landed near Emeline, almost scaring the shit out of her by how quiet he was until his claws hit the ground. She didn't argue as the creature crawled into her lap, rubbing his head against her abdomen. She knew he enjoyed her company, but it was more now that she recognized the need for comfort in the dragon was an inkling of how on edge Arsen was.

"Because he's killed me before," Arsen added, making everyone else go still. Emeline kept a hand on Samael's back but reached over and placed a hand on Arsen's forearm. The move felt natural, but she still blushed when the others tracked the intimate gesture with their own silent observations.

Arsen took a deep, steadying breath before he told them the truth about the realm's sacrifice. His sacrifice. How he'd been killed like a lamb ready to be offered, and how Lucifer brought him back to life as an act against the king. Emeline noticed he didn't go into detail about how he was destined to be the reason for Eris's reign to end, but the group knew about the severity of Eris's hatred for the spare prince. Arsen had placed her hand in his when he touched upon the torture he suffered as a child.

By the end of it, Sari had tears running down her face. Wyll's eyes were glassy; the tears which refused to fall were refracted by the firelight. Lysander had been holding onto a thick, wooden branch to stoke the fire, but it splintered under his anger. He threw what was left into the fire, causing a few sparks to dance in the air before they fizzled out. Even Quillan, who always wore an easy grin, now looked older with his features hardened.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Wyll asked gruffly. "This whole time —we—we thought we knew, but…" Anger simmered in his voice, but Emeline recognized his feeling for what it truly was. Grief. "We could have gotten you away from him."

Arsen shook his head. "We all have a duty to—"

Without any warning, Wyll stood up. "You're right. We do. And mine was to fucking protect you. And now I'm realizing that I didn't just *fail*; I didn't fucking know about it! You said you had a meeting during the second ritual slaughter. Royals only, you'd said." Wyll laughed, but there wasn't a shred of humor in it. "I didn't know you were being fucking held hostage. I should have realized something was wrong when you left Samael behind."

Smoke billowed out of Samael's nostrils. *"I don't get left behind. I chose to stay."*

Emeline waved the smoke away, wishing she could clear the tension just as easily. "What's done is done. Could there have been better communication between all of you? Yes." Emeline shrugged a shoulder. She looked at Arsen. "You thought you were doing what was best, but Wyll has a right to be upset. He cares about you. Same with Sari."

Then she looked at the two across from them. "Now that you both know about his severe daddy issues—" An indignant, low snarl came from the prince, whom she shut up with a single glare. "—recognize that him telling you in the first place is him trusting all of you with that knowledge. Let's not waste the little time we have with each other tonight being angry."

"While we're sharing secrets, tell them that he's an emotionally stunted virgin—" Samael was cut off as Arsen grabbed his tail, threatening to throw him into the fire through their open bond.

Quillan slid closer to Wyll, not wanting Samael's snapping teeth anywhere near him.

Lysander sighed heavily. "Great. So we're more fucked than we originally thought. This is basically a suicide mission."

"You're more than welcome to leave." Arsen huffed, glowering at the dragon when he *accidentally* scraped his left foreclaw against Arsen's shoulder.

Luckily, the armor was there to stop his claws from drawing blood, but now there was a deep cut through the leather. Emeline pulled Samael back to her, ignoring the smug way the dragon looked over at Arsen while he cuddled up to her.

The prince's tone turned biting, eyes staying on Samael and Emeline for only a moment longer before he acknowledged Lysander. "I wouldn't hold it against you. I rarely visit my father, and when I do, nothing good ever comes of it." Lazily, he grinned at Sari, his canines flashing. "Did you both complete the blood bond?"

"For Astaroth's sake," Sari snapped, blue eyes glowing with indignation. "Can we not keep anything the least bit private?"

Quillan grimaced. "What I saw—" The full weight of Sari's anger landed on him when he met her sneer. Hell hath no fury like a lady scorned. The guard stumbled over his words. "—will go with me to the grave. Don't mind me."

Emeline frowned, remembering the way Samael had acted about blood bonds. “It only means that you’ve begun a courtship, right? It’s not as if someone can tell, right? Does it matter?”

“Depends, little nightmare.” Arsen’s feral amusement caught her attention, making her eyes narrow in suspicion. “If Wyll and Caesaria drank enough of each other’s blood, then it’s as good as marriage. Fae consummate a marriage in blood, not sex. Though they often go hand in hand. Wyll doesn’t have a prominent lineage—”

“Thanks.” Wyll’s tone went flat.

Arsen grinned at him. “—which means only Astaroth would have to bless their courtship. Merging bloodlines is a sacred act, and one that demons don’t take lightly because it can either make a lineage more or less powerful. My father murdered his siblings for wanting to mix with les—other fae.”

“What? That’s not what I was told.” Sari stared at Arsen, dumbfounded. “It was for power, not courting lesser fae. Eris was the second son born to the First King. He killed Levius to become the king.”

Arsen returned her scowl. “Then why kill Keselia and Llyris?”

“Keselia was the only daughter, but second born.”

“Doesn’t matter; she couldn’t succeed the throne because she’s female. His only other threat was the third son and the youngest, Llyris,” Arsen pointed out, sitting back up.

Quillan interjected lightly. “Couldn’t you both be right? The king wouldn’t want anyone else to have a claim to the throne, and he didn’t want his bloodline being diluted with lesser fae.”

Emeline didn’t bother to correct Quillan if he wanted to insult himself. Something nagged at her about the situation. “How did the court react when Eris took the throne? When all his siblings were found dead?”

“My father, the duke, never trusted Eris, but he was born into his position.” Sari promptly shifted her attention to the guards on either side of the fire. “If either of you spills any secrets said tonight, I will corrupt every cell in your body into destroying itself and make sure that you spend the next hundred years in pain.”

Wow. Sari was in her villain era.

The lady continued. “As far as I know, the strongest fae has always assumed the throne. Those fae just happen to come from the Seaspire family. Eris’s grandfather *is* Leviathan. It’s why he’s so powerful. With no

one wanting to die over questioning his right to the throne, the court carried on." Her eyebrows drew together as a distant look passed over her face. "I do think it was around that time when Astaroth's bloodline cut off the Seaspires from the family library. It would have been one of my ancestors from the first or second generation."

Emeline shared a look with Arsen, who nodded. She met Sari's eyes over the campfire. "The Grimwoods were the ones who gave Eris the sacrificial spell to split the realms and create Haven. Why help him with a spell to create the fae realm if your ancestor didn't trust Eris?"

Sari's expression was contemplative, not defensive. Her not questioning *how* Emeline knew that piece of information was a sign of the trust they'd fostered. Emeline slid her gaze between each fae, realizing they were all deep in thought with their own opinions and assumptions. It occurred to her that Arsen, Sari, and Wyll always kept their thoughts and secrets close to their chest. The prince and lady more so than anyone here… and now they were telling family secrets to each other, their guards, and a human.

"You are the reason any of this is happening," Arsen told her, his tone praising.

She sent him a quick, shy smile, but her attention was back on the situation at hand and not how his praise warmed her body. How were they supposed to stop a marriage from happening when the king and queen of Haven were traveling to witness it? How would Riven react when his plans fell apart before they'd even arrived in New Haven?

"If they've drunk enough of each other's blood to merge the bloodline, then it's a moot point. They're married in the eyes of Hell and therefore Haven. I'm more interested in knowing whether Astaroth has blessed the marriage and why. If they did exchange enough blood and the Duke of Hell approved of the marriage, then it means the old bastards are scheming. Lucifer has had a plan for centuries, and I think he's finally starting to watch it play out in front of him."

She imagined the bearded ruler atop his throne in Hell with the largest bucket of popcorn. If she ever met him, she was going to have quite a few *choice* words for making their lives out to be some sort of drama.

Wyll had the decency to look abashed, answering the question which had been weighing on everyone's minds. "It was enough."

Quillan whistled. "Who knew you'd be the one to break the rules? Stealing the prince's betrothed? You'll go down in history like that other

fellow. The human knight in the books the prince used to sneak us when he'd come back from the human realm."

Was he referencing Lancelot?

Lysander gave him a blank stare, leading Wyll to roll his eyes. "It's the tamest secret revealed tonight. Arsen sneaking books in is the last thing we need to be worried about."

"And whose fault is that?" Samael grumbled, staring at Wyll.

"I'm glad they finally gave in," Emeline reasoned, running the tips of her fingers over the scales on Samael's back. A content noise escaped the dragon, leading him to rest his head back on her lap. *"Timing sucks, but time is rarely kind to anyone. I can't blame them for wanting to make sure they have at least one night together. Once we enter New Haven tomorrow, there's no telling what's in store for any of us."*

Arsen tipped his head in a short nod, acknowledging what she said, but there was a distant expression on his face. Emeline wondered what was going on in his head. As soon as the thought left her, it was like a wall she hadn't realized was up… *crumbled*.

His thoughts were a soliloquy she was privy to.

"If he murdered Levius for the throne, then what stopped him from killing the court? If Keselia and Llyris were a threat, what about everyone else? The dukes and duchess have an inherent right to the throne should the Seaspire line fall. Something doesn't make sense…" His expression remained passive, but Emeline could hear the anxiety rising in his thoughts.

For every thought Arsen had, he derived possible outcomes. He first figured out what could happen and then tried to account for any preconceived variables. From those subsequent outcomes, he branched out even more, trying to plan for everything and anything. It was hard to keep up with his racing thoughts, and it was setting her on edge.

Samael lifted his head, turning slightly to glance sideways at her. *"You wanted to know what he was thinking. His head is always busy unless he's focusing on you."*

On her? Emeline wasn't sure she believed him, but Samael also had no reason to lie. In fact, if it was embarrassing for Arsen—it was probably the truth.

Ignoring them both, Arsen's thoughts spiraled.

"Power. Power. Power—that's all he fucking wants. Absolute control over the realm. Fae away from humankind. Why wouldn't he eliminate the

other bloodlines if they have a claim to the throne? Am I missing something? Is he hiding something?"

"How did the First King die?" Emeline inquired, the question open to the others.

Quillan shrugged. Lysander didn't look like he knew the answer either. His eyes met Wyll's, who mirrored his uncertainty. Sari rolled her eyes at the lot of them with a disgruntled *"males"* slipping off her tongue.

"No one really knows for sure, but there is speculation. Some say the First King's death is what led to Eris wanting to split the realms." Sari began to shake her head slowly. "But I don't think anyone's ever looked into it. Or cared, really. The First King was said to be a monster who lived more in the water than on land. Having one of his children take over was better for everyone, and anyone who values their life doesn't talk about the king's siblings."

Emeline's smile was asinine. Imagine that. The First King was a monster like the second. And taking into account Riven—the third would be evil like the rest of them. A question slipped out of Emeline's mouth before she could think better of it.

"If Eris murdered his siblings for their claim to the throne and Llyris was after him, then what's stopping him from killing the crown prince? What's stopping him from killing Riven for *his* claim to the throne?" Emeline turned to Arsen, asking him directly. "You know the king and his desire for power better than anyone here. You've seen him at his worst. Can you say without a doubt that Eris actually *cares* about Riven? Or does he care about his legacy more?"

Arsen's drawn-out silence served as the answer. Emeline listened to the fire crackling, wondering what the point of having an heir was if Eris would never give up the throne. Was it a matter of pride that should he fall, his blood would stay in power? She didn't know enough to come to a conclusion, and Arsen couldn't pinpoint a clear reason for why Eris would murder his siblings. It could have been for something as simple as fear of being usurped.

"We should get some rest," Wyll said finally. Defeat laced his voice. "We're all going to have a long day tomorrow. Lys, Quill, help me with the bedrolls."

If there was one good thing coming from tonight, it was that Emeline wouldn't have to sleep on a bedroll for much longer.

“Or alone,” Arsen murmured wickedly.

.——— ———.

Despite waking up in the comfort of Arsen’s arms, the cloudy morning set the tone for the carriage ride to New Haven. Dreary and foreboding. Quillan’s laughter and jokes weren’t carried in the wind, nor were Lysander’s exasperated replies. Wyll’s silence was familiar, as was Sari’s. Emeline knew she was still mulling over last night’s conversation and trying to figure out for herself why Eris would slaughter his siblings—to preserve ancient bloodlines or for more selfish reasons.

Instead of feigning conversation, Emeline leaned her elbow on the sill and gazed outside toward the approaching town. In no time, the carriage wheels hit cobblestone, jarring her. Large buildings made of stone and timber filled the sides of the street. None of them had decorative flowers or smiling shopkeepers out front like in Scaleridge.

Emeline wasn’t sure if it was the weather, but there was a heaviness in the air that she didn’t like. The few fae who poked their heads out of a door or stood by the window wore solemn expressions. Their clothing came in simple dresses or tunics in a varying shade of gray.

This place was lifeless.

Add in some fog, and this place could have served as the setting for her grief.

“What’s wrong with this place?” Emeline asked whoever was listening, whether it be Samael or Arsen. *“It’s depressing.”*

Samael answered her. *“New Haven is run by the officiates. Annoying scum from Haven who weren’t important enough to have any influence there and now act as if what they say is important here. They answer directly to the king. No one wants their attention, so they ensure they do not stand out.”*

“Why not leave?”

That’s what Emeline had done every time the restlessness hit her. Each ‘home’ in a new place had only given her a temporary sense of belonging. She’d been chasing that feeling all her life, until home had inevitably found her in the middle of the ocean and brought her to a manor. What followed that thought felt like a caress in her mind. A soft touch full of warmth and approval. *Arsen*.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“Scouting,” he replied simply but then enlightened her. *“I want to see if the crown has arrived yet. Samael and I don’t see any escorts. We might have time before my father and Riven get here.”*

Any time would be a blessing.

Emeline reached forward, placing a gentle hand on Sari’s knee. She’d gone quiet again for the last leg of the journey. The fae’s attention snapped to her, and she greeted it with a gentle smile. “Whatever happens, you know that Wyll and Arsen won’t let anything happen to you.”

“It’s not exactly me I’ve been afraid for, Emeline.” Sari’s words caught her off guard, and the court lady shook her head in disbelief. “Em, you have *no* magic.”

The nickname made her throat tighten. Grief, a familiar shadow, beckoned to her. She took a deep breath, acknowledging that she did miss her friends, but she didn’t let it keep her down.

She offered a wry grin through the pain. “I can be quite charming when I need to be.” Then because Emeline could never keep her mouth shut, she added a snide remark, “And I bet you were really worried when you were introducing Wyll to God as he was plowing you against a tree.”

Wyll’s choked indignation was drowned out by Quillan and Lysander’s startled laughter. Emeline rolled her eyes, half-amused by the presence of an audience and half-annoyed by the fae’s advanced hearing. Or maybe she was annoyed because whoever said that guys don’t gossip was lying. Males, in any form, were nosy busybodies.

Sari cleared her throat in a purposeful manner, smothering all other noise. “Yes, well, the fact that you’re human makes you about as charming as a rodent wearing a dress to them.”

Samael cackled. *“I like rodents.”*

“She does remind me of one when she stuffs bread and cheese—”

“Do you want to die today?” Emeline accidentally said the words aloud, causing Sari’s eyes to widen. Emeline hastily apologized. “Sorry, not you. Dumb and Dumber are talking inside my head.”

“I was hoping Wyll and I would be able to do that by now,” Sari admitted, glancing out the window, where Wyll rode Smoke. The horse’s ears flattened against his head, evidently uncomfortable like the rest of them. “I wonder if it’s because of Arsen’s bloodline that the ability manifested so quickly.”

Maybe. She didn’t have a great understanding of blood bonds, but it sounded like the most important factor was blood, and Arsen shared his with Lucifer. “You and Wyll exchanged blood yesterday. How does it feel to be married in the eyes of Hell?”

“It would be better if we could plan a trip to get away instead of going straight to evil’s doorstep,” she noted glumly, sinking deeper into the cushions.

Emeline went to make another joke when the carriage came to a halt. The door opened shortly after, Arsen appearing before them. His hair was tousled from the wind, fair cheeks flushed with color. His gaze found Emeline’s first, taking in her appearance. She wore the same simple kirtle from this morning, not finding reason to change. The deep-red color was another *fuck-you* to the sea-green banners standing behind Arsen.

The prince’s armor was made of scales, a deep shade of blue that surprised her. He hadn’t been wearing that this morning. His answering grin stirred wariness into her shoulders.

“Why blue?” she asked, knowing she’d regret the answer.

“I distinctly remember you wearing a blue robe in bed when I—”

Sari pretended to retch. She stood up, stepping down from the carriage with little more than a *“I don’t want to hear this”* before stalking off.

Lowering his voice, Arsen placed his hands on each side of the doorframe, giving her a serious look. “My father isn’t here yet, but if something happens—take Sam and—”

Emeline walked over to him, aware that if he wasn’t so fucking tall, she’d be glaring down at him from where she stood in the carriage. Instead, they were practically eye-level. She placed her hands on her hips, giving him the fiercest glare she could manage.

“You aren’t getting rid of me. Samael and I will be right next to you.” She wasn’t looking for confirmation or permission. She didn’t need his validation, gesturing between them with her pointer finger. “You and I are a *team*. I don’t take orders from you.”

A naughty smile played on his lips, while a wicked glint flickered in his golden eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

Emeline didn’t fall for the bait. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I.” Arsen’s smile disappeared. “I refuse to lose you.”

She cocked her head. “You don’t want to lose me?”

“No.”

Emeline tapped the side of his face with a condescending smile. “Then don’t let me leave your side, *my prince*.” She added the moniker with a bit of scorn, remembering their first encounter, and then grinned victoriously when he looked annoyed.

He wasn’t annoyed at her wittiness; he was annoyed that he was giving in so easily.

She took the hand Arsen offered, glancing sideways at him. *“If the roles were reversed, you wouldn’t let me fight alone. So save your time arguing for more useful things you could be doing with your mouth*.”

Arsen merely smirked at her, refusing to let go of her hand even when she stepped onto the cobblestone.

“If we live through today, I’ll endeavor to show you just how useful I can be.”

Their fingers laced together.

It was time for the first battle of the day.

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38

STRESS EATERS UNITE

EMELINE



Emeline had to crane her neck back with how tall the building was. It wasn’t a manor or like any of the other structures lining the cobbled streets—this resembled a gothic cathedral. It was easily over a hundred meters tall with blackened stone along the base. Had there been a fire here before? Four spires of varying heights rose from the ground, with the shorter two in front. Flying buttresses connected the spires to two aisles,

but she couldn’t see how far back it went. If the officiates stayed and worked out of this place, then the building had to be massive.

The front of the cathedral had statues carved into stone with space behind each body. While most of the stonework was burned, the statues themselves were stark white and unblemished. Standing in the center was a fae with eyes so cruel they appeared to glare at her from where she stood, staring up at him. He held onto a pointed staff, laying his hand over the top of it as if he were a god or the bringer of judgment. The stonework was incredible, making the fae’s opulent robes look as if they would flow in the wind. On the top of his head, there was a crown full of spires.

Emeline hated that she found the fox-like shape of his eyes familiar. Without a doubt, she knew that this had to be the king. *Eris Seaspire*. To the statue’s right, she recognized the crown prince. Riven’s likeness held the same air of arrogance he carried in person. His ringed fingers were holding a wicked-looking bow with an arrow notched back. It was the same bow she’d seen before at Morningstar Manor. He wore a three-piece suit with the tailcoat falling behind his knees. The rings on his fingers differed from the king’s, who wore jewels rather than simple bands.

Annoyed at the sight of them both, Emeline looked at the feminine statue to the king’s left. A shorter fae, who reached the king’s shoulder and wore a blank expression. She was neither cruel nor kind. Indifferent. A veil was sculpted from the stone, draped around her body and reaching down to her waistline. Emeline spotted the crown of spires on her head, less extravagant than the king’s but just as sharp.

It was the queen.

