



COURT
of
FURY
COURTS AND KINGS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
K.A. KNIGHT

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Court of Fury (Courts and Kings).

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Edited By Jess from Elemental Editing and Proofreading.

Proofreading by Norma's Nook.

Cover by Jay at Simply Defined Art.

Art by Dily Iola Designs

Character Art and Chapter Art Design by Dily Iola Designs

Interior Formatted by The Nutty Formatter.

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Content includes: explicit sex, explicit violence, torture, stalking, gore, depression, murder, imprisonment, PTSD, loss of a child, voluntary cannibalism, dismemberment, sexual assault, dubious consent and much more.

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PROLOGUE

“**N**o! Mother, please! Mother, help me!” I bellow, struggling in the arms that drag me backwards towards the onyx entrance. “Mother, please!”

She watches me dispassionately, her bright eyes as cold as her heart. There is no familial bond or love there, even as her daughter is thrown into hell. “Mother, please believe me!”

At my words, she simply turns, her dress coiling around her like a snake, and walks away, leaving me to my death.

“Mother.” I sag in the arms holding me, my bare heels digging into the rock as we plunge into darkness. My last sight is of my mother’s retreating back. The betrayal lies thick on my tongue, and I feel sick to my core, but as the darkness conceals the rest of the world from me, reality sets in.

If I don’t escape, I’ll die, so even as my heart breaks, shattering in my chest, I force strength through my skinny body.

“Let me go, I’m innocent!” I roar as I twist in their arms, trying to free myself.

They just laugh as they continue dragging me.

“I am. I was framed. Please, let me go. I have money—”

“Your mother has money. You have nothing. Don’t you see, girl? No one can save you now.”

Fear pounds through me and sweat slicks my body as a cold chill makes me shudder.

Their leering eyes lock on me. “We could have our fun with her before we toss her in. She won’t survive an hour in there. It would be a waste.”

Their meaning is clear, and my eyes widen as fire burns inside me.

“No!” I wrench my arms from them and begin to run. Their laughter chases after me as sharp black stones cut into the soles of my feet. My blood makes me slip, and my chest heaves from fear as my tattered dress catches on the rocks surrounding us. The darkness consumes me as I plunge deeper into the earth, searching for a way out.

I don’t understand their amusement until it’s too late, my arms windmilling in the air as I try to stop my descent as I gape in horror. The rock ends abruptly in an opening that stretches as far as the eye can see. A yawning black hole dropping down into the bowels of hell. I ran exactly where they wanted me to.

Despair and desperation fill me as I stare at the darkness, knowing what awaits me down there. I’d rather die up here than go below. Spinning, I hang my heels over the edge of the jagged rock as I hold up my arms to ward off the leering men coming for me, their faces contorted with lust and greed.

As the door wardens of hell, it’s their job to carry out the sentence, yet the violence in their eyes lets me know they are no better than those they escort.

“Please,” I repeat, even knowing it’s useless.

“She begs so sweetly. It won’t save you though.” One chuckles, and I spare a look at the black hole behind me, knowing what lies in wait deep in the earth.

Hell, or as close to it as you get in this world.

I have been marked for death, and not even the fury filling me from betrayal can stop this.

Whipping my head back, I find one of the men in front of me, and my eyes widen as he places his palm on my chest and shoves. My scream echoes around the cavern as I tumble backwards over the edge, plummeting into the darkness below.

It feels like I fall forever, my body flipping and turning, my hair whipping back as I choke on air that seems to heat the farther I fall. Pain suddenly explodes through me as I slam into a rock protruding from the side. It pierces me, ripping my skin, before I plunge deeper. I feel my blood pump from the open wound as I struggle to breathe, and then I hit another rock with my left arm. It instantly goes dead and hangs from my shoulder limply, then I crash into the ground.

The blow knocks me out for a few seconds, and when I awaken, it's to feel so much agony, I can't breathe or think. When it eases slightly, I lift my head, and a choked whimper escapes my lips as I look around.

The cavern is light enough to see, since I'm in a circle of light, but in the darkness beyond, moving shapes are called by my screams. They inch closer, and I try to sit up, but my body doesn't respond. When I look down, I realise my legs are bent at odd angles. My left arm won't move, and my side is badly injured. Blood seeps into the sand and rocks below.

I'll be dead before they even get to me, but part of me won't allow that. Choosing a direction at random, I grab some of the sharp rocks protruding from the ground and drag myself forward, slicing my fingertips to pieces in the process. Each slide of my body on the ground is pure agony, but I keep going, refusing to give up until my hand hits something smooth. In dawning fear, I lift my eyes to the dark boot then up to the man's face as he leans down. His mouth stretches impossibly wide to show rows upon rows of sharp teeth.

Screaming, I throw myself back into the circle, but the pain steals my consciousness for a moment. When I wake, I turn my head, trying to keep my eyes open, but there are so many monsters watching me hungrily now. I spy a vampire and a wolf, and those are only the ones I can name. The worst of the worst are gathered, the monsters the world could not control and rejected, who were thrown into hell for their crimes.

"Well, well, well, look who we have here, boys. New prey." My eyes meet the sharp-toothed man's face as he steps into the light, revealing one big eye in the middle of where two should be. It blinks at me as he flashes those sharp teeth once more. "She's mine first."

A chorus of roars echoes as he grins wider, staring at me through that one dark eye. "Welcome to Gehenna, girly, though I suppose you won't survive long enough to see any more of it than this. Let's feast!"

Curling around myself, I try to staunch the blood leaking from my side, knowing it's only enticing them, but it's useless. I'm losing too much, and I feel one of my lungs caving in. I'm dying, and my vision is blurring.

I start to pass out. Maybe it would be better not knowing what they will do to me, but if I do, I'm dead.

I guess I'm dead anyway.

As the monsters and men converge on me, I close my eyes then give myself over to the darkness trying to claim me.

My last thought is of all the life that was stolen from me and the people who did it. I wish I had enough power and time to get revenge.

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CHAPTER ONE



Ten years later . . .

My eyes narrow on the warden who is trying to escort me, and he gulps as he steps backwards, his face paling. He has to tilt his head back to look at me, and I purposefully step closer to tower over him. My teeth flash in a feral grin as we turn in unison and head into the dark opening, the rock calling to us. We do not run. We walk calmly, and when we reach the edge of the opening, I glance back at the door wardens, as they call themselves. Their fear fills the air. I can taste it.

“You’ll be responsible for finding your own way out,” the captain calls, still terrified despite the money we gave him to get us through the entrance. We expected this, after all. Men who can be bribed cannot be trusted. Ignoring them, I turn my head forward without a word, and the five of us step over the edge and drop into the darkness.

During the fall, we remain silent, my eyes adjusting quickly enough for me to see the obstacles reaching for us.

Kicking off the rock that spears from the wall, waiting to impale me, I twist mid-air and bend to absorb the impact when we finally reach the ground.

We do not need words—their thoughts are mine and mine are theirs. It’s how our brains work, a connection that cannot be explained or severed. As one, we turn and step from the circle of light into the darkness. We only make it down a short, slim tunnel before we break into a bigger cavern. The

same dark rock surrounds us, and in this one, I sense creatures lingering, but one cannot hide in the shadows. His thick, leathery, green skin makes him stand out, as does his ten-foot height. He leans forward on his crude throne as I approach him. I could walk around the maze forever and never find who we need, so it's better to ask directly. Our exit will only work if we are in and out within four hours.

Stepping towards the troll, I run my eyes over him. "We are looking for someone."

"You do not look for people in hell, boy," a voice calls, and I turn my head to see a huge man step from the darkness. His tattered, holey fedora sits wonky atop his head, and he grins, flashing sharp teeth, as one eye meets mine. "You simply die or run and never stop. Welcome to Gehenna."

My hand lifts and catches a creature that flung itself at us from the dark, and without looking, I crush its neck and drop it to the ground, watching the man. The others in the shadows look to him. He's the one we need. "We can make it worth your while."

Emrys steps forward and tosses a bag towards the man. It spills open, showing supplies that are more important than gold or riches down here. We did our research. Their food and drink must be scavenged and found, leaving them to fight over their dwindling, scarce resources.

Gehenna is not an ordinary prison. It was built deep into the earth, without an exit and only a hole for an entrance. Those who are sentenced are thrown in to die either by the elements, madness, or the other prisoners' hands. The worst of the worst are down here. It surprises me that the one we are here for has survived this long. It's almost unheard of, especially since she is female. She is the only known living woman in residence.

He stares like most do, trying to figure out how we work so smoothly together. He doesn't pick up the bag, though, and the monsters I see through the others' eyes do not take it either, which indicates he is powerful indeed. "Whatchya want, boy?"

"A female named Oriana. She was sentenced here ten years ago."

The room falls silent, and in my team's eyes, I see some of the monsters retreating at the mention of her name, which makes me frown, but I keep my eyes on the sharp-toothed man.

With a dark chuckle, he kicks the bag back to me. "I'll tell ye where she is. I don't need no payment for that. Watching her rip you all apart will be payment enough."

“So she is alive,” I confirm.

“Aye, but she doesn’t go by that name anymore, not since she entered the doors of hell.” He chuckles like this is the best thing to ever happen. “Follow me.”

With little other choice, we toss the bag to waiting monsters as a distraction and follow the man into the darkness. We move through different tunnels, spotting more monsters. No one knows the layout of Gehenna, and the god who built it died down here. Its depth and size are truly unknown, but once you are inside, there is no way out. For the courts of the world, it’s a good dumping ground for their criminals. Most deal with them in their own ways, but some either cannot be killed or are sentenced differently, and that’s when Gehenna comes in.

A bogeyman of our world, used to threaten others to behave.

“Tell me everything you know about her,” I demand.

To kill a monster, you must first understand it.

“You want her dead?” he guesses correctly, grinning at me. “Most do and have tried, worse monsters than you.”

“How do you know we aren’t here to save her?” I retort.

His laughter echoes as he stops at a tunnel exit and turns to us. “She doesn’t need to be saved. She’s a queen down here, and this is her castle. Only a fool would say something like that, and despite your intentions, you do not look like a fool, but fool or not, you will still die.”

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He steps back, letting us see the tunnel that opens into a huge, circular cavern where glowing blue water resides. There is another dark tunnel across the water.

He nods at us. “This is as far as I’ll go. Do not fall into the water, as it’s Serancha’s territory.” He whistles and disappears into the darkness behind us. Eyeing the water, I agree with Torrin’s thought that this will be difficult.

Golems are not made for water. We sink, and I cannot swim, but every problem has a solution.

Raiden and Bram simply start solving the problem, and within seconds, Raiden shifts, and with Torrin's strength, he's tossed across the water, landing on delicate paws on the other side of the tunnel. His bright white and blue fur is stark in the darkness, and lightning races across his fox's body. Bram simply leaps up onto the ceiling, carefully forcing holes into the rock with his hands, and swings one-handed across the impasse. He lands next to Raiden, who has shifted back, and with a grin, he leans into the wall and waits. Torrin and Emrys follow Bram's path, and when Emrys is a good distance out, I leap up and hold onto the rock, ready to follow them. When I'm halfway across, something hisses below and breaks the surface as rocks tumble into the water, awakening the beast.

"Serancha, I guess," I say as I stare at the creature that rises from the depths below me. It looks like a mix of a kraken and a mermaid. It's horrific and beautiful at the same time, with fangs gleaming in a human yet flared face, but as it rises, the rest of its body is that of a beast, with scales covering it as it propels itself from the water. Before it can wrap around me and drag me down, I simply let go and sink into the water. My weight instantly carries me down. Pulling my blades free, I slide across its body. Its roar and hiss shake the water as it splashes and circles around me, coiling its body tightly like a snake, but I simply change. My skin hardens to pure rock, dragging me deeper as I drive my blades into its chest. The beast's eyes widen before it uncoils and lets go, its blood filling the water. Leaving it to its death, I hit the bottom of the pool and walk across it. It slowly angles up, then I climb the rocky edge, hauling myself up and out, dripping wet.

"So much for not making a mess," Raiden jokes as he winks at me and turns, sauntering away, his other thoughts flowing through my head.

Torrin nods at me and follows Raiden, while Bram looks me over before we continue on our way.

The tunnel goes only one direction, and before we know it, we step through another entrance. Unlike the past cavern, this one is massive, bigger than most castles we have been inside. The black rock reflects firelight that burns deep below, the flames reaching the surface we stand upon. There are more rocks floating in the air that lead to a floating platform above us. I spy a crudely made bed and other personal items, but

it's the woman who draws my gaze. Her back is to us, but I cannot look away.

Is she the one we are searching for?