Her features and Riven’s were very similar. The curve of their jaws. Their noses. The downward tilt of their lips in faint apathy. It made her wonder how the king felt knowing his prized child didn’t resemble him as much as he did his mother.

“He hates that Sen looks more like him,” Samael noted.

Emeline frowned at the dragon in Arsen’s arms, not surprised, yet still disappointed. It was like a small part of her thought that there had to be something redeeming about Eris. Evidently not.

The stonework formed an arched entryway with carved depictions of symbols she didn’t recognize. Runes that she didn’t have any hopes of recognizing, but they felt old. Before she could ask Samael or Arsen, two wooden doors beneath the archway opened outward.

Five fae walked out, all dressed in similar sea-green vestments, with silver decorating the front of their clothing. Were they part of a fucking cult? The ceremonial robes were nothing if not creepy.

But so were their stares.

The hair colors might have varied from light to dark, but their cold eyes all looked the same. The one in front had ashy blond hair cut to his angular cheeks. Out of all the fae, his eyes were the cruelest. A small mark was visible on either side of his eyes. They resembled black wings like a raven's.

"Your Highness," the fae, standing centerline of the damn cult, greeted Arsen. He bowed his head, placing a hand over his heart. He nodded once in Sari's direction, acknowledging her presence before turning back to the prince. "We were expecting you last night."

Arsen's smile was anything but kind. "If that's the case, then all the rooms must be ready. Everyone is tired after a long ride."

The fae's jaw clenched, nostrils flaring. "Rooms? We thought to only prepare one. Surely you can't mean the guards. There's a stable—"

"—You thought wrong," Sari interjected, her tone full of blatant dismay. "I will not stay in the prince's room, nor will our guards stay with horses."

"But you are to wed—"

Sari didn't raise her voice, but when she interrupted him, Emeline could hear the lethal power imbued in her voice. "Since when did a lowly descendant of Malphas believe he could question Astaroth's line?" Her voice became harder, sounding older. "Know. Your. Place."

Emeline recognized the resentment hiding in the cult leader's clipped yet respectful tone. "Yes, my lady."

He snapped his fingers without breaking eye contact, leading a few of the fae to bow before walking away. Only one remained by his side. A taller fellow with hair so black, it held a hint of blue under the clouded light. He wasn't looking at Sari but at Wyll with open hostility. Wyll must have noticed, but he ignored the stare like it was beneath him to even acknowledge it.

The notion made Emeline's lips curve up.

It was something Sari would do.

They were perfect for each other.

"I don't find what is so funny, *human*," Malphas's descendant sneered, eyes narrowing in on her. "Prince Riven has specific instructions for you."

Emeline beamed a bright smile at him. “I’d be happy to tell you where you can shove those ‘*instructions*.’” Her smile grew. “If only you were less obsessed with matching outfits with your creepy friends, you’d realize that New Haven needs serious help. It’s dreary as fuck, and I’m willing to bet that the people are going hungry while you all fatten yourselves up in there.”

In her periphery, she thought Sari might have pinched the bridge of her nose. If Emeline had to guess, Quillan was probably trying not to laugh.

She took a step closer, ignoring Samael’s warning in her head not to get close. “I’ve dealt with bullies and men like you before. You don’t scare me.”

The taller fae brandished a dagger she didn’t realize he’d had hidden in his sleeve. “You insolent—”

Before he could so much as aim the blade at her, Wyll had one at his neck. Emeline felt Arsen’s fingers hook into the lacing at her back, pulling her against his chest. Quillan stepped in front of her, while Lysander moved closer to Sari’s side in Wyll’s absence.

Wyll’s usual dry tone was replaced with a sharper, more menacing one. “Any threat against Emeline is a threat against the Second Prince.” He pressed the blade harder into the stranger’s neck, forcing a thin sliver of blood to trickle down the pointed edge of the blade. It splashed against the stone, which somehow felt foreboding. Like this was the first of more blood being spilled tonight. “Consider this your only warning.”

“Stand down, Wyll,” Arsen said lightly, his smile as bright as Emeline’s had been.

Everyone who knew the prince *well* knew that smile was not good. Quillan tensed. Lysander kept his composure. Wyll listened without fault, standing beside Sari, but he held a quietly disapproving look. Emeline didn’t have time to speculate before Samael suddenly leaped from Arsen’s arms to the bleeding fae.

Samael’s venom-injecting fangs sank into his neck, cutting off the fae’s anguished cry. A sickening *crunch* filled the air before Samael tore open his throat. Muscle and bone were revealed only briefly before blood poured out of the open wound. Emeline was the only one who reacted, tensing at the sight of so much blood. Arsen moved his hand to her waist with a protective grip, his thumb absently stroking her side. Samael wasn’t finished, sinking his teeth into the fae’s shoulder before the former party could lift his arm

that was holding the dagger. Another *crack* and *crunch* followed as Samael ravaged through joints and cartilage.

The metallic scent of blood permeated the air, and Emeline did her best to ignore Samael was *eating* someone right in front of her. Most of the others appeared bemused, but Quillan and Arsen looked properly entertained.

Arsen gave a low chuckle. He lifted his chin, looking down at the mangled fae with a psychotic look in his eyes. His gaze both darkened and burned brighter. The plume of a dark cloud before an eruption capable of massacring millions.

“My guards are kind enough to offer warnings. I will not.” Arsen’s canines flashed in another feral smile when Samael’s claws tore through robes to carve into flesh. He shifted his attention to the blond fae with wings on the sides of his eyes. “Whatever plan Riven expects for you to carry out, Dolias, I would suggest you reconsider where your loyalties lie.”

Dolias’s gaze fell to the other officiate, whose internal organs were currently being ripped out of his body. Samael was swallowing one down whole like a long spaghetti noodle, offering the cult leader a brief, dragon-equivalent grin. Teeth bared, Emeline could see every bit of blood and chewed-up organ in his teeth. Venom dripped down the scales around his muzzle. Her nausea grew worse.

“Sam, close your mouth when you’re eating,” Arsen mused darkly, but his eyes were on Emeline now.

She swallowed, wrinkling her nose. *“If I puke, I’m aiming for both of you.”*

“If I go against the crown prince, it’s a death sentence,” Dolias finally said, but he still refused to meet Arsen’s gaze. “And if I go against you, your dragon will eat me.” Now he looked directly at the prince. “Go ahead and kill me, spare, but you will never earn the king’s approval.”

Rather than anger, Arsen’s haughty smirk appeared. His gaze flicked to Emeline before looking at the pissed-off creature in front of them. There was an ease in his expression she didn’t expect. A calm before the storm. “I don’t need it. I have hers.” Arsen nodded toward the door. “Now about those rooms.”

Dolias’s mouth formed a tight line. “This way, Your Highness.”

.——— ———.

Everyone was given rooms, much to Quillan's vocal surprise. He'd mentioned earlier that he hadn't had a room to himself until he'd officially joined the prince's personal guard a few months ago. He was leaning against the door with Lysander, while Sari paced the room angrily.

"Those sexist pigs." Her blue eyes practically glowed with fury. "What could they possibly be talking about?"

Emeline sat on the edge of the bed she was to share with Arsen later and pretended to be more interested in the lackluster decor. Jade-colored walls. A white wardrobe with a vanity mirror. A rather boring-looking desk holding a single quill, black ink, and a set of stationery. Were all the rooms like this?

"Probably about what sort of plans Riven has for me that those officiates were supposed to carry out." Emeline shrugged nonchalantly, fully aware that her level of fucked hadn't registered; otherwise, she'd be more unsettled. "If I had to guess, he wants to use me as leverage to make sure Arsen goes through with his marriage to you. Or maybe it's about the wedding in general. What asinine shade of green to go with silver, perhaps?"

"They should be worried about *me* going through with it," Sari snarled, her fury transcending into wrath. "I am the daughter of a duke. I am so tired of males thinking that because I have breasts, I'm not a threat. For Astaroth's sake, what sense does it make to have a meeting about a wedding that I'm in without me?"

Emeline smiled faintly in amusement.

Common sense was a rarity these days.

"Why aren't *you* upset?" Sari's hands fell on her hips, glaring down at Emeline, who shrugged. "Don't you care about Arsen? Love him? Don't you want to marry him yourself?"

Wow.

"I'm only now realizing that I care about him. Can we save the L-word for another day? At this rate, I'll never be able to make fun of *90 Day Fiancé* again." Emeline rolled her eyes at the confusion returning to Sari's expression. "Another human joke."

Emeline stood up, walking over to a large arched window overlooking the front of the church. She'd found out on the walk to her room that they were staying in a cathedral dedicated to Leviathan.

Emeline continued, “Anyway, I would love nothing more than to leave this place. I’ve seen the kind of greed and hunger for power in Dolias’s eyes plenty of times in my career. It’s the kind that makes him unpredictable, and that’s what’s currently setting me on edge. We know where the crown stands, but Dolias…” She tilted her head. “What’s his story?”

“Not lesser fae, but close,” Sari answered pensively, her eyes becoming distant as she described the officiate. “The wings on his eyes indicate he’s descended from Malphas, a president of Hell, who rules over legions. The demon is known for creating citadels and towers, able to break down enemy fortresses. He’s a great deceiver—”

“Imagine that,” Quillan muttered, earning an elbow to his side from Lysander. The younger guard sent him a nasty look, hissing, “Am I wrong?”

Sari continued as if he hadn’t said anything. “—And the one responsible for creating most of the churches in the realm dedicated to Lucifer and other powerful devils.”

Great, so they were dealing with a power-hungry *Bob-the-Builder*.

Emeline shifted her attention, wondering what Arsen and Samael were doing. She received her answer a moment later.

“Sen’s torturing him. We want more information on what the other prince wants.” Samael’s tone was bored, a stark contrast to how dire the situation was. *“He’s afraid of death which is allowing Sen to be creative.”*

Emeline grimaced, not sure if she wanted to know the details. *“What do we know?”*

“You were right to think he planned to keep you until after the ceremony.” The pride in Samael’s voice made Emeline’s grimace turn into a grin. *“But Sen believes there’s more. He wants to know if the plans originated from Riven or if they were told through Riven.”*

“What’s that mean?”

“We want to know if Riven’s orders are from himself or the tyrant who sits on the throne,” Samael clarified.

Abruptly, Sari’s face appeared before hers, and Emeline let out a surprised shriek, tripping backward. Sari’s quick reflexes caught her by the arm, and if she weren’t so strong, Emeline was sure she’d be on the ground.

“Were you talking to Arsen? What are they doing?”

“Torturing Dolias,” Emeline answered, straightening out. She took in Sari’s surprise, but Quillan and Lysander didn’t look shocked at all by

Arsen's actions. Torture must be a familiar tool to Arsen and his guards. How medieval.

"Dolias is Eris's favorite." Sari crossed her arms, eyebrows furrowing. "Is it his personal mission to piss off the king as much as possible before the ceremony tomorrow?"

Tomorrow.

The word was foreboding. It felt toxic to breathe in, her chest tightening with dread. That's right. Tomorrow, Arsen was expected to get married. It was easy to disregard it and think of it as some abstract event happening in the future, but Emeline was in New Haven.

She was standing in a room that she would share with the prince, who was expecting his abusive father later in the evening. The tight control she had on her anxiety began to unravel. Threads came loose, filled with worries she'd stuffed down and a touch of fear when she thought of the future.

"Breathe, little nightmare," Arsen's voice whispered in her mind. *"Neither my father's schemes nor Riven's will go as planned."*

Emeline could feel her heart beating faster as she said, *"You can't know that for sure."*

"I've never fought back against my father. It'll be a miscalculation on his end to underestimate me. I won't be marrying Caesaria tomorrow. I'm trying to end this mess tonight," he admitted.

Tonight?

"You mean we could go home tonight?"

"Yes." His voice turned husky in her mind, making a blush rise on her cheeks. *"We're taking you home. Tell Sari that she'll see her father tonight at the ball. It seems that more than just my family will be in attendance for the wedding. The king wants an audience for how well he's able to control the spare heir."*

Emeline's anger flared for a multitude of reasons, the most prominent being that the king had any reason at all to believe Arsen was his to control. The second had more to do with Arsen acting alone.

"While I'm not exactly skilled in torture, isn't there something I can do that's not sitting in our room with your guards and Sari complaining about the situation? I can't sit here and do nothing."

"Not skilled in torture?" Arsen repeated, his voice turning into a lofty drawl. *"Clearly, you've never looked at yourself in the mirror when you put*

on that blue robe.”

“Focus, you idiot.”

“What you can do to help is not—”

Emeline interrupted him quickly, *“If you finish that with ‘getting in the way,’ I’ll murder you.”*

“Is it wrong to be turned on right now?”

She didn’t dignify his question with an answer, but he knew she was trying not to laugh in the same way she knew he was smirking. Instead, she looked over at the court lady, who was still staring at her, waiting for a response.

Oops.

“Arsen says you’ll see your father tonight. Eris wants an audience for your wedding tomorrow.” Emeline rolled her eyes, opening her mouth to say more, when there was a knock.

Quillan and Lysander scowled at the noise, taking a step back. Lysander reached forward, opening the door and asking a question too low for Emeline’s human ears. Anticipation greeted her as she waited for whoever was behind the door to leave.

Only, they didn’t.

She entered the room when Sari gave the order for her to come in.

It was a maid wearing a long, sage-green dress with sleeves and a white apron over the front of it. The colors of the Seaspire throne as always, but it was the hollow look in the fae’s eyes that Emeline found herself intrigued by. With dark hair swept into a tight bun, the servant curtsied to Sari.

“Lady Grimwood.” Her voice was pleasant and soft. “I am here to get you ready for the ball tonight. Your bath is prepared in your chambers, along with a set of gowns hand-chosen by the crown prince himself.”

Riven chose the gowns?

Sari rolled her eyes, muttering, “Always a controlling bastard.” She gestured to Emeline but kept her eyes on the newcomer. “Emeline will need a dress as well.”

“The crown prince made it a point to say that she’s not invited,” she said, her voice a touch nervous.

Emeline didn’t want to go anyway. She would much rather not go, but the look on Sari’s face told her that the lady wanted her there. She felt the familiar tug in her chest, reminding her how much easier life was when she

avoided events that made her anxious. How easy it was to skip family get-togethers because she didn't want to hear all the usual questions.

How's life been recently?

Are you seeing anyone?

Society needed a real kick in the ass to understand certain questions shouldn't be normalized. Being in a relationship shouldn't be a check in the box for a successful life. Getting engaged or when to start trying to have kids shouldn't be discussed over grandma's lasagna. Marriage and pregnancy shouldn't be seen as the first steps toward a happily-ever-after.

For Emeline, the thought of pregnancy filled her with an unshakeable fear rather than any positive emotion. Her grief beckoned her forward, toward the fog she found herself subconsciously seeking.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to." Arsen's voice momentarily cleared the haze, making her gaze draw up to where Sari was looking at her expectantly.

The fae had asked her a question, and she'd missed it.

Emeline touched her wrist, toying with the beads as anxiety crashed over her. *"You don't have that same luxury."*

"I was born into this world; you weren't."

"No, I wasn't. I wasn't even brought into this realm willingly," Emeline replied pointedly, hearing Samael snicker at her snarky comment. *"But I told you that you weren't fighting alone anymore. I want to fight for Sari too. She and Wyll deserve a future together."*

Her subconscious whispered to her, saying she wanted a future with Arsen too. That touch of fear morphed into a tangible beast inside her body, sending her pulse racing. She swallowed, wiping clammy hands against her dress.

"I don't give a fuck what Riven wants. Sari, save me a dress. I'll get dressed later and see you tonight." Emeline's voice filled with anger, her own smokescreen for anxiety. "Lysander, you should stay with her. Quill, you're with me."

Quillan's eyebrows rose, but he looked to Lysander for confirmation. The second-in-command nodded slowly. "I can't leave Lady Grimwood, and the prince assigned you to the—*er*—Emeline."

"To me?"

"You two get along well," Arsen murmured casually.

Emeline grinned. *"Yeah, he's easy to—"*

“But if he gets too close to you, I will break every bone in his body until I find a suitable toothpick for Sam while he eats him alive.”

Her grin fell fast.

“Down, boy,” she shot back.

Arsen’s lazy drawl didn’t convince her he wasn’t territorial. *“Woof.”*

She’d add the possessiveness she found attractive to the list of reasons why she needed therapy, or a one-way ticket to Bedlam. Quillan stepped away from the wall to peer at her curiously.

“Where are we going?” he inquired, looking between the rest of the fae like they might have a clue what was going on in her mind.

Emeline smirked. “To the kitchen. I’m hungry, and I don’t want to sit in here and pace. Nor do I want to spend the next six hours preparing for a ball I’m not even invited to. We’re going to go stress eat and try not to get killed along the way.”

At that, Quillan’s expression brightened. He placed a hand over his stomach like he was starving, too, when he’d eaten half of Lysander’s rations from breakfast in addition to his own.

“That’s an escort mission I’ll happily take.” He playfully extended his elbow for her to grab. “My lady.”

Samael’s growl bounced around in her mind, and she offered Quillan a wry grin.

“If you don’t want Samael to eat you, I’d keep your hands to yourself.”

Quillan blanched, taking a step away from her.

Sari shook her head, but gestured for them to go. “Try not to get killed, yes? You have a bad habit of angering people.”

Emeline winked. “I’ll do my best.”

The door closed behind her with Sari’s mutter slipping through the cracks. “Astaroth help us all.”

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39

THE FAMILY REUNION

ARSEN



Torturing Dolias was almost fun.

Arsen had let the backhanded comments slide for years, and now he was finally holding the officiate accountable for all the things he'd said. Arsen wasn't sure how much time had passed, but he knew from checking in with Emeline that she and the guard were on their fourth stolen

sweet roll. The thought of her almost made him smile, but he kept his face blank.

Dolias stood, cradling his broken elbow to his chest. They were in a small, sacred area with white stone decorating the ceiling and the walls. The floor, although also made of white stone, was painted with Dolias's blood. Samael circled the officiate as Arsen stood across from him with his arms crossed.

"Your father will punish you for this." Dolias spat out a wad of blood, careful not to hit Samael.

Arsen cocked an eyebrow. "Father's idea of entertainment is someone else's suffering. You might be useful for making his pretty towers, but you're expendable, like the rest of your mongrels running about."

"The only mongrel is—"

Wyll's blade flew in a blur past Arsen before finding its mark in Dolias's shoulder. The officiate's arm hung loosely after the blade severed through the tendons and cartilage connecting bone to shoulder. Pride swelled in Arsen, remembering there was a time where Wyll wasn't trusted to hold a kitchen knife. Then he'd trained hard to become Arsen's personal guard.

And his friend.

"My sincerest apologies, Your Highness." Wyll bowed, his blond hair sliding forward to cover part of his face. "My hand slipped."

Stealing his so-called fiancée, and now causing bodily harm to one of the king's favorite servants… Wyll had become so much more fun in the past forty-eight hours. Arsen's grin did nothing to hide his thoughts, earning a discreet eye roll from the blond.

The prince turned his attention back to the poor sod who struggled to hold his broken elbow. Pain and resentment swirled together to form hatred in Dolias's obsidian eyes. No more needed to be said. Arsen had gotten the information he wanted, but he couldn't deny that the monster in him yearned to make Dolias suffer more.

Before he could act on baser instincts, he waved for Dolias to leave. Then his hand paused mid-air. "What time is the crown expected to arrive?"

"Dusk, Your Highness," Dolias gritted out, sliding his gaze nervously to Wyll as the guard pulled out another dagger in warning. His tone evened out, becoming more respectful. "The crown's arrival will kick off a feast in the refectory before everyone is moved into the atrium. The celebration will

be held in the main aisle, where the great Leviathan's statue may look down upon us all."

Arsen nodded, but he stayed silent while the coward left the room. Samael let out an annoyed exhale, forcing smoke harshly through his nostrils.

Wyll's attention landed warily on him. "Is he going to eat me?"