She's easily six foot, and not one inch of her is soft. The muscles on her arms and back are defined, flexing under golden, scarred skin as she turns. Her chest and stomach are exposed, the dips of her defined abs impressive and sexy as hell. Her thighs are thick and muscular as she wanders to the edge of the floating platform and looks down at us. Her hair is a bright blonde at the roots, then her locks fade to bright orange then yellow, falling to her shoulders with a slight curl. She's beautiful and has a face I have only seen on statues, but her features aren't small and delicate. Her face is made of hard angles with sharp lines. Her eyes glow, and one of her eyebrows has two slashes through it, but she is so striking that something stirs within me as I stare at the woman. "Fresh prey? I haven't had anyone to play with for a long time."

I try to regain my composure, knowing the others are experiencing the same struggles. She is not what I expected at all.

Should we still go ahead? someone mutters in my head.

We have our job, I reply.

With an impressive show of strength and control, she leaps from the platform and glides like she weighs nothing, then she lands before us, looking us over with her magnetic eyes.

"Do you not speak? How dull. I don't get many visitors." I follow her gaze to the pile of bones tossed haphazardly to the side.

"I like your décor," Raiden teases before our thoughts silence him.

Her eyes run over us. "Let me guess, Bodhi sent you?" My eyes widen in shock, and she laughs. "I wondered when he would grow tired of waiting for me to die down here. If the one person who knows the truth still lives, they could ruin it at any time. So, you're assassins? Not normal ones, since most wouldn't step foot down here, not for all the money in the world, especially with no way out . . . or do you have one?" Her eyes sparkle with intelligence, another surprising thing.

How is she not mad?

I stay silent, and she sighs. "How boring. You are pretty though, the prettiest ones who have tried to kill me, but I'm afraid you won't be doing that today. Your deaths will be so sweet, and knowing he failed again turns me on."

My eyes bulge as flames burst to life in the shape of glowing wings behind her as she smirks at us, like a goddess looking down at the weaklings worshipping her as she stops before me. Close enough that her strength presses against mine, our eyes almost level, she's so tall.

"I might as well have some fun before I kill you." She slides her hand into my hair and pulls me closer, pressing her lips against my hard, stony mouth, catching me off guard for the first time in my life. This is something I can use, though, so I raise my blade to sink it in her back while she's distracted, but my hand spasms and drops the weapon. Desire blasts through me so strongly, my rocky exterior cracks and my soul screams. I don't understand why until realisation comes through Bram.

Mate bond.

I feel it snap into place, and horror washes through us all as I pull myself away from her.

Laughter bursts from her lips as she watches me, clearly feeling it as well and knowing what it is. "Well, isn't that interesting? I guess that ruins your plans."

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CHAPTER TWO



I stare at five matching incredulous expressions while concealing my own.

Mates . . . but not just one, five. I can feel all of them, as if they are connected to the first man I kissed. The awareness and connection solidify in my chest, ready to be consummated and united forever. My eyes land on the man I kissed, as I sense he does most of the talking. I wouldn't say he's in charge, since they almost feel the same to me and I swear their eyes turn distant, as if they are conversing between themselves. It's little things, like mannerisms, that make me think that. Down here, you learn to read people well enough to survive.

Take the man I kissed, for example. There is not any fat or softness on his body or face. He's wide, but his physique is pure muscle, the type that doesn't have chiselled abs but pure strength. His arms are bigger than my entire torso, as are his legs, and his face is thick and wide with matching thick lips, but they were hard, like granite. The sides of his head are shaved, leaving the rest of his deep brown hair pulled back on the top in a bun. The shaved sides also have markings, but I don't know what they mean. His beard, despite looking a little unruly, is long and tame, matching the colour of his hair. His eyes are bright grey with flecks of amber and are surrounded by thick, dark lashes. His nose is wide, matching his face, and there is a streak of war paint across one eye and down his sharp cheek.

"Not possible," he rumbles, his voice like crashing rocks as his fists clench at his sides. He's danger incarnate. I have no idea what kind of

monster he is to have survived journeying here, nor do I care, as long as he can get me out.

The tallest of the men steps closer to the first's back, his dark eyes almost evil in appearance and filled with malice. His face is sharp and beautiful despite his towering size, and his form is slim and lithe but defined. He is undeniably beautiful in a way that would draw gazes in every room, though that seems to almost annoy him. I meet his eyes boldly as his beautiful lips twist in a sneer like a wild gorgon brandishing their teeth when threatened.

A slightly red scar crosses his nose, and he has another on his cheek. His hair looks black in this light and lies messily across his face, hanging to just above his ears and covering his forehead. I see gilded ornaments along his ears and some scattered in his hair.

He almost seems to glow in the dark chamber.

"Not possible," another man adds, and I look at him.

Their words are mocking, as if for me and not for them. I wonder how much that bastard is paying them to have such conviction to not only travel to Gehenna, but to kill me, and especially now when faced with this unexpected mate bond. Regardless, I was wrong. This last man who spoke is the biggest of them all. He is pure muscle, his golden skin swathed in little more than leather skirts and silver gauntlets on his arms, as if he cannot find clothes or does not want to. His chest is the size of the dragon I once slayed down here, and just as wide and impressive. He has ink on his right shoulder that seems to move as I look, unable to make out the details. His beard and moustache are trimmed, and his dark eyebrows slant down over glowing orange eyes. His hair is clipped tightly on the sides and spikey in the middle, framing two twisting horns.

He's some sort of animal, but I'm not sure what.

I glance from him to the one at his side who remains silent, watching me with a disinterested expression. His eyes are pure black, no pupils at all, and his hair is the same, the matching black tipped in red and messily falling around his head. He's narrow, almost slim compared to the others, but I see muscles beneath his loose clothing. He's dressed almost like a cowboy, with a belt holding weapons around his hips, but it's the scars that catch my eye. They mar all the skin I can see, but rather than detract from his appeal, they enhance it, making him look dangerously beautiful.

“I say we kill her anyway,” the final man remarks as he leans casually into one of the rock formations that line the entrance to my chamber. When my eyes meet his, he pushes away from the rock with a show of graceful agility and prowls towards me. His hair is mostly blue, but I swear I see flashes of silver throughout it. It’s long, past his shoulders, with some on top pulled back haphazardly so strands fall over his pale face.

He is exquisite, prettier than any woman or man I have ever seen. I’ve never beheld someone so clean or handsome. His lips are perfect and pouty on his angular face. His straight eyebrows, which are blue at the ends, sit perfectly above his eyes, one of which is brown, the other a glowing blue. When he stops in front of me, he waves his hand over me, and I see his skin light up blue inside, like glowing veins.

What is he? I’ve never encountered anything like him before, and I’ve met a lot of different monsters.

“You’re not even my type,” the man scoffs, looking me over, his voice dark and seductive, like the softest clothing sliding across my body.

I try to remain as unaffected as I can. They are all beautiful in different ways and deadly, not just due to the weapons they carry, but the way they hold themselves. I also know what it takes to survive down here, and no normal monster would be able to. I have seen legends of old fall and die within seconds of arrival. Monsters I read about as a child have begged for their lives, yet here these men stand, unscathed and calm.

I should not underestimate them, as many did with me. For the first few years while I made my place here, I knew how deadly that mistake could be.

My usual mocking grin flirts at my lips as I run my fingers across his chest. “Mating bonds don’t care. You think you’re mine?” I look him over before meeting his eyes again. “You’re too breakable for me.”

He blinks incredulously before a laugh bursts from him. “Me? Breakable?” He glances at the others.

“Look at you, I’d snap you like a twig,” I taunt as I step back. “So, you are here to kill me, but now you can’t because of this pesky mate bond.”

“Let’s test it, shall we?” the scarred cowboy says, and I watch as he raises his gun. My instincts scream at me to attack, the feral animal inside me wanting to tear out his throat, but I simply wait. Even if he can, I won’t die, and if I do? Well, I won’t stay dead—a nice, little trick I learned all those years ago.

His hand shakes on the gun, and his eyes narrow as he raises his other hand and covers it, steadying his grip as he tries to pull the trigger. Sweat breaks out on his forehead, and just when he manages to squeeze hard enough, his wrist jerks to the side, causing the rock behind me to explode. His soul won't let him hurt me. His nostrils flare as he spins the gun back into his holster.

"See?" I chuckle. "Mate bonds do that to you. It's not personal. It won't allow you to harm the other half of your soul, even if it's not fully formed. You can't exactly kill your mate, can you?" I can't help but laugh. "Tell me, what's your way out? I have things to do outside this prison, and I have been biding my time. What are your names?" I ask. I don't really care, but I can't keep calling them cowboy and big guy in my head.

"You do not need to know our names," the big man with the amber eyes begins.

"You won't be alive long enough to need them," the icy-haired man finishes without a pause between their words. They are so in sync, it's freaky.

"It's cute how you finish each other's sentences," I taunt. "Fine, so you can't kill me, but you need to finish your contract, so that means breaking the mating bond. Trust me, I'm not any happier about this than you. We'll stick together, then you can figure out how to break the mating bond, but to do that, we need to get out of here, no? Then we can go back to killing each other. Sound good?"

They don't even exchange glances, but they have this faraway look in their eyes before they blink in unison and stare at me. It's fucking freaky, and I've seen a blob with a hundred eyes that look at you at the same time, but still. This is definitely weirder.

"Fine. We must move, as the way out closes soon," one of them says. "You will not need to bring anything, since you'll be dead shortly."

"Your way of flirting needs work, mate," I retort as I slap his cheek as I saunter past him. "I have nothing I need to bring. I'm out for blood, not life."

I walk from my chamber without a backwards glance. This has been my home for ten years. It was hard to track time down here, but I managed to as best I could. I was just a girl when I was thrown away. No one thought I would survive, including me, but I did, and I grew stronger. I became the biggest monster down here, one the others feared until they stopped trying

to come after me. I have no friends or family, only thoughts of vengeance, and these men stand in my way. I do not need a mate bond nor the reminder of the life I was torn from. When they break the bond, and I know they will, I will kill them just like everyone else who wronged me.

The man I kissed moves past me with the huge guy, leaving the others behind me, but I'm not worried. I let them surround me, since those are the most likely positions they'll die in and their bodies will be fodder for any desperate beasts trying to eat or survive. Craning my head around the bigger guy, I watch the man I kissed as he eyes something on his wrist before turning left.

Technology doesn't work down here, and Gehenna constantly changes. I tried to map it once, but I gave up when I realised this entire place is magic. Spike told me it was built by a god who was so tired with the world and evil infecting him that he sealed himself in the middle of it and became its heart, and now his magic keeps it going. I don't know how correct that is, but Spike has been here longer than anyone else, so I guess he would know better than most.

"What's that?" I ask, but they don't answer, not that I expect them to, and the scarred cowboy kicks my legs from behind, forcing me to keep up with the men in front. The hair on my arms rises, and I feel the locks on my head floating. When I glance back, the pretty man is glowing and he has blue sparks in his hands, no doubt causing the ozone.

Lightning, cool, but the fool just showed me his hand.

I turn forward and follow them as they manoeuvre through the tunnels. We pass the blood pit where the vampires linger, and they disappear when they see me. The next chamber holds the lake where the Loch Ness Monster resides, and I wave at the water as we cross the bridge. Others would have died, but he knows better. Besides, I sometimes toss my kills in there for him to eat.

The men around me are on edge, seeing the monsters. They don't speak to each other, but their question is clear as the horned man looks at me. "Are you the reason they aren't attacking?"

"Everyone knows better." I shrug before grinning. "Only foolish men try to slaughter the devil, and they soon realise why others chose to serve rather than fight."

My meaning is clear, but he simply turns around as we traverse another chamber. This one is empty and has been since the wolf who wished to end

the world disappeared.

Suddenly, we are not alone. I feel the change in the air before it appears. I've trained myself to recognise every little detail around me to keep myself alive, especially those first few years, which were extremely hard. The bodies piled up wherever I went, exhausting me, until I was forever dripping blood.

"In trouble, Ferol?" The familiar lisp makes me grin as I grab the rock above me, vault over the two men, and land on the other side of them, smiling at Spike. His sharp teeth are visible under the fedora that hides the missing bone on his forehead. Once a proud unicorn, or so he told me, he was betrayed and his family was stolen. He simply wanted revenge, but after slaughtering an entire city thousands of years ago, his horn was carved off and he was tossed down here.

"Eh, just having a bit of fun," I respond. "Thanks for sending them my way."

"I know you needed it." He looks at them then me. "Getting out?"

"Trying," I reply, waiting to see if he will stop me. I wouldn't call us friends, since he'd kill me if it pleased him or he needed to. How can anyone be friends in a situation like that? I suppose he's as close as I can get, though. I hear the men behind me readying for a fight, but I ignore them.

"Go ahead, get your revenge and make them pay." He bares his sharp teeth in an especially wide grin. "Feast for all of us."

"You won't try to stop or follow us?" one of the men asks.

"I belong here, boy. It's all I know. There's nothing out there for me. This"—he throws his arms wide—"is my kingdom. It's better to live in hell than kneel in heaven." He eyes me again. "May the blood flow free and plentiful, friend." He tips his hat and disappears, though I feel him lingering.