"Doubtful. You don't have very much meat on you," Arsen said absently, distracted by the fact that Emeline was reaching for a fifth roll.

"You're going to get sick," he chided.

Emeline huffed in his mind. *"Don't you have more important things to do than worry about my bread intake? I'm stress eating since there's nothing I can do but wait."*

There were few things the fae prince enjoyed more than talking to her. Having his head between her legs was one of them. He wanted to taste—

"I can hear *you."* She was making a choking noise, like she'd heard his thoughts and had forgotten how to breathe.

Arsen's voice was taunting, *"You wanted access to my mind, little nightmare. You have it."*

She made a grumbling noise, but Arsen realized Wyll was staring at him. He arched a brow again, saying, "Would you like for me to commission a portrait, so you can stare at me longer? I'm sure Caesaria would appreciate a giant painting of me while you two work on creating an heir."

"Not in the budget for a personal guard. You should give me a raise."

"How about a tip?" Arsen barely resisted the urge to laugh before saying, "Why don't you prepare to meet your *swēor*?" His grin broadened. "Your father-in-law will be dining with us tonight."

Wyll was quite pale, but now he resembled a ghastly shade of white. Arsen snickered, clapping him on the back. He opened his mouth to say something snarky, but Wyll raised his hand.

"Don't. I didn't even think about that."

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the consequences of our own actions." The prince kneeled down, picking up Samael, who glared disdainfully at the blood on his claws. The poor bastard was caked with gore, but Arsen summoned his magic to clean the blood off his scales. Samael's mood brightened, putting his own body at ease.

Arsen continued, his words becoming more serious. “Listen, about the slaughters, you and I both know that my father would kill you without a second thought. Taking you to those meetings with him wouldn’t have changed anything.”

Wyll stared at him for a moment, looking a bit surprised at the sincerity. “I might not have been able to stop the king from hurting you, but you didn’t have to go through healing alone.” He let out a shuddering breath, looking as if he knew he was going to regret what he was about to say before he said it. “I’m glad that you have Emeline. That you had her to confide in. I might not understand what you see in the snarky creature, but she’s good for you.”

“This is disgusting,” Samael noted glumly. *“We could be with Emeline, and instead you’re having a heart-to-heart with your guard.”*

Emeline piped up, her tone reprimanding, *“Let them have their bromance. Wyll’s going to need all the help he can get with meeting Sari’s father tonight.”*

The prince shook his head at the ridiculous human term and wanted to reply, but the guard spoke up first.

“You’re talking to Emeline, aren’t you?” Wyll’s eyebrows drew together, confusion and a hint of jealousy staining his question. “Why do you think Sari and I aren’t able to have the same connection when we’ve consummated the marriage in blood? Astaroth blessed the union; otherwise, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

Arsen shrugged but looked down at Samael. *“Any ideas?”*

“Lucifer might have created me, but I don’t know how every devil’s mind works.” Samael’s bad mood soured the longer he found himself away from Emeline.

“I’m not sure. Sari’s powerful, but she’s still several generations from the first line. It could be that her bloodline isn’t strong enough for the both of you.” His words struck Wyll’s inferiority complex, but Arsen knew it was the truth. Hiding it would help no one. “That doesn’t make you less of a fae. You’re the right person for her, and she’s going to need your strength more than ever tonight.”

Wyll sighed and nodded. “Abaddon help us all.” He placed a hand on Arsen’s shoulder, turning him so that he faced the door. “Let’s go get you ready to celebrate your engagement to my wife.”

Arsen snorted inwardly. There was only one woman he wanted, and she was, impressively, on her *seventh* sweet roll.

.——— ———.

Arsen stared back at the mirror, scowling.

He hated it.

From the white-gray color of the suit coat to the silver buttons embellishing the front. He hated the dark color of the lapels and the ridiculous cravat strangling his neck. Above all, he hated the sea-green pendant ornamenting the front of the neck piece. Leviathan wrapped around a sword was the symbol of the Seaspire line. The sword was similar to the one marked on his neck.

It was a subtle warning from the king that *he* held all the power.

Part of him hated his relation to Eris, but he didn't hate his lineage to Leviathan. He enjoyed the water—not as much as Riven—but enough that, when he wasn't with Samael in the air, he enjoyed sinking into the watery depths.

Deep down where the pressure of the water strained his body, he felt grounded. Much like Emeline did when she touched her bracelet and had the subtle reminder each time that everything in life was temporary. But he wouldn't allow them or their relationship to be a fleeting moment in time.

Speaking of his little nightmare, she walked out from behind the ornate privacy screen in the corner of the room, holding his heart in her arms.

Arsen took in the green shade of her dress. The silver lacings at the front and the long, billowing sleeves. He hated the colors of Haven on her, but he lo—*thought* she was beautiful all the same. He focused on the features that made her *Emeline*, rather than what reminded him of the realm he protected. Dark, auburn hair fell to her back in soft waves. Dark lashes framed hazel eyes. They stared back at him with the same appraising look. He saw the cherry blossom bracelet on her left wrist, a wonderful contrast to the green and silver.

"*You* stressing out is stressing *me* out." Emeline walked over to him, frowning for a moment when Samael jumped out of her arms and used his wings to glide over to the bed. "Where do you think you're going?"

"He's giving me space," Arsen thought, wrapping his right arm around her waist to pull her close against him.

His left hand cupped her cheek, encouraging her to face him. When she did, he bent his head and kissed her. Her hands slid up his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck. Her possessiveness had his cock throbbing with need. Arsen resisted the urge to take her to bed, but he did deepen the kiss. Her pulse fluttered under his touch. His tongue slid along her bottom lip, feeling her smile. He nipped at her, reaching down to squeeze her ass. She opened her mouth to tell him off, but he took advantage of her reckless mouth.

Arsen's tongue brushed against hers as a knock sounded at the door. Samael wasn't the only one to growl. Emeline laughed at his displeasure before pulling back.

Her cheeks were flushed, eyes gleaming with affection. A tugging sensation erupted in his chest. Anger manifested as he thought about how that same warmth in her eyes would leave the moment they left the room to await the crown's arrival. He wanted nothing more than to whisk her away and make her happy.

"Come in!" Emeline called out, knowing Arsen was distracted.

The rest of the group entered, Wyll opening the door for Caesaria and then the guards following in behind them.

"Your hand." Emeline reached behind her, pulling his hand from where it rested on her ass, up to the small of her back.

Arsen smirked but said nothing. Anger still stirred in his chest, but it subsided as Emeline stayed by his side. Caesaria was dressed in a lavish white gown, lined with several layers of velvet fabric. The long sleeves, almost reaching the ground, were layered with jade-colored lace, matching the lace on the bodice of the dress. She wore sparkling jewelry around her neck, but Arsen didn't care to look any closer.

Caesaria was Caesaria.

She liked pretty, shiny things.

He was more interested in the woman beside him and the grin she wore looking at the youngest guard. Quillan.

"You look miserable already," she observed with a glint of amusement shining in her eyes.

Arsen eyed the guard, noticing that he was pulling on the collar of his surcoat. They all wore white breeches tucked into black boots. Puffed long sleeves under green surcoats, which all had the crest of Haven embroidered on the front. Quillan and Lysander clearly hated it, while Wyll looked

relatively at ease. The pompous bastard probably loved the opportunity to dress up for his wife.

“I *am* miserable. I’d much rather enjoy a sour mead with the rest of the prince’s guard than meet the crown for the first time,” Quillan complained, running a hand through his hair.

Wyll smacked his hand. “You asked me to help you with your hair, and now you’re messing it up.”

The younger guard didn’t look upset about it. Arsen’s hair was artfully disheveled tonight, but his father always had his hair neatly combed, and with the likeness—Arsen never wanted to do something that would make himself look even more like the king.

Emeline’s hand found his, squeezing it gently. *“You could never be like him.”*

He offered her a quick, secret smile, reserved only for her. Then he nodded to Samael, who laid claim to Emeline again. His scales peeled back to reveal sharp teeth as he bared his venomous fangs at the rest of the group. The other fae looked on nervously as Caesaria declared she was leaving before Samael made a snack out of her.

Arsen placed his hand on Emeline’s waist, taking a deep breath to see if the anger would settle or go away.

It didn’t.

Not when they made their way to the grand steps of the cathedral, no longer stained in blood. Not when the guards, Emeline, and Caesaria made idle small talk to pass the time. And certainly not when the sight of the crown's lavish carriage finally made its way into view. Under the setting sun, the silver looked gold.

The amount of powerful magic in that carriage set both him and Samael on edge. The dragon was growling low in his chest, reacting to the overwhelming amount of anger seizing Arsen around the throat. As the carriage traveled down the cobbled street, he tried to understand where his anger was coming from. What exactly had spurred it?

He was at a loss until Emeline said, *“It’s grief, Arsen.”*

It confused him at first. *“What would I be grieving? I’m angry, not sad.”*

“All Eris does is take away your sense of control. I’ve been listening to you all day, trying to create a solution for every possible problem you could come up with. Grief strips your sense of control away, but anger creates the

illusion of being in control. I think you're holding onto that anger so you don't feel helpless," she began to explain, turning to look up at him.

Arsen stared back as her thoughts found him. *"It's unfair, the situation that Riven and your father have put you in. The expectations they have for you. Your anger is valid, but so is your disappointment. Your resentment. Your desire for autonomy. I think that grief can also be filled with a lot of questions of 'why me' and your entire life—the decisions have been made for you."*

He swallowed hard. *"Not all of them. I chose you. I want you."*

She offered him a gentle smile. *"You have me."* Then in a firm voice, she added, *"Seeing your father tonight is going to be a lot. It's going to bring up a lot of feelings I think you've been suppressing for a while. But you have Sam and me. You're not alone."*

Had he been suppressing it?

If he thought about the past few centuries, he couldn't pick out specific days unless it involved a slaughter or had a great impact on his day-to-day life. But if he thought about the past couple of weeks, he could pick out every single moment with Emeline. The quiet ones. The way her eyes softened and gave him patience when there were times he didn't think he deserved it. He wanted more moments, not only with her but in the close group beginning to form between his guard, his friends, and the woman he l—*cared* about.

Arsen's heart thudded against his chest so hard it was almost painful. Had he been grieving this entire time and not processed it? At their first meeting, he'd understood her dissociative stare from below the surface of the water. Wasn't that the first time he'd felt like someone understood what it was like to be part of a society but not truly connect with everyone?

Samael leaned back into Emeline's embrace, seeking the comfort Arsen needed. He felt the dragon's contentment through their bond when her arms tightened around him. It allowed him to relax the slightest bit.

Taking a measured breath, Arsen stared straight ahead at the carriage as it stopped a few meters away from the front of the steps. The door opened, revealing his brother. Riven stepped out. His black hair was slicked back, neat, with not a single hair out of place. His suit was more embellished than Arsen's. Its usual shade of jade was decorated with silver fringed epaulettes on both his shoulders. He wore no blade at his side, but he didn't need to.

All Riven had to do to decimate hundreds was to summon his arrow and nick anyone's flesh. Plague would bring down the entire town.

Riven grinned at the sight of him, pleased to see his brother.

The crown prince turned to the side, holding out his hand for a smaller figure to step out of the carriage. The Queen of Haven was beautiful by fae standards, and considering how Emeline's eyes had widened—human standards too. Her gown was modest, the perfect blend of Haven's colors. Green fabric, with colorless diamonds sewn into the front bodice of the dress. They created a delicate wave design, catching the light and making her nickname as The King's Jewel true. Her usual veil was sheer, smaller diamonds lining the edges closest to her face. The spired crown on her head kept the veil from slipping.

While her appearance left most breathless, Arsen felt the weight of her cold gaze. The memory of her looking down at him while he was beaten and bruised surfaced. Liora had known what Eris had done to him, and instead of helping him, she'd only given him that same, stone-hearted expression.

Emeline glanced down at Samael discreetly. *"We hate her."*

It wasn't a question, but the creature in her arms agreed. *"We hate her."*

Arsen couldn't bring himself to agree. He was numb regarding the queen. She was a good mother to Riven, and he was relieved that his brother had her.

The next figure didn't need his son's help.

Eris Seaspire stepped out, his eyes finding Arsen's almost immediately. Sounds died around him. No birds chirped as the sun disappeared behind the houses. No soft whistle of the wind through the alleyways. It was as if nature herself didn't want to earn the King of Haven's attention. Arsen couldn't hear anyone's heartbeat except for his own. It roared in his ears, making his skin prickle with unease.

One glance from his father and he was transported back to a time where every interaction with the king ended with… *"Is this finally the end?"*

Rather than show his father how much his proximity affected Arsen, he straightened and stared back. Unadulterated hatred gleamed in the king's eyes.

"Brother!" Riven's blatant disregard for the brewing tension captured everyone's attention as he walked to the front of the cathedral steps. "Who knew you'd be the one getting married before me?"

“He says that like he’s not the one who practically forced you into it.” Emeline glowered back at the crown prince, but Riven paid no mind to her.

Samael shifted forward slightly, keeping his attention on the king. *“It’s not too late. I could eat them all.”*

“How could you still be hungry?” Emeline baulked.

Arsen’s gaze cut to hers briefly. *“I could say the same about the eight rolls you devoured.”*

Out loud, he greeted Riven. “Lucifer help the fae you decide to marry. He or she is going to need a mind healer to deal with you.”

Riven grimaced at the thought of matrimony. “Never going to happen.”

“I wouldn’t say never. He will take a *wife*,” Eris’s smooth, calculating voice spoke up. “You’ll need to marry one day to produce an heir.”

The queen said nothing.

When the king spoke, almost everyone dipped their heads and placed a hand over their hearts. The only ones who did not were him and Emeline. Arsen realized he was a fool for not teaching her about royal customs.

“Bow,” he demanded, not looking at her.

“No.”

Arsen glanced sideways at her. *“It wasn’t a request.”*

Her eyes met his. *“And you know me better than to think you can boss me around.”*

“Emeline—”

She cut him off in a blistering tone. *“He* hurt *you, Arsen. I will never bow to someone who caused you pain. Not even if my life depends on it. I. Refuse.”*

Samael’s teeth flashed, his tail swishing faintly in anticipation. *“No one will harm our human. I will make sure of it.”*

Emeline’s actions didn’t go unnoticed. Riven’s gaze steeled, a warning in his eyes to Arsen. ‘*Control the human if you don’t want her to die*,’ it read. But it was too late for that. Eris went to step forward, moving to stand in front of Emeline. He decided against it after noticing the snarling creature in her arms. Surprise flickered for a brief moment at seeing the dragon in a human’s arms. Samael growled in warning, golden eyes flaring with the promise of wrath. The king barely acknowledged him, eyes darkening. His thirst for blood saturated the area around him, but he feigned indifference. Eris shifted his attention to Caesaria. Arsen didn’t relax.

“Lady Caesaria.” The corners of Eris’s lips turned up. “How fortunate that you will be the Second Prince’s wife. I look forward to the ceremony tomorrow.”

Caesaria bowed her head dutifully. “It is an honor to serve the kingdom, Your Majesty.”

“Eloquent as always, dear daughter.” A new, deeper voice manifested behind the crown.

Arsen’s eyes landed on the duke, dressed for the occasion in a simple yet noble jerkin. The deep blue of the fabric made Arsen dumbstruck. It matched his eyes, which were only a shade darker than Caesaria’s. The silver threads decorating the edges of his sleeveless jacket were a stark contrast against the ebony hue of his skin, but it was the defiance in his eyes that stood out the most.

Duke Grimwood was not wearing Haven’s colors.

He wore his daughter’s favorite color instead.

Emeline came to the same realization as he did. The duke did not support the marriage. And he was *not* afraid to let the king know, despite being his advisor.

“Grimwood…” Eris’s eyebrow rose, a threat laced into his words. “You’re here. I thought the issue at the border was going to keep you occupied.”

The duke smiled tightly. “I would never miss my only daughter’s wedding ceremony.”

Arsen inhaled deeply, tasting something savory in the air. His mouth watered with the meal laid out before him. *Well, well, well.*

Duke Grimwood was terrified.

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TIME IS RUNNING OUT

ARSEN



Arsen watched as Dolias stepped forward, his hand shaking from the exertion and strength it took to keep his arm raised to his chest when his shoulder was still injured.

“Your Majesty…” Head bowed, Dolias didn’t look up at the king. The scent of his fear flooded Arsen’s senses. “New Haven welcomes the royal

family. Dinner has been prepared with the finest ingredients available, including the sweet bread His Highness was fond of during his last visit."

"I should have eaten all the damn bread," Emeline grumbled sourly.

A flicker of adoration passed through Arsen before he dismissed it to keep his attention on the king and Riven. The crown prince's grin lit up his features, always a fan of sweets. Disdain colored Eris's ocean eyes, the blues and greens crashing against each other.

"It's been a long trip." Riven's voice broke through the tension again. "Shall we eat? I trust the dinner arrangements are better than the welcoming party you've gathered, Dolias." Riven glanced at Emeline for the first time. "If you mind your manners, human, perhaps we'll let you eat the scraps."

Emeline's cheeks reddened with anger. Arsen knew that whatever she had to say—it would absolutely get her killed.

He cleared his throat, praying that Lucifer was on his side tonight because he was going to need all the help he could get if they were all to survive. "Emeline will dine by my side. If that's a problem, we'll take our meals elsewhere."

Riven scowled. He twisted one of the bands on his fingers, shaking his head once. "Nonsense. This dinner is to celebrate our family growing with the addition of Astaroth's line. Need I remind you, you're to wed Lady *Caesaria*."

"If the spare wants a pet at the table, I'll allow it." Eris tapped his staff against the ground. The sharp *tap* against the cobblestone sent Arsen back in time to when pain accompanied Eris's decisions. Arsen steeled himself, narrowly avoiding the flinch that his body instinctively leaned into. "It wouldn't be the first time he's had a creature on his lap."

Samael's growl rumbled through his chest. Eris walked by with the queen and Dolias following him without a single glance backward. Riven stayed back, while Caesaria went to her father.

Arsen met his brother's glower with a level expression as the older fae snapped, "You couldn't have left her in your room or something? Dolias should have put her in the dungeons."

The dungeons? He shouldn't have been surprised, and yet there was always a part of Arsen that forgot Riven was raised by their father. He remembered the brother who snuck him sweets—despite hating the awful things—because Riven thought it would make him happy. The brother who

purposefully discarded new toys he *‘hated’* so Arsen could play with them when he was younger.

“Just because you have a plan, doesn’t mean I’m going to follow it,” Arsen replied coolly, seeing a muscle jump in Riven’s cheek. “I’m tired, Riv. He’s never going to accept me, and it’s about time you quit being delusional. Even the duke has started his own rebellion.”

Riven’s gaze hardened at the nickname, but he did shift his anger to the newer arrival. “Don’t think I’m not aware of your true feelings regarding the crown.”

Duke Grimwood met Riven’s eyes, but Arsen could taste his fear growing. All of the fae could hear the duke’s heart hammering away. “What the king did to the border kindled the Apostasy’s determination. I’ve been your tutor for *years*. If you can’t see the error of his ways, then you will fall alongside him.”

A low chuckle escaped Riven. Arsen saw the tension in his back as he stepped closer to the duke. “Is that a threat, Grimwood?”

Caesaria frowned, stepping between the two fae. “That’s enough.” She exhaled sharply but looked to Riven for answers. “What did the king do?”

“Took care of the pest problem.”

Quillan stiffened as the duke glared, the noble’s voice shaking with fury. “He summoned a wave that drowned his own guards and the few Apostates who were hiding in the mountains. He sacrificed *good* fae when there was another way to deal with the rebellious creatures.”

“Careful, duke.” Riven’s voice was deceptively soft. “You’re beginning to sound like one of them. And killing you on an empty stomach will only annoy me.”

“Enough of this,” Arsen cut in. “If we’re late to dinner, the king will have all our heads.”