"Goodbye, friend," I murmur, knowing he hears me. I step back and bow my head. The hard-faced guy passes me with a glare, looking at his wrist again and a device where I see an arrow. Interesting.

"Don't even think about it. You can cut my arm off, but this is linked to my magic, so without it, we won't get out," he says as he leads the way. I fall into step beside the pretty, amber-eyed man.

"I would cut your arm off just for fun, not for that." I shrug as we pass under the bridge of bones and step out in the cathedral. Enchantingly

beautiful and horrific like most things down here, the bridges are made of bones from the monsters that have perished and lead across a giant chasm. Bones dangle from the roof, creating a song as they tap together.

I put most of them there as a warning.

“This place just gets more interesting,” the glowing man remarks. I assume he is speaking to me, since they don’t appear to need words to communicate with one another. A mental connection? I saw it before when a mated werewolf couple was thrown down here. When the female was stolen from their nest, slaughtered, and skinned, the male went feral and killed the monsters who were responsible then himself. Before that, though, I saw them like this, not needing to speak to each other out loud.

Skipping across the bridge, I whistle, listening to it echo around, the bones seeming to sing to me. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” I point at the huge skeleton of a dragon. “He was particularly hard to kill. He ate people in a single bite. Took me two days to end him, and I almost lost all my limbs.”

“You displayed him here?” the scarred cowboy asks, eyeing me with something furious yet curious in his gaze.

“Most of these, actually, but it started before me. It’s a hall of victory, if you will, but also a way to remember them.”

He frowns. “But you killed them.”

“Out of necessity. It’s kill or be killed. It doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be remembered,” I tell him, my expression cold. “They had no choice but to be down here. That doesn’t mean they should be forgotten like the world wants. We refuse to play by those rules.”

He eyes me again before turning away, and I feel the glowing man move closer behind me, so I wait, interested to see what he will do. When we reach the bridge’s arch, he makes his move, sweeping my legs out. I tumble off the side but quickly catch myself on a sharp piece of bone, then he grabs my arm, holding me up one-handed. He’s stronger than I thought.

He crouches, one eye still glowing, and my hair floats around me. The others watch, as if speaking and acting through him, but it’s hard to tell.

“Say please,” he taunts, “and I’ll help you.”

The day I was thrown down here was the last time I ever said the word please. Instead, I let my hand slip through his and I plummet into the oblivion below. They might not be able to kill me, but they don’t have to help me either, and if I end up dead? Even better.

“Well, shit, that was easy.” I hear him chuckle out loud as I close my eyes, a genuine smile turning up my lips as I spread my arms. Flames burst to life as my body changes, and my descent slows then stops, my wings flapping as I open my eyes and rise. The bones blow in the strong wind until I near the bridge and watch as their eyes widen in shock.

I know what they see. I saw my reflection once.

I am a giant orange and red bird, my wingspan almost filling the chamber, and my tail feathers glow with flames. My red beak opens in a chuckle as I hover over them, letting them get a good look.

They call me a phoenix down here.

I had no idea. I thought I was just a magic user like my mother, but it turned out I was wrong. On the day I was thrown down here, that’s what saved me. They killed me, but I was reborn in flames as a bird.

I have died ten times since and was reborn stronger each time. I’m unkillable, they know it, and now so do these men as I dive bomb them with a squawk. They flatten themselves to the bridge, and I land on human feet, changing with a thought, and wait for them to look at me.

“Let’s get going. We don’t want to miss the window, do we?” I turn, walking across the bridge.

Their furious, shocked eyes watch me go.

CHAPTER THREE



A phoenix? *It's impossible.*
Like us?

I don't know who thinks it. It's shared knowledge. We know each other's every thought and action. That is how our connection works. We are one yet still individuals. Whoever's thoughts those were isn't wrong though—we, too, are creatures of myth—but a phoenix? The last known phoenix died four generations ago. They were revered for their powers and ability to regenerate, and they were said to be unkillable, though many tried in hopes of stripping them of their powers, especially mages. The last phoenix was believed to have chosen to die out of loneliness and boredom.

I know what I saw, though. *What is her mother?*

A mage, someone thinks, and I nod, though it brings more questions than answers. We only met with her mother's mate, and it was once outside of Gehenna, after being contacted. We did our research, as we always do. This phoenix's mother is one of the strongest magic users in the world, notoriously private, and unlikable. She was also cold enough to throw her daughter in here.

My hands stray to my guns on my belt, stroking them as I watch her wander ahead without a care in the world. No wonder she did not fear us or death. Even if she dies, she will be reborn, which begs the question: how the fuck do you kill a phoenix?

Let's focus on the mate bond first, someone else thinks, *then we will go from there.*

It's a pragmatic thought, so it's probably Kitt. Either way, now is not the time, so we follow her. At the other side, Kitt passes her, staring down at the soul finder. Our contact is waiting at the exit, holding the portal open. They were able to get through Gehenna's defences but unable to stay for long. The watch is linked to that magic and will guide us there, but we need to be quick or we will all perish down here, especially after what we saw. My estimation of this woman only goes up the more we discover. She is either very strong or very good at making friends, and from the bones she mentioned, I would guess it's the first.

"From the way you're glaring at me, cowboy, I would think you were going to try to shoot me again," she comments as she falls into step at my side.

"I'm thinking about it." I'm unused to speaking out loud, but she doesn't seem to notice the slow cadence of my words or the rough, unused tone.

Wagging her finger at me, she smiles brightly again. "We've already been through this. It's pointless."

"Does your mother know you're a phoenix?" I ask.

Her smile is secretive and angry. "If she had, she never would have let them throw me in here as an example. She would have drained my magic first."

"So you didn't know until you were down here?" Raiden asks with a scoff as he boxes her in on the other side, but she doesn't seem the least bit bothered.

"A phoenix's power is only born after their first death, or at least that's what Spike told me. He was around when they were. I died the day I arrived here, but I awoke in flames. It didn't stop them from trying, all but Spike, who realised what I was."

"How did you survive?" I ask curiously, and I feel the others' anger in my head at my interest, but I ignore it. Despite them wanting her dead, they are curious too.

"I died many times, ten to be exact, before I started winning. Each time, I came back stronger. I honed myself into a weapon so not even the deadliest monster could touch me. You kill enough monsters and eventually they begin to hesitate. Ten years is a long time to build a reputation." The look she gives me is dark. "I would hazard a guess that you know a lot about doing what it takes to survive."

She means my scars. I don't respond, just look ahead. Unbothered by our cool, hate-filled attitude, she sings to herself as she walks between us.

Should we try an accident again? someone asks.

No, it's not worth it. She will only be reborn. We might as well wait until we are out of here, since we might need her to get through this place.

Begrudgingly, we walk with our prey as the prison changes from chamber to chamber, yet there is one thing that remains consistent—it's dark and filled with monsters. They keep their distance, watching us hungrily.

"If we carry on this way, we'll reach the killing field. That will be fun," she says, and Torrin glances back, his horns moving as he ducks his head with a frown.

"Killing field?" he rumbles.

"It's where the dying and desperate go, the twisted, sick monsters that are little more than wraiths now and unkillable. They feed on anyone who draws near to remain alive. Nobody makes it through, so it will be fun." She claps her hands.

"How do we kill them?" Bram asks out loud, and I see his eyes glowing brightly as he struggles not to shift under the threat.

"You can't." She grins at him, madness in her eyes. I suppose most creatures would go insane down here, and it's clear she is slightly crazy. I know captivity and what it does to one's mind, and when she looks at me, I see the same haunted madness I find in my own eyes.

"Then how do we get through it?" Kitt snaps, losing his patience with her as he turns and glares.

She instantly sobers and steps closer to him. For a moment, desire flushes through him as he recalls her kiss before he pushes it away, but it's too late. Nothing can be hidden in our bond. The only saving grace is that we never share what we see in each other with anyone else—not that we have anyone, but it's the principal. What happens in the hive, stays in the hive.

Idly, he wonders if the mating bond is influencing his thoughts, but none of us can tell either.

"I think you mean to ask for my help, which is not done in that way, killer." Her voice is deadly, almost burning like her flames.

We move as one, circling her so she's in the middle, but she doesn't look afraid, just stares at Kitt.

“How do we get through the killing field without dying, please?” he grits out, but we have been forced to do worse.

“You’ll see.” She smiles brightly and pats his cheek. “Good boy, killer. I like manners.”

We follow her, and when we pass under the entryway, we finally understand what she meant about the field. It’s a soulless area that stretches as far as the eye can see in either direction, though I do not spot any of the wraiths she spoke about. She’s silent and contemplative as she waits, allowing us to go first, then she falls into step at my side as we slowly cross the field. The soil is dry but sinks under our feet, so we walk faster.

A screech, the kind that makes your ears bleed, fills the air. I reach for my guns as we continue. More screeches echo around until we stop, waiting for the threat.

“Can I borrow this?” I jerk my head around as she sticks her hands into my holster, drawing my long, enchanted dagger. With a wicked grin at me, she brings it down across the back of my legs in a swift move then drops the dagger and slowly steps away as the others turn to me in shock. Torrin lunges for her, but she dances out of reach. It wasn’t a killing blow, since the mate bond wouldn’t have allowed it, but I notice she is suffering from the effects of fighting against it to hurt me.

I know why she chose me. She doesn’t know what I am, but judging by the weapons I’m holding, she assumed I was weak. My legs go out from under me, the tendons cut. Blood spills across the dirt, and ghostly hands rise from below, wrapping around me and dragging me into the soil as she winks, waves, and turns, skipping ahead.

I realise how she was planning to get through here—by sacrificing one of us. She doesn’t know it would destroy our minds if one of us went dark. She probably doesn’t even care. She wants us dead as badly as we want her to die, only she doesn’t care when or how. This is all a game to her, and she has nothing to lose.

I am used to others thinking I am the weakest in the group.

More hands claw at me, dragging me down into the soil. The others fight to free me, but their hands go through the wraiths as the soil seals above me, trapping me in complete darkness. It’s a good thing I don’t need to breathe, but I am tugged and torn, my clothes ripped as their claws carve my skin.

All too soon, the hissing wraiths freeze when they taste the blood she spilled. It's black, dead sludge, and there is no life to feed on. She chose wrong.

Slowly, the hands retreat, no doubt giving up on me and targeting the others, so I tell them to run as I burst through the soil to see them sprinting across the field behind her. She's fast, and soon, she's out of sight. My legs heal enough for me to dart after them.

Ignored by the wraiths, I fix my clothes as well as I can and slide my dagger back into place. Quiet fury builds within me with each stride.

When I reach the other side, I duck under the exit tunnels and glance back. The wraiths' hands are sticking from the ground, but they do not cross the barrier. Turning forward, I step into the chamber where the others wait. I find her leaning into a rock, smiling happily. "You made it—"

Slamming her into the rock, I tighten my hold on her neck until she feels my strength. I lift her, watching as her face turns red then pales, but she doesn't fight, just wears that maddening grin. "I die, you die, remember?"

"Can't blame a girl for trying." She coughs. "Besides, we made it through, didn't we? And it confirms what I thought."

"Which is?" I spit.

"You're a ghoul."

Shock fills our bond. No one has ever guessed what I am. It's our saving grace, our ace in the hole for when things go bad.

Her smile only grows, and she taps my hand. "Mate bond." She's right. I feel it tugging at me, my soul roaring in horror at hurting my mate, even as my heart fills with hatred. With a snarl, I release her, and she doesn't even cough, which infuriates me further. "How did you know what I was? Ghouls are rare."

"But not extinct." She shrugs. "You think you're the only ghoul? I've met three down here. One wasn't so nice. He was fully feral. The other two weren't so bad if you ignored the whole eating people alive thing. It's noticeable with your waxy skin, and add that to the fact that you don't breathe and the scars, I had an idea. Now that you're all safe, let's go."

We need to kill her soon before she kills us.

The agreement in our minds is instantaneous.

She knows too much.

She's a threat.

This is about more than money now.

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CHAPTER FOUR



They seem even angrier than before, which is fun. I ignore their furious gazes as I walk behind them. Whether they know it or not, I saved their asses—well, more like I saved mine and theirs was just an added bonus. I glance at the cowboy again. A ghoul, how interesting. They are particularly hard to make.

Unlike most creatures, who are born, ghouls are created using reanimated corpses, then a beating heart of a current ghoul is shoved inside. Their body is revived using magic and the blood of the most powerful creatures one can find. Once alive, they are unfeeling, killing machines, unable to die or truly live. This one is covered in scars, and I'm curious how they found his body or if it was done after his reanimation. From the scarring, I would guess it was after, since they haven't healed. I wish I could find the two ghouls who hide down here to ask them, but they have long since retreated, hiding when they went feral so they didn't hurt anyone. It's a risk with a ghoul. If they go too long without nourishment or simply give into their dark thoughts, they can turn into a mindless, flesh-eating predator. It's where zombie films first got their ideas from, after one was accidentally spotted a long time ago. Zombies are nothing like they appear in films—I'd know, since my mother loves to experiment with that kind of thing.

"Hey, cowboy, what's your name?" I ask. When we get out and break the bond, and I finally kill them, I'll look up his story just for perverse pleasure.

He ignores me, but the long, grey-haired lightning boy slows his strides. Anger glints in his steely gaze, but there is also mischief. It's clear he likes to cause trouble.

"Cowboy, as you call him, is named Emrys. The one you kissed is Kitt. The minotaur there is Torrin." The bull man meets my eyes with a snarl before turning away, and the man at my side chuckles. "That's Bram." He indicates the man with the glowing eyes. "And I am the one and only Raiden." He bows dramatically, and I simply turn away. The best way to get under someone's skin is to not give them the notice they so desperately crave.

"Why would you tell her our names?" Kitt asks out loud, which indicates he did it for my sake, not theirs, as he throws me a deep glower.

Oh, I'm so scared.

"So she knows what to scream when we kill her." Raiden chuckles as he winks at me.

I cup his chin. His glowing eyes widen infinitesimally, but I notice it and see his pulse thrumming in his throat. "You forget, pretty boy, that I've died ten times. Not once did I scream, but I cannot wait to hear yours."

He swallows, and some of his usual cockiness returns to his face. "Like you could make us. Worse people have tried. You have no effect on us whatsoever."

"No?" Cocking my head, I slide my hand down his throat and squeeze. "So why is your heart beating so fast?" I ask mockingly before letting go. The others are furious and ready to rip me apart. It seems whatever I do to one, they all experience it. I'd be curious to see how deeply that connection runs.

"Rai, don't play with your prey," Bram chides with that dark voice.

"But she's so much fun. Usually they cry or fight, but not this one," Raiden replies, skipping to Bram's side and grinning up at him. "Can't I play with her for a little longer?"

"Enough," Kitt snaps, and then his eyes do that faraway thing again.

"If you're going to gossip in your heads, you can do it while we walk." Five pairs of shocked eyes land on me. "Your eyes give it away. I've seen something like that before." More like felt it, but I don't let them know that. No one will ever know that apart from two people, including me, and the other one? Well, he won't be speaking again. "You're all connected.

Interesting, but I don't give a fuck right now. Didn't you say we are on a time limit?"

Without a word, they turn in sync, the creepy movement making me sneer, but I follow them, watching as Kitt checks his magic watch to take us in the right direction. It's then I notice it. I spotted it a few tunnels ago, but I wasn't sure until now. Slyly, I slide past them so I'm level with Kitt, and the others are behind me like sexy fodder—wait, sexy . . . Where the fuck did that come from?

Kitt gives me a frown but refuses to speak as I speed up, forcing him to catch up. Eventually, the watch on his wrist glows brighter and brighter.

"We're close," he mutters, and we step out into an oval chamber. There's nothing special about it bar the glowing circle of magic showing a dark night sky and ground on the other side that seems to slowly inch closed by the second.

The way out is real.

The men stop, silently communicating, even as I glance behind us and to the portal in annoyance.

"We might want to get through quickly and stop fighting," I warn with a grin. "Unless you want to die?"

"What—" A hiss fills the air, and I jerk my thumb in that direction.

"That would be the naga queen. She's very smart and probably overheard us and is following. She'll tear you apart and go through the portal. That will be fun, but not so much for the annoying bond we share, so let's move."

"We can just kill her," Torrin mutters, smoke blowing from his nose as he produces two gilded blades.

"She's a nice naga. Why would we do that? Well, nice enough. She did kill me once, but that was a misunderstanding." I shrug. "She's not harming anyone yet. She simply wants to escape like most, so leave her and let's go."

"Everyone down here is scum," Bram growls.

Before he can react, I hold him by the throat and dangle him in the air. The others aim their weapons at me, but I ignore them. "They are not scum. They are misunderstood. They are hurt and lost, and they were born into a world that couldn't accept them. You think you're better than those down here, killer? What is the worst crime you've committed? I'm betting it's a whole lot worse than anything they have done, yet you're free. Why?"

Because you had someone to protect you. Most creatures down here never did.” I let him go with my last word, wiping my hand on my side to get the feel of his skin off me.

He rubs his neck, an embarrassed, angry blush on his face.

“Move, now,” I order.

A thick arm wraps around my neck from behind, cutting off my air, and a dark, gravelly voice says, “You do not give us orders, firebird.” It’s Kitt.

“No? Then I’ll just watch you die and pass through and be free of you.” I chuckle.

“You wouldn’t survive the mate bond breaking if we died,” he sneers.

“I’d die with you, then I would be reborn. Sucks to be you.” At least, I think that’s how it would work. Grabbing his arm, I lean forward and throw him across the room. He soars through the air before hitting the rock, but despite the blow, he lands on his feet. He storms towards me to continue the fight as another hiss sounds, closer this time, and he stops, his eye twitching.

“We’ll finish this later, firebird,” he warns.

“Can’t wait.”

Ignoring me, he looks at the others, and they walk to the portal. Raiden goes through first, then the others, until only Kitt and I are left. I don’t care if he remains here alone, so I head towards the exit.

As the circle of magic glows stronger, it begins to shrink. The faint, familiar screech and bellow echoing from deep within the belly of Gehenna brings a smile to my face. I blow a kiss in that direction, hoping he knows I’m finally free, and then I step through the portal and to freedom.

Once I’m out on the other side with Kitt, it closes, shutting off the bellow and hiss. I take my first breath of fresh air in ten years. My lungs expand, and for a moment, I close my eyes, letting it wash through and around me. When I finally focus again, they are all watching me. Ignoring them as best as I can, I survey where we are instead. It’s clearly not the entrance to Gehenna. There’s a forest in front of us and not much else. Glancing back, I see the dark grey rock that is Gehenna sticking from the ground in a small formation—the only sign of what lies below. It’s the man sinking to his knees next to it that draws my interest though. His eyes stop glowing as he pants, his hands held in front of him.

This is the man they must have paid to keep the exit open. He must be powerful to be able to do that, but he’s just a kid, a teenager at most.

“Are you from one of the mage families?” I ask.

His head snaps up, panic winding through him, and I know he’s not.

“Ah, a loner.” I wink, knowing what that means. Unlike some of the other courts, mages are not allowed to live outside of our world. If they are caught, they are killed. The idea of them selling magic secrets is abhorrent to our people, especially my mother, who rules with an iron fist since she took over during her pregnancy with me. She believes in the old ways, retreating from the world and taking her people with her. There were always such high hopes for her child. What a disappointment I was when I was born without magic.

Fool her and all the rest.

“My part is done,” he announces, and Kitt produces a card and tosses it to him. The kid scoops it up then eyes me worriedly before disappearing into the forest.

“Let’s move,” Kitt orders for my sake.

“We were told to wait here for him when we completed our mission,” Torrin grumbles.

Bram adds, “If he finds out we didn’t kill her . . .”

“He can do it himself.”

“No, we are better off waiting until we can break the bond, otherwise it will injure us too. We’ll just pretend we are still in Gehenna,” Kitt concludes, and they must realise they are talking out loud, so they fall silent once more, turning to the forest. Emrys, however, nudges me forward with his gun, keeping me in front of him as I follow them happily. I soak in the nature around me. I forgot what it was like, how much space there is, and the chill of a winter wind. I forgot so much. Despite the situation, I revel in it.

“Move faster,” Emrys growls, pressing his gun against the small of my back.

“I can’t even remember what the sun looks like.” The remark slips free, but they turn to look at me as I stare up at the night sky. I stumble since I’m not looking, but I can’t take my eyes from the moon and stars. “I was just sixteen when I was entombed there. Has it changed? The sun?”

“No,” Emrys finally answers from behind me. “It’s just a burning ball.”

“Of light,” I whisper. “Light is hard to come by below the earth. I used to dream of the sun and the light touching my skin. The comfort of a warm bed—” I cut off and snap my mouth shut, focusing on walking again. I hate

that I let that weakness slip out. Call it foolishness, but after seeing the world again, I forgot how beautiful it could be.

“Eh, when I first woke up, I lay in the ocean for days,” Emrys mutters, and I look at him. His eyes are still hard, but he nods. “It’s easy to forget the beauty the world can offer when all you see and know is the hatred and death it produces.”

My smile is small but genuine before I dash it away and turn to the others, clearing my throat. “So what now? Do you know someone who can break this bond?”

“The collector,” Bram begins.

“Never,” Raiden snarls, surprising me with the intensity in that one word.

“We are never going back there,” Emrys declares.

“We could make a deal,” Bram protests, looking around.

“You know how those deals end,” Kitt states, and everyone else silently stares at him. “No, we will try other magic users first. We still have favours to call in.” He turns that dark gaze on me, his brows furrowed. “No complaining. It’s going to be a long walk.”

“I’m used to doing what it takes to survive,” I respond and wait for them to move again. When they do, I follow, ignoring their heated, annoyed gazes as I keep up. We plunge deeper into the forest. It’s slightly chilly, but it’s a welcome relief from the oppressive heat of Gehenna. Before I was sent down there, I was accustomed to the cold, able to be shirtless even in the deepest snow, but now, goosebumps erupt on my skin as I shiver. Still, it’s a welcome relief to feel it.

We walk for hours. They do not speak another word, and when the sun finally starts to rise, I hurry to the closest tree and climb it. I hear them scrambling after me, but I perch on a high branch above the canopy and watch it rise. The bright colours are beautiful, and the sun is blinding with its brightness, but even though tears gather in my eyes, I do not blink, not wanting to miss a second.

Despite my determination to escape and get revenge, I stay frozen until the burning ball is in the sky, and my eyes close as the heat hits my skin. It’s warm and comforting like a hug—well, I think it is, but I cannot remember the last time I had a hug.

When I release the tree and drop to the ground below, I find them waiting.

They could have forced me to move, but they didn't. They let me watch the sunrise, and I smile gratefully.

"We've been walking for hours. When will we get where we are going?" I ask.

"When we do," Kitt snaps.

"I might be immortal, but I still need rest," I retort as I sink to the ground and close my eyes, curling against the root of the tree to keep my back safe. I don't sleep, however, as I feel them move around.

The air is tight with their anger. I sense them silently speaking before they give in and settle down to rest, then I finally try to sleep. The truth is I don't need to rest that much, but the idea of being able to sleep on the slightly damp earth with the breeze blowing over me sounds luxurious. When we get where we are going, I will have to kill these men before I start on my journey, so I will treasure every little moment I can get. I tell myself they can't kill me as I sleep, and it's the only thing that allows me to relax enough to give into the exhaustion I always carry.

I'm used to sleeping very little in case anyone tries to attack me when I'm vulnerable. This might be the safest I have ever been, even surrounded by men who want nothing more than my death.

Isn't that sad?

CHAPTER FIVE



I cannot believe how easily she falls asleep. One second, she's stiff, and the next, she's breathing deeply, fully asleep.

How can she sleep surrounded by enemies? I wonder, and someone answers.

She's used to it. There are not any doors in Gehenna, and we're no different to those monsters down there out for her blood.

Now that they mention it, I realise they are right, but I still notice the dark circles under her eyes and wonder when she last had a full night's rest. From my own experience, I'm betting it was ten years ago, before she was thrown into that hell. It's hard to sleep while surrounded by enemies, even if your body demands it. I know how long someone can truly go without rest if necessary.

Sinking down to my ass, I lean back into a strong tree and watch her. The others are arguing, their thoughts floating rapidly through my head. It used to cause me agony, but now I'm used to it, able to distinguish whose thoughts are whose. I don't offer my opinion a lot, so when I do, they usually listen, like now.

Let her rest. It will not harm us and will give us time to consider a plan instead of walking aimlessly.

We are not here to offer her comfort. We need her to die, Kitt snaps in my head.

We cannot kill her until the mate bond is gone, and at least this way we have some privacy to plan.

None of them can argue with that, and their thoughts fall silent—well, as silent as one’s mind does. There are random firings and errant thoughts, but I am used to tuning those out, not wanting to invade their privacy any more than I am forced to.

Creatures emerge from their homes when I settle down, sensing my presence. Despite being nocturnal, my call is too strong to ignore. When one draws too close to her, I send a slight surge, and it turns and scuttles towards me. Lowering my hand, I let the deep black beastie crawl up my palm to my arm, watching me with its beady, stunning eyes. Deadly creatures are so beautiful. I wonder if this is what I would look like if I could fully shift—something else they stole from me.

My form sticks halfway when I change, and it has been this way since the experiments.

Don’t dwell, Kitt thinks softly. It’s how we survived those days, with his soft, commanding reassurance. When things got too bad, one of them would open their minds and allow us to slip in to escape what was happening to us. Even now, he opens his mind to me if I need it, but I simply look down at the creature.