Riven turned on his heel, looking overjoyed. “Right. This talk can wait until later. My little brother is getting married.”

“I want to throw another vase at his thick skull,” Emeline mused, not taking her eyes off the other prince.

Arsen snorted inwardly, his amusement only evident to her while his face remained passive. *“Behave, little nightmare.”*

“Woof,” she drawled sarcastically.

This time, he did smirk at her and sent her a wink. *“Good girl.”*

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The refectory was a communal dining hall decorated extravagantly with high, vaulted ceilings and a grand chandelier full of hundreds of white candles. Arsen toyed with the idea of cutting the iron chain holding it together so that it fell on top of his father’s head, but he didn’t want to chance anyone else getting hurt.

Mainly the human seated to his right.

Eris sat at the head of the table, with Liora seated at the far end. Riven sat to the king’s immediate right, followed by Arsen and Emeline. Dolias sat opposite of his human, with Caesaria to his right, and the Duke, who sat between the king and his daughter. Fear was heavy in the air, but none of it came from Emeline. She sat with Samael on her lap.

A bowl of hearty pottage sat in front of Arsen, untouched. If Dolias dared to serve a stew to the crown, then the food crisis in New Haven was more dire than he thought. Riven must have thought the same as he eyed it, but he was never one to waste food. To the king’s clear dismay, he broke apart his roll and began to eat like the tension wasn’t thicker than the pottage. Everyone else pushed it around while the silence brewed.

Unsurprisingly, his brother spoke up first, turning his head to look at Caesaria. “The ceremony tomorrow will be small, but once you come back to Haven, we’ll have a proper wedding at the castle.”

Caesaria’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “As you wish, Your Highness.”

“Perhaps a wedding tomorrow is unnecessary,” the duke began, glancing at the king with a stern set to his jaw. “The Head Officiate is serving stew instead of a feast for my daughter. I was promised a ball of celebration. There’s only a small group here and hardly a decoration in sight. Not even a decorative vase. Where is Obsenth?”

While unintentional, it was likely a good thing there weren’t any vases around. Samael’s disagreement was a wall crashing into him. Emeline’s amusement softened the blow.

Dolias sent a pointed look down his straight nose at Samael. “The beast ate him.”

Samael lifted his head, curling his mouth into a silent snarl. The officiate dutifully went back to his meal, not wanting to encourage any more of the dragon’s wrath.

Riven’s eyebrow arched. “It’s important that the ceremony happens tomorrow. As the king’s advisor, you should be ecstatic that your daughter is good enough for my brother.”

A ghost of a vicious smile formed on Eris’s lips. “He might be the last resort should anything happen to my son and me, but he’s still of a noble bloodline. Your daughter is lucky I haven’t made better use of her to secure alliances elsewhere.”

Caesaria’s hand tightened around the spoon. Arsen wished he could see Wyll’s expression behind him, knowing that the guard was likely seething with rage. Quillan stood behind Emeline with a blank expression, matching Lysander behind the lady.

“Tell me, Duke Grimwood, why are you so against this marriage?” Riven asked plainly, placing a half-eaten roll down on his plate. Apparently, he’d given up on false niceties, as a crack appeared in his patient façade. “Why have you arrived in New Haven, dressed in such a dreadful color? Why not appear united? What message do you mean to tell the people?”

Arsen slid his gaze to the duke. When their eyes met, he latched onto the fear, seeing the fae’s terror come alive in his mind. It was easy to guess, but no less difficult to see Caesaria’s body bleeding out on the ground. He saw the familiar nave and the architecture of the main aisle form around them. Was the duke not aware his daughter had blood-bonded with another fae? Could this be a vision, not ruled by fear?

Emeline sucked in a sharp breath, reminding him that she could peer into his thoughts, and now she was seeing her friend dead. He ripped his gaze from the duke’s to look at her with an apology in his eyes. She didn’t need to see that; however, it wasn’t instinct anymore to hide his thoughts from her.

Duke Grimwood’s voice was shaky from the mental image Arsen had forced him to bear witness to. “I am trying to do right by my heir. The same as the king.”

Riven didn’t look convinced, reaching for the dinner knife next to his plate. He twirled it between his fingertips, drawing eyes to the action. Approval came off his father in waves at the crown prince’s silent threat. “You say a lot of pretty words. But—”

“Enough, Riven,” Eris cut him off, surprising both brothers, but then a cruel smile spread across his lips. It immediately put Arsen on edge. “The

duke wouldn’t be my advisor if he didn’t have his own thoughts and feelings. Perhaps the ceremony tomorrow is unnecessary.”

The crown prince blinked. “But Father—”

“So unnecessary…” His words trailed off, taking the time to look at everyone around the table, except for Emeline. “I’m not in the mood to celebrate or bother with this ridiculous meal.” Eris stood up at the table, everyone rising when he did. Thankfully, Emeline was quick to catch on. She stood, arms wrapped tightly around Samael. The king’s stare landed on Dolias. “Make whatever preparations you need to. The vows will be exchanged at midnight. The spare will marry Lady Grimwood *tonight*—not a second later, or I’ll serve *you* as a roast to your starving townspeople. Do I make myself clear?”

Dolias stuttered through an answer, but the king was already leaving. The queen followed behind him. Riven stared, dumbfounded, after their father, but shrugged.

He looked over at Arsen and grinned. “Congratulations, Brother. We should have a drink to celebrate.”

Arsen didn’t want to.

What fucking plans did he have now?

The duke’s fearfulness wasn’t something he’d accounted for. If he refused Caesaria’s hand with the situation as it was, things would go very badly, very quickly. Eris would get more enraged if he sided with the duke than if he was acting alone. The marriage wouldn’t be blessed at midnight. It was inevitable. Lucifer, Astaroth, and Leviathan would never approve of the marriage when Caesaria was already bonded with another fae.

Wyll and Caesaria had fucked that up.

When the vows weren’t accepted by the devils, Caesaria would be killed.

Whether the devils did it themselves or Eris took out his anger, there wasn’t a path before Arsen where everyone survived.

Panic had him standing, telling Wyll to stay put, and striding out of the refectory. Arsen’s fists were clenched, and he didn’t know where he was going until he broke through the cathedral’s library to a small balcony. The pillars were white, flowers spiraling around the columns. There was only a stone bench to sit on, meant to overlook a small garden in the atrium. He didn’t fucking care about any garden.

Arsen took a seat, placing his elbows on his thighs, trying to even his breathing. His lungs didn't want to work. A burning sensation overwhelmed his chest. It made his pulse spike and his vision darken around the edges.

He didn't know what to do.

What was the right answer?

How could he stop this without starting a war?

If he fought back, would he be able to save Emeline from his father?

Would Riven ever take his feelings into consideration and not only his own selfish desire to keep a broken family together?

"Hey…" He inhaled sharply, not realizing that his little nightmare had followed him until her hands cupped his face. He looked up at her, the light of the moon casting a cool glow along her features. "…Breathe with me. Listen to my heart."

Hers was calm and even—and *how?!*

How was she able to stand there and not feel the weight of the world crashing down around her? Arsen searched her eyes, desperate for an answer. He placed his left hand on her waist, committing the feel of her soft curves to memory. She smiled gently at him as he made the conscious effort to match her breathing.

"You're calm." It wasn't a question, but she answered anyway.

"I'm looking on the bright side," she remarked wryly. "I don't know what I expected from a meal with your family, but it was a lot less rowdy than mine. No one was yelling. No one got eaten or stabbed, which I feel is an accomplishment. It was very…tense? Political?"

Arsen didn't smile. "Caesaria's going to die when the union isn't blessed. Lucifer won't kill me; he'll kill her, and Astaroth will have to deal with it."

"That's *if* the marriage ceremony happens…"

He scowled, brows furrowing together. "Do you have a plan to stop it?"

"Kill the king? *Three Days Grace* taught me to start a riot."

Arsen gave her a flat stare, not understanding her human reference this time. "I admire your faith in me, but Riven would go after you to teach me a lesson. I'm trying really hard here to keep you alive, little nightmare."

"I'm guessing that running away isn't an option?"

"It's no way to live a life. Our friends would suffer. Scaleridge would burn. Haven and the Den are only so big."

Emeline sighed. "I really hate your family."

There was a long line of fae who'd agree. Arsen stared at the empty library through the open doorway. This place was a prison.

He couldn't think straight.

Couldn't stand the sight of it any longer.

Samael hopped onto the edge of the railing, glancing over at Arsen. *"Bring her to the wisteria trees. You might find what you're looking for there."* Samael's message was cryptic, but Arsen had an idea of what he was trying to convey.

He distracted her by rising and leaning down to kiss her, blocking his thoughts from her momentarily.

It had to do with what Arsen had already figured out back in the forest.

Emeline's worst fear.

.——— ———.

New Haven had taken seeds from the Woods of Wisteria and made a small woodland on the northwestern edge of the town. Samael dropped Arsen and Emeline off before making the excuse that he needed space to clear his head, too, and left. Arsen was convinced Samael needed space from him and the overwhelming anxiety the creature felt through their bond.

"Wow…" Emeline murmured, pushing through the wisteria vines to see the ground was covered with glass-like lilies. Hell's flowers. "What did Samael mean on the balcony? About finding what you're looking for?"

"He meant these." Arsen crouched next to the flowerbed. They glowed like starlight in her presence. His lips curled at the sight, shifting his attention to Emeline. "These flowers are found in Hell. They don't need water or sunlight."

"Then how do they grow?"

"They feed off…humanity," Arsen said carefully, watching her kneel down beside him to touch the soft, sheer petals.

They glowed even brighter under Emeline's touch, startling her.

He smiled at her. "You've never seen them glow this brightly before."

"Are they feeding off my emotions?" she asked inquisitively, retracting her hand back from the flowers. "You're right, these ones are a lot brighter than the ones at the Manor."

Their light was bright, never wavering.

“Something like that,” he noted, enchanted by the sight of her.

She was beautiful with the light of the lilies reflecting across the delicate angles of her face. Emeline frowned at him, trying to look for an answer in his head when she herself wasn’t sure of the question to ask.

Instead, she whispered, “You seem calmer now.”

“I’m with you.”

“You were with me earlier, and were still about ten seconds from having a panic attack.” She reached forward, grabbing his hand. “We shouldn’t stay away too long. The others will be wondering where we are.”

The others could survive an hour without them. Midnight was three hours from now, and the flight back to the cathedral wasn’t a long one.

“And what if I want to spend what time I have with you?” Arsen inquired, the luminosity of the flowers dimming. Emeline’s gaze flickered to the dwindling light before meeting his again. “What if we’re fucked? What if I can’t keep everyone alive, and I should have never brought you to New Haven? I never should have brought you to the Den—”

Emeline leaned toward him, covering his mouth with her hand. “Don’t you *dare*. Yes—we’re pretty fucked. The ceremony got moved, and neither of us has a clue how to get out of this situation without anyone getting hurt, but don’t you dare regret bringing me here. Don’t you dare regret meeting *me*.”

The noise she made was somewhere between a choked retort and a sob. Something in Arsen broke at the tears gathering in her eyes. She sniffed, moving her hand to cup his cheek. He leaned into it, watching her.

“Meeting you and Samael…I’ve never felt like I belonged anywhere until I found myself by your sides.” Emeline drew in a shaky breath, struggling to find the words. “I wanted to die. In the beginning, on that boat, there wasn’t a part of me that wanted to live. Ever since I lost my pregnancy, I’ve been living in the fog. But then I met you. And I really wanted to throw a vase at your head with how fucking arrogant you were.”

Arsen’s lip quirked up at that.

She continued, “But I’ve fallen in love”—his heart raced at her words—“with life again. I look forward to what the day brings and what I’ll learn about you. There’s still so much I don’t know, and it kills me that I might never find out.” Her thumb brushed against his cheek, wiping away a tear he didn’t realize had fallen. “I want more time with you, Arsen. More time with Sam. More time with everyone.”

He cleared his throat, feeling a foreign lump form. Honesty stained his tone. “Samael was the only one I trusted for a long time. He’s the best part of me. But you’ve had my heart since the day I saw you on that boat, Emeline. You wanted to die then, but you’ve always fought for life. You punched a shark and tried to save your friend.” A wry grin played on his lips while hers wobbled at the mention of the human. “I want more than days with you. I want years. A lifetime. I want to spend the rest of mine with you—” Warmth swelled in his chest at the truth of what he was about to say next. “—and when you leave this realm, I’ll follow. I’ll fight through the gates of Heaven if it means staying by your side. No one—*not even God*—will keep me from you.”

Arsen saw in her mind how the thought of him dying filled her with such unimaginable grief. She started crying. He wouldn’t lie and take the words back. Instead, he pulled her to him, falling on his backside. Her legs straddled his hips. He didn’t hesitate to tilt his head and kiss her.

This time, it wasn’t a distraction from the secrets he hid.

It was desperation.

Yearning that had been burning inside him since they met. He needed her. Their kiss matched their torment and their longing. Emeline parted her lips, and Arsen didn’t hesitate. His fingers tangled in her hair, forcing her head to tilt for him so that he could explore her at a better angle. Emeline’s hands went to his suit coat, pulling at the buttons until they came undone and sliding it off.

Arsen returned the favor, pulling on the laces of her bodice and undoing them until the fabric pooled around her hips. She wore a thin chemise underneath, but he caught a brief glimpse of her hard nipples poking through the material.

Emeline ground her hips against him.

It took all of his willpower not to throw her to the ground and feast on her pussy. He wanted to bury his tongue in her and drown in her taste while she writhed on the lilies. Arsen used the opportunity to push the dress down her hips, discarding it to the side. His cock ached, straining painfully against the fabric caught between them.

Arsen placed a hand on her upper back, pulling her to him. He ducked his head to wrap his lips around her left nipple, feeling faintly annoyed that she was still wearing her chemise. Nonetheless, it reminded him of that night in the kitchen where he’d almost fucked her right on the table.

Emeline made a needy noise, clawing at his blouse and the cravat. The jade pendant hit the ground as she undressed him. Her light shoes fell next to his boots. Only his trousers remained, but he pushed her hands away to take the bottom hem of her chemise and rip it up the front.

She gasped, opening her mouth to say something snarky no less, but he wasn't having it. Her complaint turned into a moan when his lips finally met the bare skin of her breast. Arsen laid his right hand on her hip, encouraging her to roll her hips, while his left hand groped her other breast.

"Arsen." Her tone was pleading, crying out when he left a mark near her nipple.

Fuck. He wanted to discover all the different noises she could make. He wanted the time to tease her and make her beg. He wanted the time to cherish her and make her feel loved.

He wanted so much more time, and they didn't have it.

But for what little time they did have, he wanted to show her what a future could look like with him.

Arsen pulled his mouth away from her, taking a moment to *really* look at her. He took in her blush-stained cheeks, the lustful gleam in her eyes, and the uneven rise and fall in her chest. Her arousal spiced her scent with carnal desire, stoking his longing to new intensities. Arsen heard her heart beating fast and couldn't stop the truth from slipping out.

"I need you," he whispered, gazing at her with all the emotions he felt for her but couldn't say yet. His feelings were true, but he didn't want to confess *because* their time was running out. He would wait. And if she didn't want all of him now, he'd wait forever. "Can I have you, Emeline? *All* of you."

She smiled in a way that made his chest feel heavy.

Years of grief wanted to come pouring out.

Emeline brought one of his hands to her chest, his fingers landing on the swell of her breast. She placed his other hand over her fluttering heart. Yearning refracted between their gazes, kindling a spark of passion. She looked at him with a confident, tender expression.

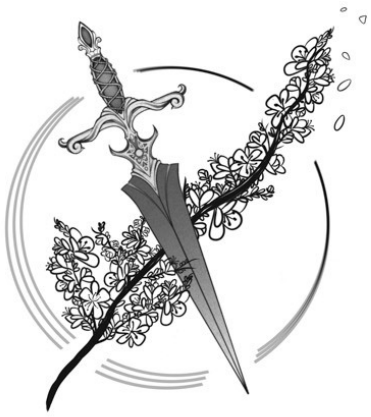
"I'm yours."

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41

GLOW

EMELINE



The lilies were soft underneath Emeline as Arsen laid her back. The glow of the flowers illuminated him in a soft light. Shadows danced across the hard muscles of his abdomen and rippled over the corded muscles in his arms. Heat spread across her cheeks, crawling down her neck and chest. Arsen’s eyes shone with mirth as he kneeled between her spread thighs.

He moved like he was about to shift himself lower, but Emeline used her right elbow to rise up. Her left hand reached for the waistband of his trousers. “We don’t have time for that.”

She earned a flat stare and a scowl. “I always have time to make you feel good.” The corner of his lip rose in a naughty smirk. “And don’t pretend I won’t have you coming on my tongue in less than a few minutes.”

Emeline glared at him, cheeks reddening as she let go. “Fine. But just so you know, I’m going to make sure your jaw gets tired first.”

Arsen’s smirk grew predatory. “I do *love* a challenge.”

It was the only warning she got before his fingers spread her, opening her to him. A shy cord struck her, knowing that she was on full display. On instinct, Emeline moved to close her legs when his thoughts suddenly filled the space between them.

“She’s fucking beautiful.”

“So soft. So perfect.”

“I need to taste her.”

Arsen’s mouth descended on her, his tongue flattening as he dragged it through her arousal. Her breathing became uneven, her back arching off the ground as the tip of his tongue brushed against her clit. Emeline went to reach for his shoulders or his arms—needing to ground herself with touch, when his hands caught hers.

Arsen laced their fingers together.

His hands held hers, intertwined as he devoured her pussy. Emeline squeezed his hands when he hit a particularly sensitive spot, and again when his tongue circled her entrance.

“It feels so good.” She squirmed underneath his touch. *“I need him.”*

“Arsen!” Emeline cried out when his lips wrapped around her clit, sucking gently before flicking his tongue back and forth over the sensitive nub.

She realized through the ardent haze that the wicked devil was listening to every thought of hers while his tongue mapped her body. He could hear it when he did something right, or when a spot felt sensitive enough for it to stand out to her. Arsen was paying attention to her body’s responses, and her mind, to make sure that he drew out her pleasure—or rather, *torment*—as he teased her clit.

Emeline panted, trying to catch her breath, but it was impossible when he was relentless. “Not. Fair.”

His lips curved up. *“Devils are rarely fair. Give me your first orgasm, little nightmare. Drown me.”*

How was she supposed to be stubborn when he said things like that? Arsen shook his head from side to side, nuzzling his face closer against her, pressing his tongue against her opening. What sent her over the edge wasn’t the crescendo of building pleasure or the wicked dance of his tongue.

It was the way his hands gently squeezed hers, using his thumbs to rub soft circles against the back of her hands.

To Emeline, it felt like he was saying it was safe to let go.

And so she did.

Emeline’s legs shook as Arsen prolonged her orgasm, licking her over and over—desperation in his movements to not miss a single drop. Her body felt sluggish, languid. Arsen placed a kiss on her inner thigh as if to thank her for the meal before rising to his knees again.

There was a playful glint in his eyes, but an edge of seriousness sharpened her attention on him. He asked quietly, “Are you sure? You want this?”

She smiled at him, but a part of her heart throbbed painfully at the uncertainty hidden behind his haughty attitude. Even now, he questioned his worth.

“I want you, Arsen,” Emeline reaffirmed, sitting up to undo the buttons on his trousers. She paused at the last one, maintaining eye contact with him. “All of you.”

The flowers seemed to glow brighter around them.

Arsen’s grin was promising. “I’m yours, Emeline.”

He pushed the fabric down, revealing first the deep indentations of his hips. Emeline wasn’t ashamed to acknowledge that her mouth watered at the sight of him. His cock was hard and long, the tip already smeared with precum from where he must have ground his hips at the taste of her. She noticed that fae cocks differed slightly from humans. There were natural ridges scaling up and down his length. She felt herself get wetter at the sight of it. Also, how did she not notice them when she touched him a few days ago? What were they for? Extra friction?