“Scorpions are deadly and overlooked, the perfect predators,” I muse out loud, surprising them as my eyes land on her. “She is like that. If they knew what she was, would they still want her dead?”

“That is not our decision to make. We will complete our contract. Our deal is as good as our life bond, you know that. We do not fail or back out,” Torrin says as he sinks down next to me, offering me the heat of his body. There’s nothing sexual in the gesture, just men who have survived a lot worse together, knowing sometimes you need a nonthreatening presence at your side.

Raiden hops up on a branch and perches above us while Kitt keeps watch, and Emrys disappears into the dark. We cope in our own ways.

“I know.” Lowering my hand, I let the scorpions cover my arms and legs like I’m their new home. “I feel sorry for her, don’t you? She’s like us.”

“She’s nothing like us.” This comes from Kitt.

“No? She was hurt, betrayed, locked away, and forced to fight to survive until it morphed her into something else. She’s nothing like us at all,” I retort, and he grits his teeth and looks away. “I wonder why he wants her dead. I wonder why her mother threw her down there.”

“None of it is our concern,” Torrin reminds us, and his voice cracks. He’s not used to talking out loud, none of us are, so outside conversation turns internal. *We will complete this job like any other and keep moving. It’s how we survive. Do not allow yourself to soften towards her. What you’re feeling is the mate bond, that is all, nothing else.*

He’s right, Raiden whispers. I’ve read about mate bonds. Even between strangers, they make you soft and caring, and eventually, you’ll grow protective. It doesn’t make you love them, but it binds you together and grows deeper the longer you are around one another.

Then we need to break it fast, Kitt says. Rest now if you can.

It’s the end of the conversation. I know when Kitt is done talking, so I stay quiet. I tilt my head back, and my body is relaxed, but I simply watch her.

She is not what I imagined. There’s a strong beauty to her, which is unexpected. Her face isn’t soft like most women I have seen, and instead it’s strong and bold. Her body is muscular and just as strong, yet there are curves and hints of femininity, and her hair is bright, like a flame. She’s unique, which is the biggest compliment I can give her. She’s like us. One of a kind.

Does she feel as lonely as we do?

I doze off for a while before I wake to Emrys’s thoughts.

We should keep moving.

Knowing better than to argue, I climb to my feet, watching my new friends scurry away as Torrin stalks over to her and kicks her arm, nudging her. She springs up, crouching with her teeth bared, her eyes glowing so bright they pierce through my skin, burning it away.

Torrin roars, ready to attack as she lunges at him before stopping.

“Don’t,” I snap, holding my hand up to Torrin. “Look at her eyes. She’s acting on instinct, like a cornered animal. Shh, beastie, we will not harm you,” I murmur softly.

Her eyes flit from him to me to see she’s surrounded, then she backs up before stopping when she hits the tree. Raiden slinks down, joining us, so I step back, giving her more room, and order them to do the same. Emrys takes that moment to appear, though, and he’s too close. She grabs him and presses his gun to his head, and Kitt swears, heading her way.

She’s frantic and scared, so I get there before he does, blocking his path.

“Beastie, it’s us. Feel us and look at him. That’s Emrys, remember?” Blinking, she looks from me to him and her hand relaxes. She spins his gun around her finger and offers it to him. He takes it, glaring at her, and she swallows, avoiding our gazes.

“Can’t blame a girl for taking her chance,” she mutters, but it lacks heat, and we share a look, knowing she wasn’t in control. I used to be like that when I woke, always ready for a fight. It’s a survival tactic. Sometimes, I still do it.

Knowing she probably feels ashamed and annoyed, I draw everyone’s attention to me. “We are heading to the cornfield mages?”

“They are the closest and owe us a favour,” Emrys confirms, watching me, no doubt understanding what I’m doing.

“Then we better get moving.”

I have no idea why I helped her. It must be the mate bond, and that annoys me. I will still help them kill her. It’s my job, and I don’t want to soften towards her, but it seems the bond has other ideas.

We stay silent as we begin to walk, and she follows. A little while later, Emrys catches a rabbit, and he tears into it while it squeals. She doesn’t even bat an eye despite the fact that he is purposely messy to horrify her.

By midday, we reach the edge of the forest and find our truck. It was once used by hunters, but we modified it. As we get closer, it opens and starts—the bonuses of magic.

“Get in,” Kitt orders her as he climbs into the passenger seat, and I get into the driver’s seat. She has to sit in the very back, and she sprawls out on the seats, leaving Raiden, Emrys, and Torrin to squeeze into the second row.

Raiden throws one of our stashed bags at her. “Eat or don’t, I don’t care, but your growling stomach is annoying and I want to sleep.”

I keep my eye on her through the mirrors as I pull onto the empty road and set off towards the peaks, fields, and mountains the closest coven inhabits.

I glance at her repeatedly throughout the drive, and one time, I find her watching me back. Our eyes connect, and she nods. She is giving me her gratitude.

Clutching the wheel tighter, I turn my gaze forward before the mate bond forces me to do something foolish. Kitt is right: the sooner we break this, the better.

I cannot save her. I couldn’t even save myself.

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CHAPTER SIX



With little else to do than talk to them, which is not something I want to do after this morning, I force myself to relax and doze. Memories assault me, and I push them away, opening my eyes and resetting my brain before dozing again. I suppose I could escape, since it would be easy, but I need to break this bond as much as they do. I can't have them getting in my way when I kill everyone or trying to stop me, because our connection will only continue to grow. I've seen even the most hate-filled pairs melt and meld until they lose themselves.

That will not be me.

When we reach the peak, I sit up and stick my head out of the cracked window. The wind blows my hair back as I look at the beautiful field of flowers and grass, with mountain peaks framing it in the setting sun.

They stop at the end of the road, where the others are parked, then climb out. I stretch my muscles then head for the path that will take us through the wilderness. It's private land that's classed as a nature reserve to the rest of the world, but those with magic know differently.

It's a coven. Each one is different, but this one focuses on earth magic. They are also lighter witches than those I grew up with. My mother and her people focus on dark magic, mainly death magic, but I always found it so beautiful here compared to the icy landscape of my home.

"You act like you've been here before," Torrin remarks, surprising me since he seems to avoid me the most.

"I visited many times during court meetings. Mages don't interact often, but when they do, it's always a good party. As the daughter and heir, it was

my duty to be at my mother's side," I reply, knowing they are all listening. When speaking to one, I am talking to all. He doesn't seem mad about this morning, but Emrys keeps eyeing me. I don't know if he intends to kill me or is worried I'll touch his precious guns again.

They lapse into silence, which is fine by me. I move ahead, my hands stretched out on either side, caressing the flowers as I pass. The path becomes difficult as we head into the mountains. Sheltered between two, and away from prying eyes, rests the heart of the peaks. Magic embraces me, letting me in with a familiar touch, but it would turn others away unless they are welcome. It does alert their elders, though, so it doesn't surprise me when I step into the village and their head mage, Flora, is waiting, backlit by her people and home.

The houses are built into rock and within trees, everything made from the earth. I always thought this place was something special, and it is still as beautiful as I remember.

Her hair is an icy grey—not from age, since it's been like that for as long as I can remember—and it's longer now, half plaited back with feathers and beads hanging throughout. On her shoulder rests a brightly coloured bird clutching the strap of her floral sundress. Her face has more wrinkles, but she is as beautiful as I remember, with bright blue eyes that always reminded me of the sky. She smiles, flashing white teeth, and throws out her arms in welcome.

"The lost ones." I glance at the men, realising she means them. "Welcome back."

Kitt surprises me when he offers her a tight smile, but then her eyes focus on me and widen.

"I know you," the mage says, watching me intently before she smiles. "My brightling!" It is what she always called me, but when I don't respond, she huffs. "Oriana Draven, daughter of the great Hel Draven, I thought you passed from this life."

"I did." I shrug. "How is Mummy dearest?"

"I haven't spoken to the great Draven in many years. You know how she is," Flora replies, embracing me despite my resistance. Pulling back, she plays with my hair, and there's an odd look in her eyes. "I guess it happened!" Mother always called her insane, but I simply thought she was odd. "Come, let me offer you respite, and we can discuss why you are here." Sliding her arm through mine, she steers me through the streets. I

ignore the greetings and looks. I am known because of my mother, and here, that is not always a good thing.

When we reach their ancestral hall, framed by a great tree, I am ushered into a seat on a long bench. During gatherings or meals, the hall is full, but right now, it's empty. The tree is at the back, its roots built into the structure as I touch the uneven, handmade table as I glance around.

Nothing has changed, not the flower chandeliers or the trail of lights. When I was younger, I wished I were born here instead, into this light and happiness.

When Flora sits opposite me, the others finally take their seats, apparently unhappy but not wanting to be bad guests. "It has been a long time, lost ones. How have you been?"

"We need your help," Kitt says, speaking as softly as he can. I don't get that kind of treatment. Rude.

She waves it on. "Of course, but we will eat first. You are growing skinny." I arch an eyebrow at that and look them over. Not one inch of them is skinny. Instead, Flora focuses on me, a flower forming in her palm, and she lays it on my arm. "For you, my brightling. How have you been?"

"Oh, you know, surviving," I scoff as plates float before us. When I glance at mine, I'm not surprised. They know how to cater to each person here. Raw meat is placed before Emrys.

Heaps of roasted meat fill plates for Raiden and Torrin. Bram only has vegetables, which surprises me, and Kitt has a mixed plate. Mine holds a buttery chicken, mash, and veg, and I dive in with gusto. I don't speak as I eat, and Flora observes me before a second then third plate appears. When I cannot eat another bite, I lean against the table, satisfied and full.

Those like me know there is nothing better than a warm, safe meal. I appreciate the little things after Gehenna, things I took for granted before, like running water, safe food, clean drinking water, bedding, and security.

"You act like you haven't eaten in years." Flora chuckles, but there is a question in her eyes. Despite her soft exterior, she is a very powerful mage. Unlike my mother, who uses force, Flora gets her way with kindness. You don't even realise what you've given up before it's too late. When I was a child and unused to Flora's tricks, my mother threw me into the dungeons after my first visit. I begged and cried, learning my lesson. I'd given Flora some of our secrets without meaning to. She was just so kind and warm, unlike my own life.

“Your food is as good as ever.” I sidestep her comment, and her lips quirk, knowing what I did.

“So, why are you here, and why are you together?” This time, her query is direct. Kitt finishes his plate, wiping his mouth with manners that surprise me before he addresses Flora with that same gentle tone. I guess her aura works on everyone, even men like him.

“We need to know how to break a mate bond.”

Flora blinks. “Why would you need to know that?” We all remain quiet, and she looks around before giggling, no doubt figuring it out. Why else would we be together, asking for her help?

“You five and my brightling?” When we don’t reply, she chuckles, the sound like a flower blowing in the wind. “How interesting.” She claps happily. “Why would you want to break that? Mate bonds are rare amongst our kind. It is an honour.”

“Yeah, well, that honour can get fucked,” I grumble, and her eyes narrow. “I mean leave,” I correct, knowing she hates foul language.

Sighing, she glances between us, and when she realises we are serious, she appears sad, but she sits taller under the question.

“If you want to sever the bond, there are only two ways—death, which you might survive, or her mother.” I stiffen, and she spares me a sad, searching look, knowing even asking my mother for something would require hell to freeze over first. “She’s the strongest mage out there and the only one who would be able to. Mate bonds are acts of fate and compatibility. To sever them, you must delve into someone’s soul and tear out the part that connects you. You will never be happy again. You will never be able to connect with others again. It will alter you, but you will be free.”

“Would your mother take payment for it?” Torrin asks me, and I frown, looking between Flora and them. I don’t want rumours to spread, but it seems inevitable. Everyone saw me, and eventually, it will get back to her. Hopefully, my mother just thinks of me as a ghost.

“No, even if anyone else came, she wouldn’t take payment in the form of money. She would taste your magic, decide you are worth keeping, and use you, and that is before she even realised it was for me. Best-case scenario, she kills us. Worst case, she realises my potential and keeps us bonded and under her care to use at her whim.”

“She is right. Draven is not known for . . . kindness. She believes power is above all, and she intends to grow hers until she is untouchable. If you have any potential, she will use you in one way or another. The only reason the other courts are safe is because she isn’t that strong yet.”

“We can’t stay mated nor die,” Emrys grouches.

“She can die,” Raiden suggests, shooting me an angry glare, as if it’s my fault we are bonded.

Flora doesn’t ask about it, and for that, I’m grateful. I’d like to keep at least one trick up my sleeve. “Those are your options. I’m sorry. You could hunt the earth for something else, but it wouldn’t help.” She rises. “Let me get more wine.”