No, most things like that were for biological reasons.

Arsen spoke in her mind, drawing her eyes to the hot blush reddening the tips of his ears and cheekbones. *“It’s difficult for fae to get pregnant. It helps for pleasure, yes, but also to make sure none of my seed seeps out.”*

Oh? Emeline's curiosity got the best of her. What did they feel like? She reached for him, but his hand pushed hers away. "Unless you want this to be a short experience, keep your hands to yourself."

Emeline huffed, eyeing him with a sour note coloring her voice. "It's not as if we have all night to enjoy this. We can't stay away for too long—"

Arsen's hand found her throat, pulling her up to meet him. His fingers pressed into her neck, cutting off her airway for a brief few seconds. When he let go, they were both breathing quickly.

"Whatever time we have is *ours*," he said firmly, discarding his last article of clothing to the pile nearby. Arsen's heavy gaze raked over her body. His hand went to his cock, stroking it. "No one else's. You're mine."

"You're mine too," she whispered.

Arsen nodded. A rare, honest smile spread across his lips this time, lighting up his features better than the flowers ever could. "You're my choice, little nightmare."

Emeline settled back while Arsen guided his cock to her entrance. It began like an earthquake underwater. Unnoticeable at first. The moment she felt him against her, several emotions took off at once. What had snuck up on her became a devastating tsunami, drowning her.

Guilt. Anxiety. A loss of trust—not in Arsen—but in her body. She was attracted to him and her body responded accordingly. But she hadn't…

"Emeline." Arsen stilled, sensing her hesitation. "We don't have to do this."

His understanding made tears well up in her eyes. An apology slipped from her tongue as she wiped at her eyes. A wave of hot embarrassment crashed over her. There she was—about to have sex with someone she cared about—and she was fucking it up.

"I want to—" she choked out, watching as he braced himself on his forearms over her. Like this, he was close, and she could see every fleck of gold and amber in his eyes. "—I'm sorry. I don't know…"

Her voice trailed off, but the lump in her throat grew more difficult to swallow past. God, she was so overly emotional.

"This is the first time you've wanted to have sex since the miscarriage, isn't it?" When she nodded, Arsen's hand rubbed up and down her waist in a soothing gesture. "I think it would be normal to feel overwhelmed. I can't pretend to know or understand exactly how you feel, but you know that this can stop now, yes? I won't think any less of you. Of us."

Tears slid down the sides of her face. With anyone else, she might have stopped. Made an excuse or a joke to detract from how serious she felt the situation was. But with Arsen, she wanted to take this next step with him. She wanted to share every first of hers after the miscarriage with *him*.

Because it was *Arsen* who made her feel safe.

It was *Arsen* who didn't try to detract from or invalidate her feelings.

And because it was *Arsen* whom she loved.

"I want this. With you." Emeline's right leg hooked around his waist, encouraging him closer. "Please."

The ghost of a smirk appeared. "I told you, I'd have you begging one day."

"A single please doesn't mean—"

He kissed her, his smirk growing when she hurled an insult from her mind. Emeline smiled into the kiss, feeling his cock notch against her entrance. There was a brief, lingering sense of anxiety, but it was accompanied by anticipation. Her hands explored the hard lines of his abdomen, tilting her head to slide her tongue against his. Under her hand, she could feel his heart racing as fast as hers.

Arsen pushed his hips forward.

Emeline felt the length of him begin to enter her.

Her lips parted, back arching off the ground as he filled her. At first, her body struggled to accept him. The stretch caused a slight searing pain to spread through her. The hard ridges along his cock hit places inside her that she didn't know were sensitive. Arsen stopped, sensing her pain and shaking with restraint. Emeline knew it was taking everything in him not to thrust forward because she could *hear* him.

"Fuck…"

"She's so hot around me."

"I want to lose myself in her."

His forearms shook with the effort it took to go slow. Emeline's desire took root in the praise he created a foundation from. Their kiss broke when she slid her eyes shut in ecstasy. Arsen left a trail of hot kisses down the slender column of her neck, biting down gently on the soft curve above her collarbone. Sharp canines dragged across her skin, combining a prickling pain with pleasure.

Her hips rocked against him, forcing his cock to slide in a few more inches.

“Emeline,” he warned. His voice wavered. “Behave.”

Behaving wasn’t something Emeline excelled at. Nor was listening. An impish smile broke across her face as she repeated the action, but this time her nails dug into his back. She’d remembered what he’d said about liking it rough.

A growl rumbled through his chest. Arsen leaned down more to capture one of her nipples in his mouth before driving his cock fully inside her. They both stilled, relishing the feel of each other.

Then she felt her hips lift off the ground.

A husky voice spoke next to her ear. “One more, little nightmare. Come for me again.” He placed his hands on her hips, effortlessly keeping them at the perfect angle for him. “I want your only grip on reality to be your pussy strangling my cock.”

His cock felt deeper at this angle. Her breathing was shallow, feeling like at any moment, he would split her in two.

Tone darker, he said, “Breathe. You can take me. I was made for you.”

Emeline nodded, the back of her hands brushing against the flowers scattered around them. She gave Arsen her control. Her trust. Her pleasure.

He took all of it, a fire igniting in his gaze.

His need for her defied reason as his pace picked up.

Her breasts bounced with his movements, drawing his attention. He bit his lip, fingers digging into her flesh as he unabashedly stared at her. The cindering lust in his eyes could start wildfires. Emeline gave him a sultry smile, feeling his hips stutter at the sight of her squeezing her own breasts. She put on a show for him, pinching her nipples and calling out his name. She knew with every burst of pleasure, her walls tightened around him.

Arsen moaned, unable to keep quiet at the sight of her. A vein in his neck pulsed as he tried to steady his breathing, but it was no use when she wasn’t the only one to fight dirty. His head was tilted slightly back while he glanced down at her. The possessiveness in his gaze stole her breath.

“Mine.” His lip curled, a feral quality taking over.

Emeline spoke out loud, nodding quickly. “Yours. All yours.”

Feeling that she was ready, Arsen drove into her—his cock *slamming* into her. Emeline writhed in pleasure and torment underneath him, already feeling her legs go numb with the first signs of an impending orgasm. Every stroke of his cock, with the ridges grazing against her inner walls, made new sensations of pleasure overwhelm her.

“You feel so good,” Arsen praised in a low, gravelly voice. His tone dripped with sin and surrender. Approval filled his gaze. “Look at you. My *perfect* nightmare. Look at how well you’re taking me.”

She was.

It was the perfect amount of friction when Arsen’s angle changed, his cock gliding against her clit with every thrust. Emeline’s cries grew louder, eliciting him to match his desperation with the noises she made.

Emeline felt like she was going to break underneath him.

“Breathe. You can take me,” he coaxed, snapping his hips forward to accentuate every word, “I”—*thrust*—“was”—*thrust*—“made”—*thrust*—“for”—*thrust*—“you.”

A scream tore from her throat.

Emeline tightened around him, her orgasm forcing her mind to go blank. Arsen’s forearms strained as he held her down, rocking into her. It was intentional how he used his rigid cock to draw out her oversensitivity. She was a mess, shaking and feeling a delicious, weightless sensation. Though that might have been because half her body was still raised in the air by a hungry devil.

She wrapped her legs around him, making him grit his teeth. “Don’t. I—where do you want me?”

Emeline realized what he was insinuating when his cock twitched, throbbing inside her. A heady redness settled over his cheeks, only visible because of the glow of the flowers around them.

“Is there fae birth control? I—I can’t even think about…”

Arsen nodded, his voice firm. “There’s a drink. I can have one of the servants make the tea for you. There’s no chance of pregnancy while it’s in your system, but I don’t mind—”

Her legs tightened, and she reached for him. He set her down carefully, allowing her to draw him into her arms. Emeline kissed him, speaking against his lips. “Then come inside me. Fill me.”

He shivered underneath her touch, kissing her back enthusiastically as his hips resumed pace. It felt good, but Emeline was already spent. She focused on him, digging her heels into the backs of his thighs, tugging on the hair at the nape of his neck.

Arsen’s hips faltered and jerked once—*twice*—before she felt him spill his release inside her. He moaned into their kiss, both enjoying their unhurried bliss. Arsen was careful, rolling them so that she lay on top of

him with his cock still inside her. The kissing that followed was intimate. Meaningful. His arms were tight around her waist, refusing to let her go.

Eventually, she broke away to look down at him. There was a lot she wanted to say. Most of it had to do with the intensity of the feelings coursing through her, but Emeline didn't want to say them because of the ticking clock over their heads. Arsen's faint smile held understanding.

He pressed a kiss against her forehead, then her cheek, and last, her shoulder. "We need to get back."

Arsen pulled out slowly, the ridges along his cock stroking her walls. The throbbing ache of pleasure that followed almost had her convincing him for another round. It didn't help seeing the heat in his gaze when he stared down at where they'd been joined. Emeline could feel their combined release dripping out of her. It also didn't help when he used two fingers to push his cum back into her. There was a wicked glint in his eyes, like he was obsessed with the idea of a part of him staying inside her. Going back was the last thing she wanted to do. The flowers around them still glowed, but they flickered before dimming slightly.

Emeline nodded, sighing. "You're right. Let's get dressed and head back."

.——— ———.

Samael was in her arms as they walked down the corridor. He was happily ignoring them, not wanting to be bothered with their '*mating memories*.' Arsen had smirked at him before leading her toward the kitchen.

At the sight of the prince, a male servant stilled before straightening out. The cook made her miss Mr. Draven and the easy atmosphere of the Manor. Here, there was tension everywhere. The cook who approached them had dark hair, tied back and neat like the rest of his uniform.

"Your Highness," the fae greeted, placing a hand over his heart and bowing. "How may I be of service?"

Oh great.

Arsen was about to announce that they'd had sex and she needed fae *Plan B.*

The sound of footsteps drew closer, prompting Emeline to look over and see Lysander and Quillan walking down the corridor to them.

Oh great.

Arsen was about to announce that they'd had sex in front of almost everyone.

His snicker was diabolical. *"For what it's worth, your scent is intertwined with mine. They don't need the confirmation."*

Emeline glowered at him before he asked the servant to bring him *'spiced ginger tea.'* One meant to prevent children.

With their inhuman senses, it confirmed for Lysander and Quillan what exactly had transpired in the time they'd been gone. Emeline ignored Quillan's laugh, poorly disguised in a fit of coughing. Lysander, at least, looked uncomfortable and was more focused on the current situation than their sex life.

"Lady Caesaria is with the duke and Wyll," Lysander informed Arsen, crossing his arms. "The duke says that Haven is escalating its attacks against the Apostasy, but now Eris isn't afraid to sacrifice his army for some arbitrary '*greater good*.' It turns out that many of the fae who died on duty to protect the border came from those most loyal to the Grimwood Estate. It caused a power shift among the noble houses."

Arsen nodded, not saying anything aloud. Instead, he shifted his attention to Samael. *"The duke believes he'll fail to save Caesaria in the same manner he failed to save his wife against the king."*

Samael glanced over at Arsen, looking bored. *"He's failed her in more ways than one."*

"What's that supposed to mean?" Emeline inquired.

The dragon rested back against her. *"Life in the royal court wasn't miserable for only Sen."*

His response was cryptic, but Emeline felt she could guess the words he didn't say. A court full of monsters was no place for someone to grow up. The conversation turned more natural with Lysander and Arsen discussing the crown's movements. Riven was nowhere to be seen, whereas the king and queen hadn't left their chamber since dinner.

While Emeline waited for her tea, Quillan stood to her left with an apple he got his greedy little hands on. She took one look at his *too innocent* expression and snapped, "What?"

"Nothing," he said before biting into his apple. The *crunch*, accompanied by his smirking face, made her want to throw a vase at him. "Just wondering when I should request a promotion for guarding the future princess."

Emeline discreetly looked around.

No vases. But there was a jar of honey.

“If we survive tonight with our lives, that’s payment enough,” Lysander remarked dryly. He placed a hand on the sword at his side, eyeing the servants warily before shifting his focus to Arsen again. “There are a couple hours until midnight. Give the order, and I’ll have Quill escort her back to the Manor. Wyll’s ready with the duke and Lady Caesaria at your command.”

Quillan balked at the notion. “I’m not leaving without you.”

“You don’t have a choice.” Lysander ruffled his hair in a brotherly manner, earning the younger fae’s scorn. “A soldier takes orders.”

His blue eyes narrowed. “A soldier also doesn’t leave his comrades behind.”

“This couple’s spat of yours is entertaining and all,” Arsen drawled in a tone that let everyone know he wasn’t entertained in the slightest, “but no one will be leaving the cathedral early unless it’s our only chance of survival.”

A sinking feeling dug its claws into Emeline, making her question how likely that outcome was. For each second that ticked by, were they damning themselves? Samael was clearly on edge, too, tracking everyone’s movements. He let out a quiet snarl if a servant got too close.

It became an issue when the servant from before came back with her *Plan Tea*. Arsen took Samael, treating him again like a petulant child, but now it humored her to know it was Arsen’s irascibility, fueling Samael’s already temperamental behavior. She accepted the tea, raising it to her face.

Within the steam, she could smell notes of orange and citrus. Ginger. There was also something spicy tickling her nose and making her almost sneeze. Emeline took a tentative sip, finding it pleasant enough. The mug itself wasn’t very big, and she was done with it before Quillan finished his apple.

Lysander tugged on the end of his braid, shifting his weight uncomfortably. “Perhaps we could get help elsewhere, Your Highness.”

Arsen and Emeline shared a speculative glance before he asked, “Who?”

“The Apostasy,” Lysander said carefully, swallowing. “I know it’s risky, but how does the saying go? The enemy of my enemy is my friend?”

“I think it goes, the enemy—as I see fit—dies,” a cool voice mused from the entrance of the corridor, somewhere behind Lysander.

A hot splatter of blood painted Emeline’s cheek and Quillan’s shoulder from where he stood next to her. Emeline dropped the empty mug, the material shattering against the stone floor. She stared in shock at the arrow protruding from Lysander’s stomach. Blood dripped down from the metal arrowhead, seeping into the surcoat he wore. The green fabric turned into a deep shade of red.

Lysander fell onto his knees, Quillan barely able to catch him before he dropped to his knees too.

Emeline could finally see who was behind the guard. Riven’s manic grin cut against the sharp features of his face. His lip rings caught the light as he reached out, grabbing the back collar of Arsen’s suit and forcing him to hunch over with a harsh grunt.

“Little brother, you smell disgustingly human,” he noted, eyeing the shattered mug and then Emeline. “If it were any other occasion, I might almost be proud for finally catching you with someone.” His grip tightened on Arsen. “Unfortunately, you and I need to have a little chat without an audience.”

The crown prince didn’t give Arsen the opportunity to argue before dragging him out of the kitchen. Instead, Arsen’s snarl was for Quillan to stay with Emeline, while Samael barely resisted the urge to rip Arsen’s older brother apart. He followed Arsen and Riven, evidently more concerned with Arsen being around his brother than a dying guard.

Servants stared on, some horrified, some determined to mind their own business. Quillan stared after the retreating figures of the princes before glancing around. “Healer! Is there a healer stationed here?”

One of the servants shook his head. “No. Not for the commoners, only royalty.”

Quillan’s hands trembled, laying Lysander back on the ground. If they didn’t find help soon, he would die. Fear touched her, reminding Emeline that Sari could heal people. But then, Emeline noticed the blue-violet tint around his mouth. The skin around his lips was a clear indication that there was a lack of oxygen in his blood.

Riven had delivered Lysander a death sentence.

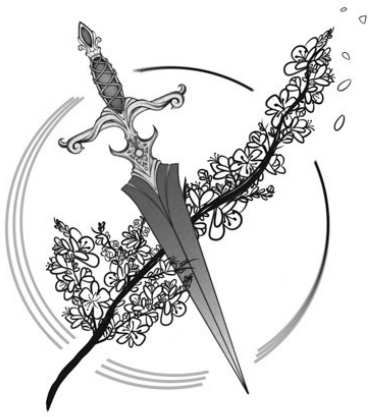
There was no one in Haven who could stop his plagues. Unless… she could convince the queen to help.

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42

A DEVIL’S BARGAIN

ARSEN



The thick door was made of oak and reinforced with iron. It didn’t stop the damn thing from cracking when Riven slammed it shut. He was furious, to say the least. Arsen gripped the edge of a desk, having stumbled forward when Riven threw him into the room. Samael was atop the desk, snarling at Riven, who stepped closer to the Second Prince.

“Relax, I wouldn’t hurt my own brother. Much.” The crown prince glowered at Arsen, the dismay in his eyes a perfect match to their father’s. “You fucked her. The human. Did you consummate a marriage?”

“In some religions, we did,” Arsen remarked scathingly, straightening out. “But no, we didn’t exchange blood.” He glanced around the room, noticing they were in Dolias’s private study. Not so private anymore considering it looked like Riven tore through it in the time they were gone. Arsen gestured to the littered paper over the floor. “Care to explain?”

“Embezzling.”

“Did you tell father?”

“He isn’t doing anything about it.” Riven’s harsh tone told him there was more to the story, piquing his interest.

Arsen leaned his backside against the desk, taking on a nonchalant pose, but he was seconds from disappearing into the other plane—into shadows—and leaving his brother to sulk here alone.

“Maybe I’d feel bad about it if you didn’t kill my fucking guard.”

Riven’s cold smile mirrored his own. “He suggested siding with the Apostasy. Or have you forgotten who the enemy is?”

Arsen had known who the enemy was his entire life. It was the fae who sat on the throne, obsessed with power and lineages. The one who had killed him as a babe, and was always searching for a way to do it again without inciting Lucifer’s wrath. He stared at Riven, refusing to vocalize the answer he knew would set his brother on a violent rampage.

Anger and exasperation warred on Riven’s face. “Are you serious?”

“I’m not laughing.”

Riven toyed with the band on his pointer finger, a habit he’d done since he was younger. It was because of Emeline that Arsen realized now it was a response to anxiety. Before, he’d thought Riven was a pompous bastard about his rings.

“Both are the case,” Samael huffed, claws digging into the desk. Soft scratching noises echoed around the room with a few parchments slipping over the edge.

Finally, Riven dropped his hands by his side. “All this over a human woman?”

Arsen stayed quiet.

The fae swore in their natural, demonic tongue. The tension in the room became palpable. “Arsen—for the love of all that’s unholy—you’ve known

her for what? A *week*?”

“Almost three,” he corrected unhelpfully.

“Three. *Weeks*,” Riven repeated with a humorless laugh, taking a step toward his younger brother. “I’ve inflicted humans with pestilence that has lasted longer than your tryst.” He scoffed the last word, adding, “If you can’t kill her, I can—”

“Do not finish that sentence unless you wish to make an enemy out of me, Brother,” Arsen said with absolute clarity, ensuring there was weight to every word. “Any move against her is a move against me. Against Samael. Against Lucifer.”

The serpent on his arm didn’t burn. The mark was cool against his skin, as if giving his approval. Arsen didn’t need the old man’s blessing, but he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t relieved.

Riven stared at him.

A slight part to his lips, he was utterly bewildered. Arsen knew his brother couldn’t understand where he was coming from. Riven had spent so much time putting the idea of family on a pedestal that he was now blinded by it.

Arsen's past was traumatic and horrifying, but in some ways, Riven’s upbringing was worse than his. At least he knew where he stood with his parents. Eris hated him, and the fae who gave birth to him left the moment she could. Riven still believed Eris cared about him, and that Liora would fight for him.

“You don’t understand—”

“Yes, Riv—I do,” Arsen cut him off, hands forming into fists at his side. “I know father will see my attachment to the human as treason. Do you think that I don’t know I’m handing him the opportunity to finally kill me? I know *exactly* what I have to lose, Riven. Samael and I both do.”