While she’s gone, I turn to the others. “How about you get me to my mother? I’ll complete my revenge, which, by the way, will include killing the one paying you. You will lose the money and contract, but I will force my mother to break our bond—”

“Like you could,” Kitt hisses.

“I will. She will have no choice. You will lose the money and contract, but you will get your freedom.”

They hate it, so I rise.

“Think on it.” I follow after Flora, needing space and leaving them to theirs. I am not used to being around people for this long either.

I find her in the kitchen, fussing over a cake and adding flowers. She must feel me because she calls out, “Bring me those sunflowers.”

Grabbing some, I hand them over and hop up on the counter, watching until she’s done. She spins the cake, smiling happily, before looking at me, and all her happiness morphs into worry. She always said she had a soft spot for me. “A mate bond is a wondrous thing. I am sorry you do not feel that way. Maybe with time, you—”

“Not them, not ever. I do not want to be connected to another being ever again.” I mean it, and she can tell. Like them, I have my own horrors I wish to escape.

Nodding, she turns and sits by my side in solidarity, but she doesn’t speak for a while. “Whatever you are going to do, be careful, brightling. Your path is paved with death and destruction.”

“Hasn’t it always been?” I chuckle humourlessly.

“I don’t mean just your fate. These men are not to be played with. I trust them to a certain extent, but I would never let them stay here forever. They

are hunted men, and they belong to another, one who will never let them go. They not only created them, but kept them, and they will do anything to get away from that. Where I am light and life, they are death in its darkest, most twisted form.”

“You feel sorry for them.”

“You would too if you knew,” she replies, patting my shoulder, “but do not mistake pity for weakness. Sever the mate bond and get as far away as you can before they turn on you like they did their master.”

“If I return home, there will be no leaving . . . not until I am done.”

“So the rumours are true.” My head snaps around, and she smiles softly. “I may be an earth witch, brightling, but I have my ways. Gehenna? Truly? What did you do?”

“I discovered the truth, something infinitesimally more dangerous than any action I could ever take.” I hold up my hand. “I will never tell you what because your entire coven would be destroyed for knowing. Thank you for your help.”

“Stay the night in the guest lodge. You remember the way. Stay as long as you need. You are always welcome here,” she says. I could never remain here forever, even without my vengeance, but it’s a pretty thought.

Patting my hand, she offers me another flower. “Flowers are wondrous things, aren’t they? Even when faced with the most horrible conditions, they still bloom year after year. Maybe you are finally blooming, brightling.”

She departs, carrying the cake, while I stare down at the flower, wondering how I am going to get them to agree to the plan.

It’s the only way for us to be rid of each other.

SEVEN

T



We keep our discussion internal, not daring to speak out loud. Who knows what or who is eavesdropping here? Secrets can never be shared. They are dangerous.

We cannot fail our mission. Word would get out, and we would be worthless. Without our contracts, we would be forced to return.

Never, I hiss, and Kitt nods. We would all rather die than go back.

But if her mother is truly the only one? Bram frowns, looking between us. *We might have no choice.*

We'll lie, Raiden suggests with an elegant shrug. We'll tell her we agree, follow her back, save our boss from this contract, then get them to break the bond and leave her to her own mess.

Would that work? Emrys muses.

It's the only choice we have, Kitt admits. We cannot spend forever searching for someone to break it while the mate bond grows stronger by the second, and every day we waste means our name is sullied and not trusted.

She appears suddenly, eyeing us for a moment before heading outside. She's our prisoner, so we have little choice but to follow, our plan formed. We'll betray her and get rid of her like we promised, and then we will be free once more.

She moves through the coven like she has a purpose. We follow, and people seem to jump out of her way rather than ours. It makes for an easier time as she follows the winding pathway up the mountain, stopping above

the rest of the coven where a lonely cabin sits. Opening the door as if she owns it, she leaves it ajar behind her as she steps inside. After sharing a look with the others, I plunge into the unknown behind her, but all I find is a two-storey cabin. A fire burns in a wood burner at the back, and there are sofas covered in bedding and blankets. Several open doors reveal bedrooms. Clearly, this is meant for guests, as there's no personalisation anywhere, just a flower on the table, the same as she was given.

"We can stay here for the night. This is for guests," she calls without looking at us. Opening the screen door, she steps out onto the wooden balcony and leans into it, looking out at the world below.

I leave her to her musings as I assess the place then divide and conquer. Once satisfied, we gather in the living room and watch her. Anyone else would think we look like silent statues, but internally, we are debating the best course of action.

We have no other choice, I state, finally silencing their arguments. We were going to kill her anyway, so we will simply go to her mother, get her to break the bond, and bury them. Our contract would be fulfilled, and we can restart far away from these people.

Is anyone curious what she did for her mother to desert her like that? Bram asks, nails flickering in agitation as he watches her. He, more than others, seems to be softening towards her, thanks to this bond. I should have expected it. No one sympathises with a tortured, captured monster more than he does.

No, and I never will be. What is done is done. We have a duty, I remind them, looking into every single eye until they focus on me. She is simply a way to achieve our goal. She has a pretty face, and there is the bond, but remember, it isn't real and neither is she. I hook my thumb in her direction. *She would gut us as easily as she would smile. She needs us right now for some reason, so let's make sure we win before she does. Understood?*

Their agreements flood my head, and I ignore their personal thoughts about the matter as best as I can.

We weren't always like this, able to speak and feel each other's minds. We were once individuals, just monsters tossed into cages alongside each other. It's thanks to the collector that we are this way. I cannot change that or go back, and honestly, I don't know if I would. I wouldn't have survived without them, and I know they feel the same way. We are one now. We are

family, and I will never let them fall back into the collector's hands, which means we must keep moving.

It's my job to keep them alive.

Not yours alone, Emrys says.

Turning away, I focus on her, not wanting to discuss my darkening thoughts and the memories nudging at my mind—memories of cells just like hers.

For now, we need her to work with us and let her guard down so when it's time, she will be compliant when we betray her. Slipping outside after Ferol, I stand silently by her side. I can admit it's beautiful here, and I bet after spending so much time stuck in darkness, it must be hard to look away from nature. For years, I watched the sun rise and set and let the breeze wash over me. I would even sleep outside no matter where we were. It felt too confined inside, too close to the horrors of our past.

"We will do as you said," I tell her as she stares out at the coven and the pink sky. "We will journey to your mother."

When she glances at me over her shoulder, there is a strange smile on her lips. "One day, you might wish you chose differently." She turns forward again, dismissing us. Leaving her to her musings, I settle down for the night. We will each take watch just in case and set off early again in the morning.

The quicker we break the mate bond, the better.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



I t's dark by the time I head back inside, not wanting to miss a single ray of light. I have seen enough darkness, however, to last a lifetime, even with the beauty of the stars and moon. I'm not particularly tired after napping all day, but with little else to do, I head to one of the bedrooms. It's the one with a room on either side occupied by them. They've boxed me in, but I don't care. I'm used to being surrounded by creatures that want my death. I meet Emrys's eyes as I head into the room. He's sitting at the small kitchen nook, cleaning his guns, and he tips his hat at me as I slink past. Kicking my shoes off, I crawl into bed and wrap the covers around me. I'm used to being extremely hot, so everything out here seems cold, which is good, but it also means I struggle to relax.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep. I force myself to stay still, watching in case they try anything, but when they don't, I drift off.

My mind is filled with the past, but my memories morph all too suddenly into something unfamiliar and strange. A dream? I'm not sure, but I'm inside someone else's body. Fear courses through me, then agony, my body jittering and shaking on whatever I lie upon.

My eyes scan the area in desperation, searching for a way out. The lights are bright and blinding, coming from every angle, and I see cameras aimed my way. Pain rips through me again. Lifting my upper body as far as I can, I glance down in horror.

My lower half is not human. I have the legs and giant stinger of a scorpion, and it's being cut off with a saw. A man in a medical mask turns to look at me, his eyes alight with delight and intrigue as he watches me

writhe and bellow in agony. There is another, a blurred figure in the distance, but it is him who speaks.

“It is yet to be seen if the specimen will regrow this appendage.” The garbled voice reaches my ears, penetrating the pain enough for me to hear. “Unlike the other of his kind, this one is stronger and has survived four procedures. This will be the fifth. I will dissect the stinger and its poison and see what riches it yields.”

The words fade into a blur as my entire body begins to shut down, dying from blood loss as I feel each sawing motion.

My eyes roll back from the pain, and the very last thing I see is a huge brown and black stinger being lifted into the air like a trophy as it’s finally cut off my body.

Sitting upright with a gasp, I cover my chest. I’m sweating, the sheets sticking to me, and I ache to run. I struggle as flames lick at me, called by that . . . that dream.

A commotion in the living area has me slipping to silent feet. I walk over to the doorway and see them. *My mates*. They are all awake and carefully circled around Bram, who is panting with his head hanging between his legs, but it snaps up when he hears me. His eyes lock on me, and his face transforms for a moment, holding the same pain I felt in the dream. As I watch him, realisation hits.

“It was your dream,” I whisper as I stare into his furious eyes. All the others turn to see me in the doorway. “Not a dream . . . a memory. I felt it. I saw it.”

Bram roars and barrels towards me, more beast than human, but Kitt and Emrys move between us, holding him back. “Get out of here now!” Kitt bellows at me, the order harsh. I hesitate until Torrin shoves me towards the door.

“Go now,” he sneers, “or we’ll let him rip you to pieces and then see if you can survive.”

Grinding my teeth, I shoot one last look at Bram, who is fighting their hold, before turning and opening the door. The temperature outside has dropped. I could wait or walk to the village, but for some reason, my eyes turn up.

Fear and pain still linger on my skin, until I feel the need to outrun them.

There is no trail or path as I walk into the darkness and climb the mountain. The higher I get, the colder it becomes. My nose freezes, and I wrap my arms around myself as I shiver. The moon is all I have to see by, but I'm used to darkness now, and I climb the terrain easily.

The snow and ice once felt like my home, and I would escape into the freezing wilderness to avoid the expectations and duties placed upon me by my mother. The temperature and focus it took to survive such harsh elements once calmed me. Now, it only enrages me, the ice and snow melting under my feet from the heat emitting from my body as the memory rides me. I practically sprint up the mountain, trying to outrun ghosts that are not my own.

I can still hear my mother's voice screaming into the void, warning what would happen when she caught me, but now it's joined by the doctor's voice and Bram's screams of pain. For a moment, the terrain in front of me shifts into a familiar frozen lake surrounded by trees. If I turned, I would see the castle upon the frozen cliff. Shaking off the thought, I almost tumble off the edge in my distraction.

I refuse to let the memories take hold—his or mine.

I'm so preoccupied, I did not notice, but it's too late now.

I'm being followed.

CHAPTER NINE



Her breathing is laboured as she finally sinks to her knees in the snow at the top of the mountain. The verge is shallow but still wide enough for her to kneel upon. The cold is enough to kill most humans, but she doesn't even shiver as she grips the snow in her fists and tips her head back, letting the cool air wash over her. I know she senses me, but she doesn't speak for a while. I transform back, wondering what she will do. I changed to my other form to follow her better, as my human one is not made for temperatures and climbs like this, though she seemed to have no problems with it.

"Worried I would run while you weren't watching?" Her voice finally breaks the stalemate, gruff and low. My lips quirk at her words as I move silently closer.

"No, we would simply find you again. That doesn't mean we can let you out of our sight though. You're dangerous, after all."

When she looks at me over her shoulder, something in my heart aches. Her eyes are forlorn, burning with pain and heartache, and her lips are twisted in a cruel sneer. "Don't forget it."

I chuckle. "I'm sure we won't. It will be a pleasure to fight and kill you."

"I'm too tired to argue with you right now," she says, surprising me. Her voice sounds subdued. This is the most emotion I have heard from her since we first stepped foot in her cavern. Nothing seems to stop this woman, but right now, she looks lost, alone, and exhausted, fighting demons both in her

head and ours. I do not know what to say, so I venture closer, stopping behind her until she can feel my heat at her back.

“Does it mean the bond is growing stronger if I saw his nightmare?” she asks.

“Yes.” My voice is soft, almost kind, though I am not sure why. She represents everything I hate, but I feel a little sorry for her. It’s easier in my fox form, as he cares for nothing or no one. He merely tolerates the others. We both lapse into silence, so I sink down at her side and look out. I cannot see much, since the darkness is almost absolute, so I find myself talking just to fill the silence that reminds me too much of a time I never wish to revisit. “It reminds me of Gehenna.”

“Just a lot colder.” She nods. “Darkness is the same everywhere you go, but some you can escape, while others never end.” Her words are littered with memories and horrors, ones I have no desire to delve into. She survived ten years in Gehenna, which is impressive. I cannot imagine what she endured. I do not wish to like her, but I do respect her ability to survive.

“I’m surprised you didn’t run.” It’s a question.

“I promised myself I would never run again, and I never will. Stop being nice to me. We all know you want to kill me.” Her eyes cut to mine, harder now, and I cannot help but smirk cruelly.

“That I do, but tonight, I feel sorry for you.”

“Do not.” The hiss is pure malice.

I chuckle. “Think of it as a truce only for tonight.” I shrug. “Tomorrow, I will go back to being a bastard to you, and we will go back to trying to kill each other and be rid of this pesky bond yanking us closer together.”

She scoffs and looks away, remaining quiet for a long time.

“Will he be okay?” I can tell the question is pulled from deep inside her. Like us, she doesn’t want to care, but the bond is forcing her to.

“Bram?” When she nods, I purse my lips. “We all have nightmares. You invaded his privacy, with or without meaning to, and he woke thinking he was still back there. He will be fine. It is not the first time we have almost lost one of us to the past.”

We both lapse into silence again. We aren’t friends, lovers, family, or even mates despite the bond. We are enemies, and neither of us wants to be anything else, just thrown together by a twisted fate we cannot seem to avoid.

She shivers, tugging her feet deeper under her, and it's then I notice their colour. She didn't have time to put layers or shoes on, unlike me. I was already on watch when it happened, hence the reason I came after her, even though I hate her most—well, after Emrys and maybe Kitt, though his emotions are a lot more twisted up. My fox's calmness washes through me, blocking most of that.

"Your feet must be cold," I say, more curious than concerned. Could she die from the temperature? Would it freeze her rebirth enough for us to break the bond? Maybe.

Do not, it could kill us too, remember? Keep her alive. Kitt's voice sparks annoyance in my head.

"I'm used to it," she responds, glancing down at the reddening appendages. "My mother once submerged my lower half in a frozen lake for three hours as punishment. I couldn't feel my feet for days and was bedbound."

"Your mother sounds like a delight," I deadpan, and she smiles as I sigh, feeling Kitt's nudge. Against my own wants, I shift and wrap my furred body around her feet and legs, warming them as best as I can. She jerks in surprise, but I simply lift my head and stare at her in fox form. I'm bigger than most, around half the size of her body, my fur a mix of blue and grey. My eyes glow, and sparks of lightning look like static flowing from my back as I curl around her with my tail tucked into my mouth to keep her core warm.

Blinking down at me in surprise, she lifts her hand to pet me, but I flash my sharp fangs, stopping the movement.

"Sorry, pretty boy, forgot for a moment who it was." She drops her hand and looks out at the darkness as my fox settles down, annoyed at having to be this close to someone, but orders are orders. "I never thought I'd miss the freezing cold, but down there, I did every now and again. I don't know why I'm telling you this, maybe because you can't respond."

Huffing, I bite her side until she glares at me, but when I settle down, she carries on anyway, as if I care what she has to say, though I hear the others listening. They are probably wondering how they can use it against her, at least for Kitt. He's always working on a plan to keep us safe. It's what he did before and why we follow him now.

"It will be like where we are going, only worse. It's not the elements that will kill you, though. That will be my mother. She didn't become the

leader of the darkest witches of our time by being nice. You said earlier I was like her, and you're right. I can be cruel, but I wasn't always. She made me this way. When you grow up around enough death and games, you start to think it's normal. I bet you can understand that." She spares me a look, one that tells me she knows too much.

One thing we've learned is that her and her mother are not friends, and whoever wants her dead will be on our side, which will make everything easier. Pushing down the twinge from the mate bond, I focus on that and holding on until it breaks so I can go back to the way I was.

We sit here for a while, lost in our own musings, until her hands wrap around my body, tugging me off her. My fox hisses as she grabs him none too gently and throws him at the rock. I hit it hard, and I'm just about to show her my powers when I see the dark shape descending upon where we were, its claws raking the earth where I just lay.

She saved my life.

Cocking my head, I look at the beast in shock, recognising it right away. It's one of the collector's most feared pets, and this beast only does as the collector commands.

Ferol grabs the beast's jaw as it opens wide to swallow her, since she is in the way, and with a mighty yell, she throws it back into the air. Its malformed wings struggle to catch the air, which gives her time to get to her feet and grasp a sharp rock.

The creature is a mix of all the best ones—vampire, dragons, shifters—and the collector moulded it into one, making it insane. Its body is the size of a dragon's, but it's in the image of a bat and a human. It's disgusting and fearsome and also very deadly.

I've wanted to kill one of these shadows for years. Glee fills me for a moment, even as I sense the others. *I have this*, I assure them.

Racing towards the beast, I push off the ice and soar through the air. Once I'm on its back, I sink my teeth in as my powers flow through me. Lightning arcs from my body, causing it to roar. Its wings falter as it collapses on the edge of the verge, digging its claws in to stop it from plummeting to the valley below. Releasing my bite, I slide down its buckling neck to the snow and flash my fangs at it.

I swell with power, tripling in size until I am bigger than the beast. The ice forms deadly spikes as I yank the shadow down onto them. It cries out, struggling on them as I prepare for the final attack, but Ferol steps in.

The rock hits the shadow, and it turns its head to see her as she flies through the air. Fire races across her body as she hits it. She holds one of my sharp icicles in her hand, sinking it into its head and twisting until it stills. Ferol slips off it and looks to me, the shadow dead behind her as my ears flatten back in annoyance.

Changing, I sway before her, licking my lips where I taste the beast's blood. "You saved me."

"Mate instincts, a mistake. It won't happen again," she grumbles, eyeing the beast before sparing me a look. "This wasn't an accident. This was sent, and it wasn't for me. It was for you."

There's a question in her statement, one I don't answer. The others are right here with me, and when I blink, her eyes are narrowed, no doubt sensing me talking to them.

"We should head back."

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CHAPTER TEN



It's obvious Raiden isn't going to say anything, he even shifted back to that adorable fox to avoid my questions, so instead I follow him down the mountain, annoyed with him, them, and myself. I saved him, and I have no idea why. As soon as I saw that creature emerge from the darkness, I moved on instinct, but he won't even tell me what it was. Bastards. I don't know why I would expect anything else from them though. We are enemies, after all, and if it wasn't for the bond, we would kill each other. This mating is messing with my logic, and I don't like it one fucking bit. The sooner I am free, the better, even if that means going back to the one place I hate most.

After all, I was going to have to for my revenge anyway.

I silently follow him, and at the cabin, I shake off as much snow as I can before ducking inside. They already knew we were coming, and they gathered in the living room. All eyes are on us, unreadable and hard.

Bram carefully gets to his feet, shame lining his features. My expression is cold and hard as I grab my boots and slip them on, wincing at my frozen toes. I use the discomfort and pain to remind me of my mission, and it isn't so I can play mates with the likes of them—no matter how hot they are. "We should leave now if we want to get there as quickly as possible." Running my eyes across them, I harden my resolve. "We should break the bond soon."

Not because of what I saw, but because I am terrified of what they might see in me.

I head back out, leaving them to their plans and thoughts. I am not one of them and never will be. We will break the bond and kill each other. Whoever is left will get their life back. I need to remember that, even though the bond is strengthening inside me.

Despite the early hour, when we finally get moving, the village below is bustling with people, and I find Flora waiting at the entrance as if she knew when we would come. Knowing her, she probably did.

I feel the men draw closer behind me, another thing irritating me on this beautiful fucking morning, but I ignore them and smile softly at Flora. “Thank you for the hospitality. It was appreciated.”

“I saw the fun you had above our border this morning. Are you okay?” She eyes me worriedly, so I pat her hand.

“Never better. I’m not that easy to kill.”

She chuckles, covering my hand and infusing warmth into my skin. I feel it stoke my fire until I fully wake from the cold, including my frozen feet. “I do not doubt that, brightling.” When she glances behind me, her smile doesn’t wane at all. “Lost boys, it was nice to see you again, and remember what I said. When something is broken, it cannot be fixed. You know that better than most, so figure out if that thing might be what you are searching for.”

“You call them lost boys? Why?” I ask despite my clear intention to ignore them as best as I can and not get too close.

“Because they are lost, of course. They are always searching for that missing piece, poor souls.” Leaning in, she drops her voice. “You might have more in common with them than you think if you can see past your rage.” She pats my hand again.

I pull it free and nod, turning to leave. I sling the bag of essentials I found waiting for me down here over my shoulder. None of it belongs to me, but then again, I don’t have any possessions anymore. That kind of stuff was stripped from me all those years ago.

“Be careful, brightling, and remember that the blood that flows through you flows through her. You are just as strong as her, maybe more so. I told her that once, and I think that is why she was so angry, because she knew it too. Use it against her and survive.” She combs her hands through my hair, and more flowers appear. “My offer stands. If you need a home one day, there is always one here.” She steps back, her gaze faraway. “Though, I believe you will find your own.”

Ignoring the cryptic words, I wave goodbye and follow the lost boys to their vehicle. At the door, I climb into the back without a word and close my eyes, studiously ignoring them.

I hear them plotting the best route out loud, which is surprising since they usually speak internally, but I don't offer my opinions. We will get there either way, and men like them prefer to be in control. We finally start to move and I stretch out, one arm thrown over my face to shield it from the sun, which, although beautiful, is blinding to someone who has lived in darkness, but the warmth burns through the windows and into my skin. It feels like being home in Gehenna again.

I don't know when I started thinking of it that way, but I suppose if you live somewhere long enough, you put down roots, even if it is hell.

"I'm sorry," Bram whispers sometime later, shocking me from the relaxed doze I was in. Lazily opening my eyes, I meet his ashamed gaze before he drops it to the seat he's picking at as he leans through the gap. "When my memories take me by surprise like that, my animal side takes over. It wasn't personal. It sees everyone as a threat. I've almost killed them more times than I can count." His eyes are hazy with tears. "I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that. It's not your fault."

The shame in his eyes is my undoing, despite my best intentions.

"You should never apologise for what you cannot control, especially if it is the fury the monsters of this world created in you," I respond.

"Haven't you heard? We are the monsters," he jokes dryly.

"And how do you become a monster?" I arch a brow. "You are forced to become one, created in another monster's image. Whatever happened, own it. It's who you are, and don't ever fucking apologise for it."

"Many would argue we were monsters before," he murmurs.

"They are fucking idiots. What you were born as does not make you a monster. Look at other races. Humans have serial killers. It's not about what you are, but who you are that makes you evil and monstrous."

Blinking, he searches my gaze before nodding, a slight smile curling his lips before it fades. "You saw it, didn't you, the way they did . . ." He jerks his head to the others, who I know are listening carefully. One wrong move or word and they'd be on me. They are protective of each other. A bond like that only grows in the harshest environments.

"I did, but I didn't mean to. I don't even know how. I was asleep, so I thought it was my own nightmare at first. I would say it won't happen

again, but it's clear the bond does as it wishes." The fear of what they could see in me has my hands tightening into fists. "The sooner we break this, the better, because then you won't have to worry."

"And what do you worry about?" He indicates my fists and tightening face. "You worry what we will see as well."

"You don't want to see inside my head, Bram, trust me on that."

His eyes widen. "That's the first time you've said my name." I remain silent, and he sighs. "Like you said, like recognises like. What haunts you?"

"You don't want to know." I close my eyes, cutting off the conversation.

The van keeps moving, and I eventually drop my hand from my face and open the bag for the food Flora packed. There are eggs, fruit, and some meat that I devour without leaving a crumb behind. Food is life, and it was scarce in Gehenna. Unless you were willing to eat others, you ate what you could and when. It left a constant hunger pang in my stomach, and now I slump back, feeling slightly sick since I'm full.

Closing my eyes once more, I let the soft rocking of the moving vehicle drag me back to sleep and into the constant nightmares that await.

"I'll fucking kill you for this!" he bellows, banging his head repeatedly into the rock as I lean on the outside of the makeshift prison. With no entry or exit, it's more like a tomb. "Ferol!"

He continues to bellow my name, and my eyes close as a single tear slips free and slides down my cheek.

"Ferol."

When he calms, I press my face against the rock and swallow the pain gripping me. "You betrayed me, just like everyone else," I say, my tone composed despite the whirlwind of emotions I feel.

"I had no choice," he rasps, his voice ragged and torn from his screams. "Let me out, darling. We can start over. We can move on. I won't ever hurt you again."

"I'm not that much of a fool. I might have been stupid enough to trust you in the first place, but never again. Do you think I didn't learn from the first betrayal that landed me in here? No, everyone will always put themselves first, and that's exactly what you did. I never would have," I hiss, banging my fist into the rock until it bleeds. "Never."

His laugh is slightly manic, and I hear him pacing on the other side. "That's what you think. You would if you had no other choice. I love you,

Ferol. Please, please let me out."

"Goodbye, Jax." I turn and walk away, leaving him in the belly of the beast. His quiet pleas turn back into roars of anger as he pounds at his cell.

"Ferol! I swear when I get out of here, you're dead. You're fucking dead. I'll kill you myself! Do you hear me? There is nowhere you can run where you can escape me!"