Riven’s gaze darkened. He closed the distance, grabbing the cravat at Arsen’s neck and hauling him toward him. They were practically the same height, but Riven had an inch or two on him. But where Riven was leaner, Arsen was more muscular from hours of weapons training and flying with Samael.

The creature at his side went to jump at Riven, but Arsen threw his arm out.

“Don’t,” he cautioned, *“It’s what he wants.”*

Samael didn’t stop snarling, but he did wait at the edge of the desk with his wings unfurled. The crown prince didn’t so much as blink, despite the dragon being lethal enough to rip his throat out without expending much effort.

The glow of the torchlight flickered behind Riven. It made his words ominous and his demeanor more sinister. “She is not worth dying for.”

Arsen shoved his brother back. The force of it would have imprinted the outline of a fae into the wall. It would have killed a human instantly. For the older prince, it only made him stumble back a few steps.

“She’s worth *living* for,” Arsen corrected in an icy tone. “And that means more than you could ever hope to understand.”

It was on the tip of his tongue.

Everything their father did.

All the pain, lies—but he didn’t want to risk their relationship, fragile as it was. Riven warped everyone to fit his vision, demanding full control of the situation. He’d created a version of his family that didn’t exist, and Eris allowed it because it helped to carry out his own agenda. Arsen was the only one who challenged it, and yet, for some reason, Riven still believed he could conform.

“Your attachment to her is ridiculous.” Riven took a step back toward the door. “This ends now.”

Before he could disappear, Arsen darted forward and grabbed his wrist. *“Wait.”*

The fae’s nose scrunched, smacking his hand away. “Don’t wrinkle my clothes. I’m not a savage.”

“No, you’re a fucking prick.”

“That’s not very nice,” Riven mused, triggering a memory.

The night Emeline opened up to him about her miscarriage and how she’d said the exact same thing before he’d sent Samael tumbling off the bed. If it weren’t for the fact that Emeline was human, his brother might have gotten along with her. The thought of the two of them—three, counting Samael—ganging up on him made him want to shove iron through his skull.

“Neither is threatening my woman,” Arsen retorted, the claim slipping off his tongue.

Riven pinched the bridge of his nose. “Great. Now he’s putting a collar on her.”

Arsen snorted inwardly.

If anything, Emeline held the leash.

His brother continued. “You do realize that Father’s not going to let her live past tonight. This spat—this arguing that we’re wasting time on—is all for nothing because Father *is* going to kill her.”

He was so *sure* of it that it made Arsen’s heart pound with dread. It made his chest feel tight, like he needed to run. He pushed the panic away, focusing on Samael circling them in a predatory manner. Riven glanced sideways at him, clocking his movements, but didn’t move to a defensive stance.

“What if we made a bargain?” Arsen asked nonchalantly.

Samael stopped dead in his tracks, sitting back on his haunches. He stared at Arsen with narrowed eyes. *“Sen? Have you lost your mind?”*

“Huh? What’s going on?” Emeline’s voice piped up, hearing Samael’s disgruntlement. *“Is Arsen alright? He’s not dead if you’re still alive, right?”*

“Depends on his answer,” Samael drawled back to her. *“Where are you? Still with the dead guard?”*

Emeline sighed. *“He’s not dead yet. I’ve got an idea.”*

That couldn’t be good. Arsen shook his head, realizing that Riven had asked him a question and he’d been distracted. It didn’t take a genius to guess what it was likely about.

“Yes, a fae bargain,” Arsen reaffirmed with a nod.

He tried to appear indifferent about it, but fae bargains were shrouded in notoriety and legend. Even humans knew of them. Every word was always carefully chosen, and to break one meant death. Arsen had never made a bargain before, and he wasn’t sure if Riven ever had.

Suspicious, Riven spoke slowly, “What are the terms?”

He resisted the urge to grin.

If Riven was hearing him out, then there was a chance.

“You might be right about the human.” Arsen crossed his arms, giving his brother a level stare. While he spoke, he made sure to keep his heartbeat steady. “Her lifespan is the blink of an eye for our kind. What sense does it make to wage a war against our father if she’ll be dead in the next century?”

Samael made a low, whining noise.

Riven’s attention drew to him, but Arsen kept speaking. “However, I won’t deny that I care about her. You’ve been able to tell since the Devil’s

Tav back in Scaleridge. So, afford me this kindness." Arsen swallowed, choosing his words with the utmost care. "Allow me to kill what Emeline fears most, and afterwards, I'll take her back to the human realm, where I'll never see her again."

His brother's eyebrows scrunched together. "What's Emeline's worst fear?"

"That information is personal."

"Why would I agree to something without all the details? Do you take me for a fool?" Riven snapped angrily. "I'm the heir to Haven. You can't trick me."

"Don't think less of me for this," Arsen chided, not looking at Samael.

The dragon huffed, smoke billowing from his nostrils. *"I think you're a fool regardless. Let me eat him."*

Arsen cleared his throat, purposefully making his swallow visible. He allowed his voice to shake as he looked at his brother, his eyes widening slightly. "I wasn't trying to trick you. But you're right. It was stupid to think you'd ever go into a fae bargain with me. After all, I'm only your half-brother." He made his lip quiver, glancing away. "My own mother didn't want me. Why would you trust me?"

"This is pathetic. Truly pathetic and I'm embarrassed to know you." Samael reflected in a disdainful tone, *"You're a terrible performer, and no one would be stupid enough to—"*

"No, Arsen—that's not it." Riven frowned, stepping forward. "Look, whatever the pest is afraid of, I'm sure that you'll be able to kill it. Fine. Is that all for the terms? You know you must give up something in return if you choose not to carry out the bargain."

"—I take it back. He's related to you, so of course he's an absolute moron." Samael's tone turned pleasant, but there was still a cynical note to it.

Emeline interjected, *"What the fuck is going on over there? I'm going to find—"*

Arsen tuned her out, needing to focus on Riven and what he was about to say next. If he wanted to protect her, then this needed to go perfectly.

"I will kill what Emeline fears most, and then I'll bring her back to the human realm, where afterwards, I will never see her again," Arsen repeated slowly, holding Riven's calculating gaze. "If I choose not to kill what she

fears most, then I will allow my brother five orders which I must follow unconditionally."

Riven's eyes twinkled with anticipation. He loved having authority over others, and to have any power over what his unpredictable, trouble-making little brother did—it was the ultimate prize.

Arsen added the last part of the bargain, knowing that it would either make or break the deal. "Until Emeline's fear is destroyed, you are not to harm her, nor will you give the order for anyone else to harm her. Should Emeline get hurt because of you, you will forfeit your right to the throne."

The crown prince held out his hand, summoning one of his arrows. There was a slight purse to his lip as he thought over what Arsen had said before slicing open the palm of his hand. Arsen bent down slightly, holding out his hand. He didn't flinch when one of Samael's claws tore through the inside of his palm.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Samael grumbled.

"Don't I always?" He straightened out.

Samael's reply held no hesitation. *"No. You don't. That's why we end up in trouble nine times out of ten, and I have to fly us out of some hellish situation."*

Arsen shifted his attention from Samael to his brother, holding out his hand. "Do we have a bargain?"

"One sworn with blood," Riven agreed, an unhinged grin spreading across his face. "I, Riven Seaspire, Crown Prince of Haven and descendant of the great Leviathan and the Master of Archers, accept the terms of this bargain." His brother clasped his hand, light flaring from where they were joined. "Until the human's—Emeline's—worst fear is destroyed, I am not to harm her, nor will I give the order for anyone else to harm her. Afterwards, you will return her to the human realm, where you are to never see her again."

The light grew brighter, and the air thickened around both fae princes. Riven's voice was imbued with power and authority as he described more terms within the bargain. "If you choose not to kill what the human fears most, then you will allow me, your delightful older brother, to choose five orders which you must carry out within a year's time. If *I* violate the terms of this bargain and harm the human—Emeline—then I will forfeit my right to the throne of Haven."

Arsen nodded, his voice equally as unrelenting. “I, Arsen Seaspire, Second Prince of Haven and descendant of the great Leviathan and His Majesty of Hell, accept the terms of this bargain, sworn in blood.”

Heat seared through Arsen’s hand as the bargain was struck. The light dimmed between them. Riven let go of him, opening his mouth to speak, when Arsen threw the first punch. His knuckles cracked against the left corner of Riven’s mouth.

Grimacing, the other fae took a step back. He briefly touched his bleeding lip, staring back at his red fingertips. “Again. Not very nice.”

“That was for murdering my guard,” Arsen said flatly. “Lysander didn’t deserve that.”

“Yes, well, if my plan is working—then your reckless little human is on her way to see if Mother will cure the fae of his plague,” Riven replied with a bloodied, sickly sweet smile. “But don’t worry, I didn’t give the order, nor will I harm her myself.”

Arsen practically shouted the words in her mind. *“Where are you?!”*

“Jesus fucking—inside voice?!”

Samael was no less quiet. *“Emeline?!”*

Her tone was both annoyed and frantic. *“What? I’ve been trying to find—”*

“Where are you?” Arsen cut her off, already heading toward the door.

There was no answer.

Only the sound of Samael beating his wings hurriedly down the corridor as Arsen disappeared into the shadows.

.——— ———.

She wasn’t in the kitchen, but neither were Quillan and Lysander.

The servants had them moved to an area outside but nearby. It made sense not to have someone riddled with disease in the same area where food was prepared. He saw Quillan kneeling down beside Lysander, looking distraught. A line formed between his eyebrows, a pang of sorrow hitting Arsen, but it was largely outweighed by panic.

“Where’s Emeline?” he snapped as soon as he caught sight of them.

“She went to go find a healer,” Quillan bit out, resentment coating his voice. “The cook said the healer here wasn’t for commoners, only nobility. Emeline went to go argue.”

That was something she would do.

But what Riven said still bothered him.

“You’re certain she didn’t try to go find Queen Liora to cure Lysander?”

Quillan shook his head once, his mouth tightening. “She brought up the idea, but I said no. It isn’t safe when the queen is always with the king.”

“Do we believe that Emeline followed his advice?” Samael inquired doubtfully.

Arsen wanted to say yes, but a sliver of doubt reminded him of her reckless bravery when someone around her was in trouble. She’d considered him the enemy when she’d pushed him out of harm’s way at the orphanage.

What would she do for Lysander?

He glanced down at the dragon, seeing the same anxiety running rampant. *“Find her. Her scent will be easier to track down while it’s still mixed with mine.”*

Samael nodded, disappearing into the night.

The dragon had about fifteen minutes of searching before Arsen lost his temper and leveled the entire fucking cathedral to find her. To an extent, Riven’s plan had worked. He’d counted on a human’s empathy to be their undoing, and he’d gotten Arsen out of there to stop him from making sure she didn’t do anything impulsive.

Arsen had been alive for 533 years, but he’d never felt his age until it was Emeline playing roulette with her mortality. Could his hair turn gray this early?

Lysander’s choked, wheezing noises drew his attention. Quillan rushed forward, trying to sit him up and open his airway more. A futile endeavor. Whatever disease Riven had decided on, it was a slow death, starting with cyanosis.

His nose wrinkled as the scent of fear became almost overwhelming. They were outside, but even the fresh air couldn’t carry away the fear of a dying fae and a friend gone too soon. It certainly couldn’t take away Arsen’s fear, which was the perfect match for Emeline’s.

Underneath the glow of the moon and nearby torchlight, Lysander reached toward his collar. There, tucked from underneath the surcoat, he pulled out an intricate stone wrapped with black macrame netting. The stone itself was in the shape of a teardrop and mottled with shades of dark green, terracotta, and a ghastly salmon color.

Arsen always found it ugly when he saw it.

Lysander's hand shook, pulling it off his head before holding it out to Quillan. "You're brash and your footwork needs work. Ask Wren for help." His voice was full of brotherly disapproval, and Arsen understood quickly that this would be the sort of death that Quillan would hold onto for the rest of his life. "Don't hold a grudge—" He stopped short, going into a fit of coughing.

The younger guard took the necklace, but there were angry tears in his eyes that refused to fall. "Stop acting like you're dying. Your stupid stone isn't going to make everything better. Emeline will find help."

"Not—" Another cough rattled his body. The spasms didn't stop, but Lysander continued, "—stupid."

Quillan looked up at Arsen angrily. "Can you heal him?"

"I can put him out of his misery."

"So you can finish the job your brother started?" he snarled, fingers curling around the stone necklace.

Lysander made a disapproving noise. "Quill."

"He's right to be angry," Arsen reflected, crouching down beside the dying guard. "I'm sorry."

The guard grinned weakly. "Kick his ass for me, Your Highness."

Arsen nodded, offering him a smirk despite the scent of his fear growing stronger. Lysander didn't want to die. He wanted more time with everyone.

"Happily."

Lysander went to say something, but then his body seized. It was a subtle jerk, but it sent his eyes rolling back, and when his eyes closed… they didn't open again. Quillan's tears finally fell, hitting his clenched fist. They slid onto the pendant when he opened his hands to look at it. Arsen straightened out, ordering the guard to take a step back. He listened, but Quillan's eyes were distant.

With a snap of his fingers, flames erupted.

Lysander's soul would leave this realm and travel to the sacred part of Hell, where Lucifer rewarded fae worthy of benevolence. The firelight danced across Quillan's face and reflected off his tears.

"Is Emeline in danger?" the guard asked finally.

The thought sent a wave of panic over him, but he crossed his arms and did his best to keep the anxiety out of his voice. "Samael will find her."

“How can you be sure?”

“There is nowhere Emeline could go where we couldn’t find her,” Arsen said without a shadow of a doubt.

The prince went to say more when Samael’s voice entered his mind. *“She’s in the main aisle with your guard, the duke, and his daughter.”*

She was with Wyll and Caesaria?

Relief struck him, but it was quickly replaced by confusion. Why were they in the main aisle? Why wasn’t Emeline responding to him? Was she unintentionally blocking him out? Without asking, Arsen channeled more of Samael’s powers to see through his eyes. He had to see what was happening.

The nave came into view from where Samael was situated in the center of the doorway. A long carpet-runner decorated the center walkway, showing depictions of how Leviathan left Hell to wreak havoc on mankind. Samael’s gaze swept from the high, vaulted ceilings to Leviathan’s statue at the altar.

Carved from white stone, the grand serpentine figure overlooked the chancel, where several figures stood. Looking down the way, Wyll, Caesaria, and the duke were on the right side. The queen was on the left, her face devoid of any emotion. It was a stark contrast when Wyll and Caesaria looked both angry and concerned. The duke had his hand on his daughter’s shoulder, encouraging her to step back, but she wasn’t having it.

Then Samael’s eyes landed on Emeline.

Their little nightmare, who was standing front and center, glaring up at the king. The same king who tortured and abused him now held a ceremonial blade.

For the first time tonight, Eris gave a satisfied smile.

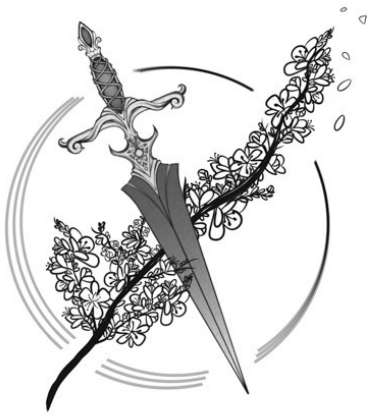
Right before driving the blade down in front of him, tearing into flesh.

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THE ALTAR OF LEVIATHAN

EMELINE



Sari let out a blood-curdling scream as the blade entered Wyll's abdomen. Emeline hit the ground, pain scaling up the left side of her body. Her forearm had taken the brunt of the fall.

Eris had aimed for Emeline's heart, but Wyll had shoved her out of the way and had been stabbed in the abdomen instead.

She saw Sari crying out, trying to go to her beloved, but the duke grabbed her around the waist and was now hauling her back. Emeline scrambled up, her disbelief warring with the sight in front of her. Eris's lip curled at what he must have thought was a shameful display of emotion. Using his end of the metallic staff, he struck Wyll's face. It sent the already wounded fae's body tumbling to the ground. Emeline winced at the sound of Wyll's sharp inhale, the groan of agony escaping him when he rolled over onto his back.

"Not a step closer, beast. Or the queen will inflict the same disease that took out the Roman Empire on the human," the king scorned with a cruel smile.

Emeline turned her head to see Samael halting on the carpet so abruptly, the runner had him sliding half a meter forward. When she looked back at the queen, Emeline was startled to see three small, silver arrows glinting from between the queen's fingers like a hellish *Wolverine* cosplayer. If she was going to die, she'd rather see Hugh Jackman than two abusers and their sadistic spawn.

Ignoring the queen, Emeline clambered over to Wyll, who was holding a hand around the ceremonial blade. The handle was made of jade, with intricate silver runes mirroring the ones on the front of the cathedral.

While she hadn't been a corpsman, and her fae medical expertise was limited to drinking Arsen's powerful blood, she didn't think pulling out the blade was a good idea. Where was Arsen to offer his blood? Besides the weird comments earlier, she hadn't a clue where he'd gone. If Riven was here, why wasn't Arsen? Had they separated earlier?

"Where are you?" she called out, her voice tinged with desperation.

It took seconds for Arsen to appear at the end of the cathedral hall. Emeline had only become aware of his presence when she saw heads snapping toward the entrance. He stood there, not coming closer, and Emeline thought it might be because of Eris's earlier threat to Samael.

"Let me *go*." Sari's eyes flashed an incandescent blue color, the red mark glowing against the swell of her breast.

The duke's eyes widened, allowing his daughter to push her way out of his grasp. Surprise swam in his eyes as Sari dropped to her knees before Wyll, brushing a lock of his hair away from his face. Sweat already beaded on his forehead. His complexion was turning sickly, but he still cracked a smile for her.

“I hope you don’t mind an ugly scar,” he quipped, voice soft.

Sari had tears forming in her eyes. “How could I? When you’ve seen all of mine and still found them beautiful?”

They’d bathed together, and Emeline hadn’t seen any. Her scars must have been figurative. She hoped everyone who’d hurt Sari at some point in her life had gotten what they’d deserved. Eris made a disgusted noise, drawing everyone’s attention back to him. Samael growled low, his anger far more menacing than anything she’d heard before.

“Damaged goods?” Eris reflected, glaring down his nose at the couple.

Sari ignored him, attending to Wyll’s wound. “This is going to hurt, but only for a second, love.”

Without waiting for an answer, she removed the blade and allowed it to clatter against the stone floor. The moment Sari’s hands were placed on top of his wound, Eris reached out his hand, turning his palm up. His skin color became a graphite shade of blue. Emeline saw his nails form into black claws, looking as if they could cut through anything. Scales formed on his hand and on his cheekbones as he channeled Leviathan’s power.

Eris reared back his hand, swiping forward in a diagonal motion.

Claws tore deep into flesh.

Tears fell down Sari’s face as she turned her head to see her father, gripping his shoulder. The duke stood protectively in front of his daughter and her husband. A disgusting, helpless feeling rose in Emeline as the people around her were hurt—and she was human.

What could she do?

The crown stood in front of her, all with the power to end her in the blink of an eye. She swung her attention to the center aisle, seeing Samael gone. Her eyebrows furrowed, wondering where he went.

“*Sam? Arsen?*” she tried again.

Nothing.

Emeline tried to meet Arsen’s eyes, but his were locked on the altar where his father stood. She wished she could know what was going through his mind. Why was he standing still? Did she want him to step in? How to balance the worry of having him in danger with the very real fear that her friends were at death’s doorstep?

With that fear, there was also a deep, intense rage. When she focused solely on Eris, Emeline only felt hatred. That ill will flowed to the queen. Then to their spawn, who was staring down the aisle at his younger brother.

“Pathetic,” Eris noted sourly, shaking his head. “Centuries of building this kingdom to become what the humans once feared, and you decide to turn your back on it. Tell me, Draec Grimwood, how would your wife feel about your daughter being wedded to a lesser fae? The very ones who killed her—”

“—You don’t get to talk about Jaiyana,” the duke gritted out, gripping his shoulder tighter. Emeline wondered if it was to stop the bleeding, but it only made it worse. Was the pain grounding, then? Blood seeped between his fingers, deepening the color of his suit. “She was smarter than me and tried to have us leave earlier. I didn’t listen to her and—”

“—She’s dead, and you’re not,” Eris finished, eyeing the blood on his hand. He scowled at the sight of it, but it disappeared moments later. The change was gradual, but his hand shifted back to normal. “That is about to change. Pity. You were useful until you weren’t.”

Emeline pressed her lips together, praying to whatever deity that was listening. Not for help to get out of the situation, or even for Wyll to start healing faster—but for her to keep her mouth shut so she didn’t make the situation worse. She wanted to unleash a spew of hatred from her tongue that made her feelings known on how the king was treating everyone around him.

She took one look at Sari, noticing her eyes hadn’t ceased their incandescent glow. Wyll’s blood was all over her hands, still gushing through her fingers. Whatever fae healing magic she was using, it wasn’t working as quickly as she needed it to. Wyll’s breathing was the only thing slowing, and it became labored all too soon. It wasn’t a normal blade Eris had used.

He was in obvious pain, but Wyll kept a smile on his face.

One she’d never seen before, that softened his features.

It was a smile only for Caesaria.

Emeline looked away again to Arsen. His posture was stiff. Shoulders squared. Fists clenched so tightly, they faintly shook. She could imagine anxiety and indecision had his boots chained to the floor. One move and the queen would kill Emeline with no hesitation.

But Wyll was mortally wounded.

Sari was almost killed.

The duke was hurt, but not fatally.

“Your greed will be your undoing,” Sari’s father said finally, wincing as he straightened out. “You think that Oswyn and Maerissa will support you if the tides shift with the Apostasy? Do you believe the fae, who will inevitably become tired of war won’t turn on you? Your reign is coming to an end, Eris. And we all know who will be the cause.”

Four heads turned toward Arsen.

The king. The queen. The duke. And Emeline. The latter only turned her head back when a heavy gaze fell on her. Her eyes met Riven’s. His brows were scrunched together, clearly trying to work out a problem he didn’t know the answer to, but everyone else did. He appeared even more confused that she knew something he didn’t.

It was then that Emeline remembered.

She smiled blithely. The bastard didn’t know about the truth behind the sacrifice nor Lucifer’s prophecy. He didn’t know the king would meet his end because of Arsen. She almost wanted to croon, ‘*I know something you don’t know.’* Part of her wanted to shout the truth at him.

But if Arsen wanted to have a relationship with his older brother, then it wasn’t her truth to reveal. That needed to be a conversation between both brothers in private.

“Everyone always has something to lose,” Eris mused, drawing Emeline’s attention back to him. The chilling part wasn’t his words but that he was still staring at Arsen. “Like the spare and his pet who finally have a shared weakness.”

Eris took a half-step in her direction.

A tremor ran through the entire cathedral.

Emeline thought it was vertigo, even though she was kneeling beside Wyll. However, when small pebbles and stones began falling from the ceiling, Emeline looked toward Arsen to see that a crack had split through the center aisle. Half the runner was now in a meter-wide crack, and she wasn’t sure how deep it was. It stopped just before the altar, starting right in front of Arsen.

His glare was downright murderous.

“What you call a weakness, I call a strength. Because now I can finally say I’m so fucking tired of staying quiet. The duke is right. I will be the reason your reign ends, as Lucifer foretold centuries ago.” His golden eyes brightened with wrath. In the dark, haunting lighting of the cathedral, he

truly looked like a demon. “If you don’t want that end to be tonight, you will leave.”

The distance between them was easily thirty meters, but when Arsen spoke—it was like he was standing right in front of them. His voice carried the threat and power of not one devil, but two.

Contempt swam in Eris’s eyes, an endless pool of scorn and disdain. She almost flinched at the realization that this was the same gaze Arsen saw when he was being tortured. She’d never been tortured, just as Arsen had never miscarried. He couldn’t understand what it felt like to lose a pregnancy, and she couldn’t understand what centuries of abuse could feel like. But what she could see was that it took strength to stand up against an oppressor. Against an abuser.

And she was proud of him for doing so.

For even trying.

Wyll struggled to sit up, but Sari shook her head. Her voice broke. “Don’t. I’m trying. The blade was cursed. I need you to stay still while I try to work past the magic.”

“It’s my duty,” Wyll coughed, covering his mouth as he struggled to breathe. Blood stained his palm. “I need to protect him.”

“You saved her,” Sari said gently, desperation laced in her words. Guilt lashed at Emeline, but there was no blame in the lady’s voice. Sari carried herself regally, staring down at Wyll. “You did well, *love*.” Her voice cracked on the last word.

“Caesaria, you need to go.” The duke stood with his back to her. “You—”

“She—” Wyll coughed again. “—makes her own decisions.”

Eris arched a brow at the exchange before sliding his gaze over to the duke. “I see that you cannot even control your heir. You’re worthless to me now.”

His decision was made. Emeline couldn’t keep up with the king’s movements. One second the duke was standing protectively in front of Sari and Wyll. In the next, he was dropping to his knees. Blood was pouring out from the open wound at his neck.

And his head was rolling down the steps.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Sari’s mouth dropped open, stuck in a silent scream. Wyll’s eyes widened, but he reached up and cupped her cheek, trying to shift her attention away from the beheaded body of her father and the rolling noise at the end of the altar steps. The air filled with the scent of blood and the heaviness of grief.

Riven learned beheading from his father, and Arsen learned how to rip out hearts from his own father figure. Did no dads teach fishing anymore?

“Kill the pest, Riven,” Eris ordered, not turning to look at his eldest son. “The human is a nuisance if your brother is behaving this way. It’s for the good of our family.”

The good of their family?

“What would you know about family?” Emeline snarled, standing up. “You don’t care about them. Not their well-being. You only care about how *useful* they are.”

“Riven,” Eris prompted.

She looked to the crown prince, daring him. Riven’s lip twitched as if amused by something.

He bowed his head toward his father, placing his hand over his heart. “Unfortunately, I am unable to harm her. For now.”

Eris turned slowly, hearing Riven’s refusal. Surprise and betrayal made hasty appearances across his face before Emeline saw his expression even out.

Riven straightened, explaining, “I made a bargain with my little brother. I can’t harm the human until he kills what she fears most.” The corners of Riven’s lips turned up at her obvious disbelief, speaking to her directly. “He also plans to send you back to the human realm and to never see you again. Although, I never promised I wouldn’t hunt you down afterward.”

Emeline turned her head, believing that Arsen *would* make a crappy deal to *‘save’* her. It sounded like the plot for any predictable movie. Self-sacrifice was fucking asinine, and she’d be damned if he thought she’d let him get away with that bullshit. “*Greater good my ass*,” Emeline thought angrily.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you fucking serious?”

“I made a bargain.” Arsen had the audacity to grin at her.

There was a lovely display of ceramic vases lining the walkways. Her fingers itched with the desire to smack him over the head. Repeatedly.

“*You can’t get rid of me so easily,*” she snapped, unsure if she’d get a reply or not.

Emeline didn’t, and she wondered why.

Did the cathedral have its own magic that barred her from hearing Arsen? Or were his walls up so high right now that nothing could get through? Where was Samael? Quillan? Not having a connection with either of them hurt. The thought of a future back in the human realm without them terrified her.

Arsen’s manic grin cut through her fear. “And my delightful older brother agreed to it without knowing what Emeline’s fear is.”

Eris’s voice behind her sounded stiff. “He wouldn’t be so stupid.”

“Well, you’ve spent almost a millennium manipulating him. It was quite easy for me to do it as well,” Arsen replied blithely.

She bit her lip, refusing to laugh.

No, she was mad at him right now.

“Last time I do anything nice for you,” Riven retorted glumly. “Maybe I will hurt her. I can forfeit the throne, but who’s to say I can’t earn it back again.”

“I will not have a bastard on the throne,” Eris’s words shook with his building rage, making Emeline flinch at the sound of it.

She looked down at Sari, noticing the lady was still trying to heal Wyll while her entire body was trembling. That feeling of helplessness made a lump form in her throat. Wyll was staring at Sari like he knew he would die any second now, but it would all be worth it if he could see her before he closed his eyes for the final time.

They should have had more time too.

Eris moved swiftly, his skin turning into keeled scales as he grabbed Emeline around the neck. The scales were hard and cold against her skin. Emeline gasped as he lifted her off the ground, her hands scratching at his grip—but the scales were impenetrable. Her nails did nothing.

“Put her *down,*” Arsen bellowed, the force of his snarl shaking the entire cathedral. More stones hit the altar, some the size of a baseball and others mere pebbles.

Eris ignored him. “Tell me your fear, pest.”

Emeline felt her fight or flight instincts kick in. The urge to flee was stronger, knowing that she could never hope to fight him off. But she swallowed her anxiety and chose violence. *Always*.

“My fear?” She forced a smile, her voice raspy. “Would be having a manipulative son of a bitch for a father. You don’t deserve Arsen—”

She sucked in a pained gasp, regretting it immediately when her airway didn’t allow her a second breath. The cathedral’s rumblings grew, forcing someone she didn’t realize was by the statue to appear.

Dolias.

“Your Majesty—”

Eris paid him no mind, turning his head to where Arsen stood. “Her. Fear.” He spoke through clenched teeth. “What is it? My foolish heir ought to know what he agreed to.”

In the corner of her eye, she saw Riven flinch. *Aw, poor baby.* At least he wasn’t having his fucking throat grabbed by a demonic fish-man. *Aquarus* popped into her head, and Emeline almost wanted to laugh. She needed to stop with the superhero references while being on the brink of death.

At least Wyll had Sari next to him.

She was going to have her neck snapped soon with Samael missing and Arsen too far away.

“Let her go, and I’ll tell you,” Arsen reasoned, a promise of death hiding in his easy tone. “You want information. You won’t get that if you kill her.”

To her utter surprise, Eris did.

Emeline’s hand flew to her throat, her breaths coming in short, wheezing pants. She stumbled backward, almost falling down the altar steps. It was Riven who grabbed her arm, hoisting her to her feet—and it wasn’t out of kindness. It was a better angle for his terrifyingly stoic mother to stab her with miniature death arrows if need be.

“Well?” Riven piped up, his patience waning. “How do you believe you’ve bested me, Brother? Because there isn’t anything I can’t kill—”

“Hope.”

Everyone stared at Arsen. Emeline frowned, wondering if she’d heard him correctly. He *had* said hope, right? Not Pope? Religion didn’t scare her; it infuriated her. She was still pissed with God even now.

Riven scowled. “What? What about hope?”

Arsen’s eyes glimmered in the low light. “Emeline’s afraid of hope. It’s the same thing that I’m afraid of because it requires vulnerability. Having hope means admitting to myself that I wish I had parents who cared about

me. A father who brought me into this world to raise me, not sacrifice me. A mother who taught me what unconditional love is."

Arsen's jaw clenched and lips pressed together as he struggled to rein in his emotions. Emeline knew that he was being vulnerable here, admitting to everyone wishes he'd thought had died long ago. It was no wonder he was closed off; he was likely doing everything he could not to have a panic attack. He was in survival mode.

"Hope means allowing myself to feel pain because every time you tortured me in the dungeons—I still had hope you would stop. That you would realize you were torturing an innocent child, and you'd change."

A humorless laugh left Arsen. "Hope means wanting a future and learning to live with grief and trauma instead of avoiding it. It's the thing with feathers. It's the internal flame in the hearth." This time, Arsen's grin turned feral, and for a moment, Emeline thought all of his teeth had sharpened, but it could have been the light. "Hope can't be killed. Per the terms of our bargain, *Brother*, I'm not *choosing* not to kill Emeline's worst fear. I *can't*."

At his words, respect glinted in Riven's eyes. But he did nothing, guessing Arsen's next words before they were out. Eris, on the other hand, looked vehemently bitter and resentful. Which son was that directed at?

Arsen finished, his chin rising slightly with victory. "Which means you can't harm her. Ever. We'll be stuck with this bargain."

Emeline didn't have the time to fully process it, but part of her knew Arsen was right. She was scared about wanting a future with him in the Den. It wasn't safe, but she chose him and Samael. It was scary to feel like she belonged somewhere when that same place rejected her. How could somewhere that felt like home also be dangerous? Emeline hadn't been afraid of the pregnant fae in the dining hall—she'd been afraid of what pregnancy could look like for her based on her past experience.

Would she lose another baby to unexplained complications?

Would she lose herself to grief again?

With each passing moment, fear sunk its claws deeper into her, and she had to repress those emotions. She had to shove down all the questions she had for Arsen like—*when did he figure it out?* Because now wasn't the time.

Not when the King of Haven was walking toward her again. Definitely not when he looked set on killing her. His eyes were inhumanely cruel. A

whirlpool of despondency, ready to drown her.

Emeline staggered back at the same time the crack in the cathedral splintered up the altar steps. Riven and his mother stepped back. Eris stopped, eyeing it before glancing at his youngest son. Sari ignored it, in favor of healing Wyll—but nothing was changing. He was still bleeding out.

He was still dying.

Emeline meant to take a quick look at Arsen, but her attention was captured by the sight of him. He had started walking down the aisle, past the pillars, when tiny particles of light appeared, floating toward him. His white suit turned black, and the style shifted to a high-collared jacket with gold buttons trailing down the front. Black trousers matched the top, lined with more gold down the sides.

When Arsen spoke, his voice was deep and raw with divine power. “If I cannot bend the will of Haven, I will move Hell.”

She could only stare as the light formed a white, flowing cape. The shoulders were ornamented with golden scales, reminding her of a dragon’s. The Morning Star decorated each side of the cape above his biceps. A snake eating its tail tied the ordained cape together.

An overwhelmingly bright light flashed, blinding her. Emeline blinked a few times before she saw a gleaming sword with a polished handle in Arsen’s hand. It looked familiar, like she’d seen it before.

It looked… it looked like the mark on his neck.

Everything about his new attire looked… familiar. Where had she seen this before? What’s more, there was now more light forming a circle around Arsen’s head.

“I am not your spare. I am not yours to command.” Cracks formed underneath Arsen’s footsteps, and now he was halfway up the center aisle. “I am Arsen Seaspire. Descendant of the great Leviathan and His Majesty, the King of Hell.” His voice grew darker, drenched in malice. Celestial fire burned within Arsen’s eyes, almost making him difficult to look at. “I am the Crown Prince of Hell.”

The light around his head formed a crown. Emeline couldn’t make out the finer, more intricate details, but she could see there was a jeweled dragon at the front of it with a diamond in its mouth. The outline of him was a celestial glow, similar to the light she’d seen from the serpent when it came alive at the orphanage.

He was no longer the Second Prince of Haven.

Arsen had accepted his true calling as Lucifer’s heir.

The Crown Prince of Hell stopped right before the altar, only a few steps away now from Emeline. The scars on his face appeared harsher, brought out by the light filtering around him. He was beautiful.

Arsen glared up at his father. He took a deep breath before saying every word that followed with absolute clarity. “From this day forward, Dragon’s Den is at war with Haven. For the pain you’ve caused, the lives you’ve taken, and the people who no longer wish to serve a tyrant king—I am declaring war.”

Several emotions hit Emeline, but the most raw one was disbelief. Arsen didn’t want war. He didn’t want to lead or be responsible for thousands of fae. But when his eyes met hers, so briefly that it stole her breath—Emeline had her answer. If it was to save her and their friends from Eris, he would damn the entire realm.

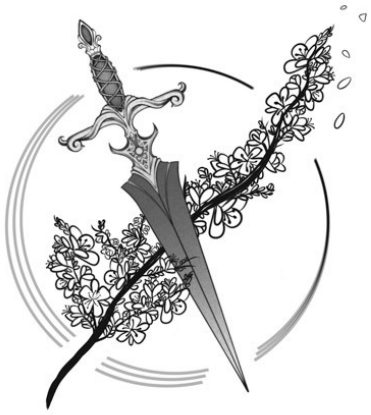
The Crown Prince of Hell lowered his voice, wrath coiling around his words. “Leave now with your wife and son. Or I will kill you where you stand.”

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THE END OR THE BEGINNING?

EMELINE



Emeline was going to be diagnosed with irregular heart palpitations if she made it through tonight. And probably more trauma. The only sounds came from Wyll’s shallow breaths and Sari’s whispered affirmations. Sari told him he was strong. She promised they’d get through this. Unfortunately, her mark kept flickering, as if her healing abilities were waning.

Eris stood, unmoving, on the altar.

Riven was subtly glancing between the king and Arsen; the only visible hint of his indecision. His apathetic mother hadn't moved, still holding her arrows between her fingers as she awaited Eris's decision regarding Emeline.

"Do you know…" the king began slowly, his lip rising at the corner with contempt. "…what it would mean for the realm to be at war?"

Arsen's smile made her wonder if it was the same one David gave before he slew Goliath. It was as contemptuous as it was confident. "Do *you* know? Because instead of going to war, you sent your eldest son when he was a child—*alone*—to cull the human population. He gave you the time that you needed to make a sacrifice. To create a realm you could run away to like the coward you are."

Eris raised his staff to strike a blow, but Riven stepped forward, away from his mother and toward the king. "Father, perhaps it's best if we leave. It's not fitting for tempers to get between family—"

"This human-lover is no son of mine. He's a traitor to his kind." Eris flicked his attention to Wyll, whose eyes were closed now. "Enemies of Haven will always fall."

Emeline held her breath, straining to see if Wyll was still breathing.

It was faint, barely perceptible.

Sari wasn't giving up on him.

"Enemies of Dragon's Den will fall first," a new voice retorted, causing everyone's attention to shift to where Quillan stood behind the queen. His blue eyes took in Wyll's dying form, and a glint of revenge shone in his eyes. He met Riven's gaze head-on. "This is for Lys."

A gut-wrenching noise erupted from the queen's chest. Emeline saw the tip of a sword protruding from the center of her sternum. Riven let out a murderous snarl, his bow appearing in his hand with a bright flash of green light. Before he could lunge for the guard, Eris grabbed the back of his suit. They disappeared with whispers of smoke taking up the space they'd been in.

Emeline whirled back to the queen, seeing her glance down at the sword. Arsen was suddenly in front of Emeline, pulling her behind him and almost causing her to fall down the steps. *Again*. His hand found the small of her back, and she clutched his austere cape—ready to chew him out. It was then that she caught a glimpse of the queen.

Right before the light left her eyes, Liora smiled. A genuine, relieved smile, warming her icy demeanor. She was more beautiful in that moment than ever before. It almost felt like a *‘thank you.’*

Arsen’s head turned toward Dolias, who was staring in horror by the statue. “Take the queen’s body to Haven, and get the fuck out of my sight.”

Dolias didn’t meet his eyes.

He hurried forward, disappearing with the queen’s body. No doubt he wanted to earn favor with the king by being useful.

Stepping out to be at Arsen’s side rather than stay behind him, Emeline stared at Quillan. Then she looked at Arsen, wondering if this was something he’d ordered him to do. Surely, not—right? He wouldn’t want to hurt Riven like that.

Arsen’s jaw clenched, a burning intensity in his eyes. His mind was working out a problem she was desperate to understand. To know. Whatever he was thinking, Emeline thought about their priorities. What needed to be done *now*?

Wyll.

Wyll needed their help.

Arsen must have thought something similar because he kneeled across from Sari, asking, “My blood? Do you think his body could handle it?”

“It wouldn’t hurt to try.” Hope blossomed in her voice.

Reality took it away. Emeline wasn’t sure if it was Wyll’s heart stopping that had Quillan dropping to his knees, or the sound of Wyll choking on his own blood. Arsen wouldn’t be able to feed him his blood if he couldn’t swallow. He’d been bleeding internally this whole time, and Sari’s magic had done absolutely nothing to heal him. When the gurgling noises stopped, less than a second later, Emeline knew the truth.

Wyll was dead.

There was no saving him now.

Sari’s hands trembled over his wound. “This is my fault. If I didn’t take the blade out, he would have had more time. You could have tried to save him. I…”

Arsen opened his mouth, but the grief hit Sari first. At losing her father and the love of her life in one night. She threw her arms over Wyll, giving her body over to the sobs wracking through her.

Her cries filled the cathedral.

A choir of shattered dreams and love with nowhere to go.

Emeline’s eyes welled with tears, unsure if it was right to comfort Sari when she was the reason why Wyll had died. He’d protected her when they’d barely begun to be friends. Survivor’s guilt stopped the apology in her throat, but it didn’t stop the tears from sliding down her cheeks.

It was then that Arsen’s barriers dropped.

Not to comfort her, but because he was lost in his own memories and grief.

She saw a younger version of Wyll, looking no more than ten years old. His hair was a lot shorter as a kid, falling above his eyebrows. If it weren’t for his lilac eyes, Emeline wouldn't have recognized him. He was dressed like a servant, struggling with a large wooden tray of iced drinks, carrying it over to a shady patch of grass, where a younger Sari and Arsen sat nearby.

It looked like a picnic, but they were both consumed by their own leisure, content not to interact.

To Emeline, Arsen appeared to be a couple of years older, but she knew he’d been alive for two centuries before he’d met the other two fae. The prince had what looked like a worn copy of a poetry book in his hand, while Sari was weaving Samael’s flowers together with long blades of grass. The cheeky dragon followed behind Wyll, terrorizing him by snapping at his heels.

“Your Highness, please—” Wyll stumbled, glaring over his shoulder at the creature. “Will you control Samael?”

Arsen glanced over, a wicked grin falling on his face. “Where’s the fun in that?” He lay back, placing his arms behind his head. “Did Mr. Draven teach you how I like my coffee? Don’t waste it by spilling it on this spoiled princess.”

Wyll placed the drinks down, but before he could answer Arsen, Sari reached forward and placed her half-done crown on top of the servant’s head.

She beamed a pretty smile at him. “You have pretty hair. You should grow it out.”

Emeline snapped out of the memory as Arsen’s hands curled into fists on his lap. She knew he was blaming himself too. They all were for one reason or another. Why was it that when someone died, those who survived always carried the burden of living? The fog called to her, but she embraced her grief. She used the pain to ground her and be present for the people she cared about.

But how could she help?

How could she give hope to the situation?

Emeline's eyebrows drew together, wondering if there was a way to bring him back. Fae had souls, right? Hadn't Sari told her as much the first time they'd met? Heaven and Hell existed—and the Crown Prince of Hell was kneeling next to her.

"Isn't there anything you can do? Can you ask Lucifer?"

Arsen shook his head. *"He only acts on his own ambition. Asking to bring a friend back to life would hardly amuse him."*

Maybe not Lucifer… but what about Astaroth?

Emeline willed herself to speak past the lump in her throat. Her attention landed on Sari. "Astaroth excels at making deals in exchange for souls. You told me that in the kitchen at the Manor. The first time we met. Can we make a deal for Wyll's soul?"

Sari lifted her head, blinking a few times to clear her vision. "What? Where would we—"

"You and I both know what's available," Arsen pointed out flatly. "We can draw his mark in your father's blood while it's still warm and see if you can strike a bargain with him."

Sari balked at the idea. "You think I could stand to use my father's soul as—as coin—to—what? Save Wyll? How could I live with myself? Bartered souls become servants to Astaroth—I couldn't do that to my father."

Arsen nodded with a sweet, understanding smile. Emeline could imagine her hackles rising if she had any. Instead, goosebumps prickled along her arms. Without another word, Arsen walked over to the duke's body and stepped on his back. Blood gushed out like he'd stepped on a juice box. Emeline understood his mocking smile now. Sari wouldn't be able to offer up her father, but Arsen had no fucking qualms about it if it meant getting his Wyll back.

This time, as the stench of blood filled the air, she did cover her mouth. She gagged and tried her best not to throw up.

"Our future will be bloody, little nightmare. Take this time to decide if you really want to be with me," Arsen replied in a clipped tone.

She frowned at the distance he was trying to create. What an idiot.

"Don't think we're not going to talk later about your bargain. And when the hell were you going to tell me about figuring out my fear? It would have

been nice not to have been blindsided by your asshole brother," Emeline retorted, watching him dip his hand into the blood pooling out of the duke's neck.

Sari flinched, looking pale herself. Quillan looked like he wasn't sure if he should be offering to help or staying near Wyll's body. Emeline figured that because he didn't have the same demonic pedigree as Arsen and Sari, he wouldn't be powerful enough to summon Astaroth. In the end, he watched alongside her.

Arsen walked over to a cleaner section of the altar. There was a bit of debris from falling rocks but nothing the prince couldn't take care of with a wave of his hand.

He spoke to her through their bond as he started drawing out the same mark Sari wore onto the stone floor. *"In the forest, when I asked if you wanted to go back to the human realm, it forced you to think about the future. It prompted you to subconsciously think about what you wanted."*

Her hopes about wanting to stay had surfaced.

That's when he'd begun to suspect.

Arsen inclined his head in a short nod. *"The flowers—Hell's flowers—feed off hope. They were a gift from God to remind Lucifer that sinners will always hope. Even he who says he doesn't want to be welcomed back into Heaven—the flowers remind him that he still hopes to go back one day. Hell's flowers are depicted in all of Lucifer's paintings in the Den."*

Emeline smiled at the thought. It was a strained relationship between God and the Devil, but hope was something they had in common. Hope that the other would change. Is that why there were so many depictions of Hell's flowers at the Manor? Did Lucifer hope that Arsen would change and accept his duty as the Prince of Hell?

Arsen lifted his head when Sari appeared beside him. Her face was tear-streaked, but there was determination set in her shoulders. She didn't hesitate to dip her hand in the puddle of blood.

"Some things will never change," she murmured, loud enough for everyone to hear. "You're still terrible at drawing pentagrams. Your runes are messy. Maybe if you'd had my father to tutor you, like Riven, you wouldn't be a lost cause."

Arsen rolled his eyes. "You can add it to the list of things Riven is better at than me." He paused. "How do you think he's going to handle Liora's death?"

“You know how he feels about family. Did you tell Quillan to do that?”

Quillan grimaced, speaking up when he met Arsen’s glower, “His Highness did *not*.”

“Then why, in Astaroth’s name, would you do that?” Sari spoke with restrained anger, most of her focus on correcting Arsen’s mangled star. “What made you think *‘let me kill the Queen of Haven’* was a good idea?”

“For Lysander. And everyone else who’s been trapped by the king and his brutality,” Quillan clarified, a defensive tone coloring his words. His blue eyes darkened and Emeline wondered if he was remembering Lysander’s death as he answered. “It hasn’t exactly been a true haven under their rule.”

“Samael.”

“I’m aware, Sen.” Emeline went to look around when Samael’s voice spoke up again. *“Don’t look for me, Emeline. I’m waiting in the shadows.”*

Why?

What was going on?

“Three dots on the end of that point and then it should work.” Sari pointed to a part of the pentagram closer to Arsen. He nodded, starting on the set of triangular points. “Whatever, Quillan. Just know that Arsen will have to deal with the fallout of what you did, and the crown will turn the queen into a martyr. You’ve given the king the perfect ammunition to put Arsen in the ground and rally the fae still loyal to the crown.”

Emeline cringed at that.

Suddenly, his trying to create distance was a correlation with the severity of their situation. She hadn’t even considered what the queen’s death would do for justifying war in Haven’s eyes. He was still an idiot for attempting to push her away, but she could understand. What would she do if the situation was reversed? What would a war between Haven and Dragon’s Den look like?

Quillan had the decency to bow his head in shame.

“I’m going to move next to Emeline,” Samael told his other half.

Arsen’s rebuttal was quick. *“Don’t be impulsive. Stay.”*

Samael’s question was mocking. *“Shall I ‘woof’ too?”*

If it wasn’t for Wyll lying dead in front of her, she might have laughed. Arsen didn’t crack a smile or have his usual amusement lurking in his eyes. He was focused on the task ahead. Emeline bit the inside of her cheek, unsure of what to do or how to help. God, if she wasn’t so fucking use—

“You brought up making a deal with a devil,” Arsen interjected, taking a moment to reassure her. His eyes were a bit softer, but agitation was creeping in. *“You haven’t been in the realm for long, but you were quick to offer a solution. You’re not useless.”* He hesitated but added, *“And you’ll learn more the longer you wish to stay.”*

The moment Arsen finished with the mark on the ground, a fire erupted from the center of the pentagram. It followed the blood, treating it like it was flammable. The fire burned so hotly that it scorched Astaroth’s mark into the stone.

But it was brief.

And no one appeared.

Emeline didn’t know what she expected, but her shoulders sagged in disappointment. It didn’t work.

“Left corner. Against the pillar,” Samael called out in their minds.

Arsen stood up straight, turning in the direction Samael had pointed out. Emeline followed his gaze, seeing a dark figure leaning against one of the pillars. He appeared to be in his forties, with chestnut hair. It fell to his shoulders in waves, all suave, matching his overall demeanor. Dressed in khakis, brown loafers, and a dark-blue dress top—this devil looked more like a modern-day broker. That was unexpected considering Lucifer had dressed in scaled armor.

Perhaps each devil had their own style.

“You called…” Astaroth mused, pushing off the pillar to stride up the walkway and take in the duke’s body. “Pity. Remaining level-headed is an important quality for my line. It’s never good to lose your head.”

Oh no.

Don’t laugh, don’t laugh, don’t laugh. She repeated it in her mind because it *wasn’t* the right time, but Emeline was a huge fan of coping with dark humor. Quillan nudged her, looking at her like she was crazy. While he looked panicked to be in a devil’s presence, Emeline didn’t really fucking care. She only wanted to know if he would help them.

Astaroth’s eyes were as blue as Sari’s, and he seemed to appraise her. “Your father’s soul for what? To bring back this lesser fae?” He gestured to the dead guard. “I have enough servants. This deal doesn’t interest me.”

He turned as if to disappear when Sari called out. “Wait!”

Astaroth stopped short. He arched a brow. “If you waste my time, I’ll kill you.”

“What if I give you a soul that you would want?” Sari bargained, raising her chin tenaciously. “The King of Haven. Eris Seaspire. Give my lover his soul back, and I’ll make sure you get what’s owed to you.”

“Sam?”

The dragon growled low in his mind, answering Arsen’s silent question. *“She doesn’t have to be the one who kills him. From what Lucifer has said, you are the reason his reign will end. All she needs to do is summon Astaroth while the blood is still warm.”*

Emeline gave Arsen a subtle, questioning tilt of her head. *“Then it’s possible?”*

“What if you don’t succeed?” Astaroth’s mouth curled up at the thought. “What shall I get if you fail?”

Sari frowned at the devil. The air shifted as the tension became heavier. “What do you want?”

The devil gestured to Emeline. “I want her soul. For no other reason than getting on Lucifer’s nerves.”

Arsen stepped in front of her. “Watch your tongue unless you’d like to lose it.”

“You accept your crown after half a millennium and think that you can tell *me* what to do?” Astaroth’s voice became deeper, quieter, and no less menacing. “Careful, prince. I am not an enemy you want to make.”

“No.” Sari descended down the stairs, speaking in the same tone Astaroth had. Her voice dripped with hostility. “*I* am not an enemy you want to make. Nor will I offer up anyone’s soul other than my own. You bring back my husband, and you’ll have the soul of a king. If you want to get on Lu—” She corrected herself, seeing Astaroth’s eyebrows raise. “—His Majesty’s nerves, then you know he must want to see Eris suffer at his hands.”

Astaroth considered this. Seconds ticked by as the silence droned on. The air, still reeking of blood, became suffocating. Finally, a glint of respect shone in his eyes at the manner in which Sari stood up to him. A smirk crept onto his face, and he held out his hand. “I accept your deal. A soul for a soul.”

Sari took his hand, flinching almost imperceptibly. A heartbeat later, he was gone, and the court lady was left looking at the palm of her hand. Emeline wondered if the deal had been sealed into her flesh.

A reminder of what she owed.

Who she owed.

A groaning noise nearby had everyone looking at Wyll. He was sitting up, placing a hand where his now healed wound was. Arsen walked over, holding his hand out for Wyll to grab. When she hadn't been paying attention, he must have used magic to clean all the blood off.

When the guard took his hand, Arsen stated in a sour tone, "I didn't give you permission to die."

Emeline's eyes watered, relief coursing through her. She walked over to join them, speaking up. "Oh good. I wasn't nearly done getting on your nerves."

"Thanks. The both of you," Wyll remarked in a dry tone, but he was already searching.

Looking for someone.

And then his eyes landed on her across the church, where Sari was staring at him with silent tears rolling down her cheeks. His eyes warmed, lit with affection and tenderness. Emeline didn't think when she did it—sliding her hand into Arsen's—but it felt right.

He squeezed her hand gently, the corner of his lip turned up in amusement when he spoke to Wyll. "Caesaria struck a deal with Astaroth for your life. The least you could do is go thank her. And give her an orgasm later."

"Solid advice," Emeline quipped, a smirk forming. "More than one, of course."

Wyll was torn between looking shocked and amused, but it was the kick in the ass he needed to run down the stairs. Emeline leaned into Arsen's side, her heart warming at the sight of the two fae embracing. Wyll's back was to them, but she knew he'd leaned down to kiss Sari. Her hands moved, embracing Wyll, and Emeline caught the sight of a gleaming red mark within her right palm before that hand raked through blond hair.

She glanced away, relieved that she could finally take a breath.

No one else had to die tonight.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Arsen let her go as Samael dropped from one of the rafters, crashing straight into Quillan.

The fae let out a startled shout, falling back. He wheezed as Samael laid one of his foreclaws against the guard's throat, snarling. Venom dripped from his fangs, *sizzling* as it met Quillan's leather armor. Instinctually,

Emeline went to try to break it up. Arsen wrapped an arm around the front of her waist. He pulled her back to his chest, and she looked up, bewildered.

His focus wasn't on her.

"Arsen?" Wyll's voice called out, sounding closer when he spoke again. "What's going on?"

Arsen didn't answer him.

"For Astaroth's sake." Sari sounded irritated. "Can we not know a moment of peace? What's wrong with Samael?"

Emeline knew Arsen was choosing the right words, not ignoring the others. She waited patiently, placing her hand on his forearm in silent support. But she was curious and, admittedly, a bit annoyed. Quillan was her friend. What did he know now that the others didn't? That she didn't?

"I should have picked up on it sooner," Arsen reflected, letting go of Emeline to move to where Quillan lay.

She watched him place his sword against the base of Quillan's throat while Samael took his place at Emeline's side. She reached down, picking him up and holding him protectively.

Arsen continued. "It would make sense that Gisela's husband wasn't working alone. Apostates rarely do. When there's one, there's an infestation. Tell me, did Lysander know who you were when he vouched for the orphaned, starving fae from the drylands?"

Quillan didn't look worried. The innocence Emeline always thought he had, that was so unlike any of the other guards, disappeared completely. He smirked but said nothing. The blue of his eyes darkened as they all waited for the prince to speak again.

"When he died, Lysander told you not to hold a grudge. It wasn't about Riven killing him; it was your grudge against the Seaspire line." Arsen was painting a picture Emeline didn't even know existed. All she could do was listen as he colored the betrayal. "You stiffened when the duke described Eris's recent attack because you hadn't known about it yet. You spoke to Caesaria about a true haven, which sounds suspiciously close to the Apostasy's motto. What is it again? *'The Apostasy will free the realm and create a true Haven for all…'*"

Arsen let out a low chuckle, completely devoid of amusement. It was menacing. She watched him, dread pooling in her stomach, as he pressed the tip of the sword harder against Quillan's neck. "You weren't on guard duty the first time we went to Scaleridge. I'm willing to bet if I asked the

other guards, you weren't around the Manor during that time. That's why my brother was snooping around Scaleridge. The Tav. Riven was looking for *you*."

Emeline heard Wyll suck in a sharp breath from somewhere beside her.

Sari's voice was full of disbelief. "It's you. You're the Speaker. The one who's been recruiting fae for the attacks on the border."

Quillan's smirk grew. "Go ahead and kill me. You won't get any information out of me. I won't betray the leaders."

"Kill you?" Arsen's grin turned feral. He looked at Emeline and then Samael in her arms. The prince slid his gaze to Wyll and Caesaria before something like resolution set in his expression. The same look Lucifer might have had before he declared war on Heaven. Arsen looked back at Quillan, taking the sword away from his neck. "I need allies in a war. You killed the Queen of Haven. The least you can do is arrange a meeting."

"You want to join the Apostasy?" Quillan stood up, incredulous and maybe a little suspicious.

Arsen shook his head. "I want to win a war *with* the Apostasy."

Emeline glanced subtly over at Wyll and Sari to see their stunned expressions. Wyll looked like he was ready to die again, but this time, out of shock.

Arsen's next words were only for Samael and her. *"I'll win this war and make this place safe for you, little nightmare. I'll make it safe for both of us to have hope."*

"Fine. I'll arrange it," Quillan said slowly, looking between Arsen and Emeline. "But it will be on the Apostasy's terms. For our safety."

The fear of hope was still present, as well as the grief, but it wasn't overwhelming. Hope was scary, but the thought of losing the people she cared about was scarier. Emeline held Samael tighter, enough so that he complained, despite snuggling back.

She met Arsen's gaze through the thick tension hanging in the air. Her thoughts were as determined as he was.

"I'll fight too. For us."

He winked, a wicked grin on his face with eyes that now held hope.

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READY FOR BOOK 2?

Devils of Haven Book 2 is currently being written and planned for a 2027 release. To stay up to date with release news, please consider heading to www.askeeperbooks.com to subscribe to my newsletter, and following me on instagram @ SallowsKeeper.

If this book made you Samael's #1 fan, fueled your caffeine addiction like Arsen, or made you laugh - I'd greatly appreciate it if you left a review on Amazon, Goodreads, Fable, etc! Your review will help new readers fall in love with these wicked devils!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I made the decision to write this book, staring at my twins' urns on Nov 4th, 2025. Exactly 1 year after I miscarried twins at 18 weeks. In that year, I struggled with my mental health greatly while navigating a male-dominated job that didn't understand how I couldn't just 'get over it.'

Losing my girls was the worst pain I've ever felt and the infertility journey is a lonely one. While writing A Devil So Wicked, I faced surgeries and more losses. I write this acknowledgement while going through another IVF cycle.

Writing a book about 'taboo subjects' like grief and early loss made me hesitate, but it was that hesitation that drove my resolution. Because - why is miscarriage taboo? Why is struggling with mental health taboo?

I wanted to open up a discussion in a safe environment using dark romantasy as a medium. If it weren't for my girls, this book wouldn't have been written.

Thank you to my husband for being patient while I consumed too much hot chocolate and spent day and night hunched over my laptop like a little gremlin. Thank you for giving me a home where I feel safe to grieve.

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Thank you to you, for giving this book a chance. I know it might have hit a little close to home, but I hope you felt safe in the pages. I can't wait to welcome you home again with book 2.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.S. Keeper is a dark romantasy author who highlights sensitive topics like grief and loss within her works. She's a fierce advocate for women's healthcare and often talks about her own struggles with infertility and loss.

She grew up in the U.S. and Honduras, instilling a love for travel and adventure early on. She lived abroad in Japan for a few years before coming back to the United States to start a family.

Unfortunately, infertility and loss would plague her, leading her to use storytelling as an outlet. She's been writing for years in different forums, but wanted to reach a broader audience to talk about grief with.

Thus, A Devil So Wicked was born, and it has become a love letter to those grieving and trying to heal.



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