Jerking awake from the nightmare, I reach up automatically and wrap my fingers around the throat of the man leaning between the seats, shaking me. I stare into Torrin's strict, stern face, not seeing an ounce of gentleness there as I come back to myself and release his throat. There's an impression from my hand. I almost broke his neck, but he didn't say a word. He silently turns back around and ignores me again, leaving me with the remnants of the bellow lingering in my head.

Needing to move, I sit up and peer through the seats. The sun has long since set, and we are still driving. The dark road stretches as far as the eye can see, and there is nothing but barren land on either side as we head deeper into the wilderness.

"Are we stopping soon?"

They ignore me.

"Hey, I need to piss. Are we stopping soon?"

When they continue to ignore me bar a twitch of annoyance on Kitt's face, I sit back angrily. I am not a child to be ignored, nor are my needs. They need me alive, not comfortable, but that doesn't mean I'll just let them treat me like this.

Leaning back, I hit the button for the trunk. Beeping sounds seconds before it opens. Rolling back over the seats, I land on the road on my knees, but I'm free of the vehicle. I stand up and dust off my bleeding knees as the van screeches to a stop. I turn and casually walk towards the trees on the left. I feel them chasing after me as I squat and do my business. Once I'm done, I fasten my trousers and step back into the road to find them standing next to the van in various states of anger.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Kitt snarls before taking a deep breath.

"I asked you, and you ignored me. I am not a child. If this is going to work, we will need to tolerate each other."

"We don't have to do anything," he responds coldly. "The sooner you're dead, the better. Your comfort is not our problem, so shut up and stay in the

back.”

Irritation flares within me. I’ve never liked being told what to do, but even more so now, so I ignore him completely.

I take my time, stretching and bending as they eye me. I’m beginning to read them. Emrys is twirling his pistols again, giving away his agitation. That means he’s feeling too much—anger, annoyance, anything. When Kitt’s face turns even colder, it means he’s hiding his true feelings, or at least trying. Torrin’s ears turn red with anger, while Raiden simply ignores me. Bram hides his eyes and the emotion within.

“Ferol,” Torrin warns, speaking for them, but something about the way he says my name has me shivering, and flames lick at my skin. His tone is filled with hate and annoyance, yet it’s silken.

Stupid fucking mate bond. Just for that, I purposely take my time walking, stopping every now and again, giving myself time to get this reaction under control, but they all stiffen. Raiden’s hands fill with lightning, Torrin bares his teeth, and Bram clenches his fists. Kitt steps forward, his skin hardening into a dark grey.

“Get back in the van now.” Emrys’s voice is low and slow, and something about it makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. “Now!” he roars, swinging another gun around and spinning in time to see shadows break free of the trees and barrel our way.

Backing towards them, I keep the van between me and the other side of the trees, but soon a dark, hissing sound fills the air. The cascade of noise grates on my ears so much, I wince, and it only grows in volume.

Spinning to keep them all in sight, I find hundreds of pure black shadows moving across the ground to get us.

The shapes don’t stop—they twist and turn, reflecting on the gravel below and separating us until we stand alone.

“Don’t let them touch you!” Kitt yells, and I leap up on top of the van to avoid them consuming me when they converge on my position.

“What happens if they touch me?” I ask, avoiding one of their hands.

Kitt looks at me and grins grimly. “You become one of them, lost forever.”

Brilliant.

How the fuck do you fight shadows?

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I never thought the collector would be insane enough to unleash the pet experiments, but clearly I was wrong. I haven't stood against them before, but I have seen firsthand what they are capable of. I watched from my tube as a victim was thrown to them. They swirled and converged on him until nothing remained but shadows and the remnants of his screams. It's how they feast, and now they are coming for us. The collector has to know we will find a way to stop them . . . right?

The only good thing about our time there was learning the weaknesses and strengths of other monsters. We remember when they were testing weapons against those shadows. They couldn't be overpowered. Cold temperatures and conventional weapons had no effect—only fire.

"The only way to stop them is fire," I roar out loud for her sake. If she dies here, then so do we. She needs to survive, which means, unfortunately, we need to work together—something I loathe. She's unpredictable and untrustworthy, and unlike with our team, I cannot tell what she is thinking. She could get us all killed, but we have no choice.

Silently, I order Emrys to remain close to her, and he backs up to the car, leaping on the roof to shoot into the shadows, but they simply ignore the bullets that soar straight through them.

"Fire, huh?" she snaps, leaping to avoid more of them. "That, I can do."

"Ferol," Emrys warns, but she ignores him, jumping into the air once more. Only this time, she changes, becoming the giant, beautiful, if not

terrifying phoenix.

Her flames light up the night as she flies above us, the wind from her wings nearly knocking me back into the shadows, which I think she did on purpose. Her beak opens in a squawk, and then she dives at the shadows. At the last moment, she pulls up, the edges of her wings sparking flames across the ground as she loops around the van and us, creating a giant circle of flames. She lands in front of me and the others, inside the flames as she faces down the shadows, taunting them.

Not one to waste an opportunity, I throw myself into the back of the car since it's close, as the others scramble in after me, leaving only Ferol to fight the shadows.

She glances back at us, her bird eyes narrowing before she takes to the air again, and this time, she lands on human feet.

"Go!" I bark before I realise what I've done. Raiden is in the driver's seat, nodding, ready to leave as the shadows increase, returning to the forest to come for us. Her fire will not hold them back forever. They cannot be killed, only slowed.

She dives into the van just as we peel away, knocking Torrin to her seat and claiming his. We speed off with smoke pouring behind us from how fast we move. Glancing behind us, I see the shadows held back by her flames, allowing us to put some distance between us in hopes that will stop them or get the collector to recall them. They cannot be sustained forever. The consumed energy drains with each second, and if it becomes too low, they will turn on the collector and feast there instead.

"What the fuck were they?" Ferol asks as she glances at the back mirror before looking at me.

"The consumed," I answer. "An abomination created from ghosts and evil magic. Everything they touch becomes one of them. They will never stop once ordered to do something by those that created them."

"And who is that exactly?" she presses, her eyes narrowing. "First, the beast on the mountain, and now this. Someone wants you dead."

"Not dead," Emrys replies as he glances back, debating his response. "Worried enough to return."

Enough.

My command filters through their heads, and they fall silent. Emrys stares through the front window.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” she growls, “but if someone is gunning for you, then that means I’m now in their path. What else can I expect?”

“What monsters can you dream up?” Raiden jokes before I cut him a look.

“We will deal with it.”

“Oh, like you did then?” she snaps angrily. “Without me, you’d have been consumed or dead or whatever.”

That is the fucking truth, even if I hate it.

“We wouldn’t have been if you hadn’t pulled that stunt.”

“Hey, peeing is a natural bodily function,” she retorts. “Don’t be an ass next time and I won’t.”

“We should put as much distance between us and them as possible before something worse comes,” Raiden remarks happily, and she looks at me with a groan.

“What could be worse?”

“A lot,” I mutter, making her groan and slump back. “We’ll take turns driving. Keep heading towards the location.”

“Don’t you mean my home?” Her voice is angry. “And just think, you thought the worst monsters were out here.”

“Before we stopped, I heard your name being screamed.” Torrin’s dark face has me turning around. The fact that he chose to speak out loud lets me know exactly why he’s mad—her.

“Did you? You must have been dreaming of me.” She shrugs but she looks uncomfortable for a moment.

“It seems we aren’t the only ones with enemies,” I mutter, something she chooses to ignore.

The van settles into a strained silence that I refuse to break.

“So I know Emrys is a ghoul, and Raiden is some sort of fox thing,” she begins after a while.

“Raju,” he supplies snottily. “A lightning fox, if you will.”

“Raju.” She looks at us. “What about you?” When none of us answer, she carries on. “I’m betting you are a golem, right?” Her guess surprises me. After all, we are quite rare and extremely hard to create. Nodding like my look confirmed it, she glances at Bram and Torrin. Maybe she’s forgotten we told her what Torrin is, or maybe she is just playing with us.

“The horns, the size, so . . . dragon?” When Torrin just stares blankly back, she sighs. “Goat shifter? Bull?” His eye twitches, and she grins. “Ah,

a minotaur. Interesting. I've never met one of your kind." She looks at Bram, whose eyes widen. He seems to have that problem every time she looks at him, and I feel him reaching for me to help.

"From what I accidentally saw . . . a scorpion? I've never heard of one though." I let it be his choice. It has nothing to do with us if he wants to disclose what he is. She could be asking to know how to kill us or just due to boredom. Either way, I won't take that from them.

"Scorpion." He swallows nervously. "We are very rare. In fact, we were extinct until I was brought back."

"Brought back?" She tilts her head curiously, and he glances at me again for help, but once more, I let him decide.

"From the past. We were extinct until . . . they found a way," Bram says, but I am surprised by how much he shares.

"The past? Like time travel? Cool." She glances back at me. "What do I get for guessing correctly?"

"Another day of breathing," I retort. "Now shut up, you're annoying."

"Aren't golems supposed to be extremely loyal to their maker?" When I don't answer, she turns in her seat, props her head in her hand, and watches me as I gaze forward. "Is the person after us your maker? I've heard golems are more loyal than any soldier or mate unless you betray them, and then they turn and make you wish you never made them. Is that the case, golem?"

"Stop." One word, but she ignores it.

"Oh, come on, what did they do? They created you from mud and stone, infused you with life, and gave you part of their soul, so they must have done something terrible for you to betray your master."

She smashes into the side of the door as I attack, my hand tightening on her throat, yet she smiles. "If you know my lore, then you know better than to push me. I will do whatever it takes to complete the job, which means your death."

"But not yet," she replies sweetly, grinning as she taps my hand on her throat. "I only enjoy rough stuff during sex. Without pleasure, it's just boring, especially when we know you cannot follow through."

"Is that an offer?" Raiden asks, trying to lower the tension. When it doesn't work, he sighs. "I'm still driving here. Let's not break the car."

As I peel my fingers away one by one, I almost smile when I see the bruise forming on her skin. Rubbing her neck, she sighs and glances in the

back.

“Touchy, isn’t he? So what can a scorpion do?”

Clutching my head, I stave off a headache and try my best to ignore her. It’s harder than it sounds.

Her scent is everywhere. We’ve swapped drivers a few times, and everyone bar me is asleep. My eyes are locked on the window, waiting for the next attack as I try unsuccessfully to ignore the fiery brimstone smell wrapping around my body. It’s the mating bond, and with her so close, I have the insane urge to reach out and touch her.

“It’s getting stronger, isn’t it?” Emrys asks, leaning into my seat from behind. “Even I feel desire and the need to claim. It’s hard to ignore, even harder with her completely oblivious to the effect.”

“She’s not oblivious. She just doesn’t care,” I respond quietly, unsure why we are talking out loud, but sometimes it’s nice to speak rather than focus on the thoughts in my head.

“Are you sure about that? Sure she doesn’t feel it too?”

“If she does, she’s better than we are at ignoring it,” I reply, and his face presses closer, his voice lowering.

“How do we kill a phoenix? We need to figure that out.” He’s right, we do, but I do not have a clue. Phoenixes are notoriously unkillable. As creatures of legend and myth, little is known about them. It makes this harder than it needs to be.

“We’ll just keep trying until one method works,” I answer.

“We need to keep our eyes on Bram.” I glance back to meet his glowing gaze, knowing he sensed what I did. Bram is growing attached quicker than the rest of us. “You know how he feels about lost and broken animals.”

“He likes to collect them.” Just like us.

He was the one who brought us together.

“If you’re going to talk about me, either talk louder so I can hear better or speak silently in your minds so I don’t have to listen.” Her voice interrupts us, and we both look at her. She doesn’t even twitch, but I know she’s awake now. She’s good. She had me fooled. “As for ways to kill me, at least get inventive. As my mates, you cannot be so dull.”

“Cutting her head off might work, and it will stop her from talking,” I inform Emrys.

Her eyes flutter open and lock on us. “But then you wouldn’t be able to kiss me again.”

Emrys surprises us by choking on a laugh. When she swings a look his way, he coughs to cover it. “That’s a Kitt problem, not ours. We didn’t kiss you.”

“Don’t you want to, ghoulish boy? I wonder, do you taste like death?” His eyes narrow as she grins at him.

“I’d kiss you.” The voice catches us off guard, and we glance back to see Bram awake. “I’ve never kissed anyone. I’d like to before the mate bond breaks.”

“You don’t want me as your first kiss, baby,” she teases, but there’s a softness to her tone. “You’ll find someone else.”

“I won’t,” Bram states cordially, and for a moment, I’m in his head, seeing what he sees—the past, present, and future—before it’s gone. “Either way, you are the end of that possibility.”

Sitting up in her seat, she glances between them and finds him eyeing her sadly. “What does that mean?”

He doesn’t respond, and when I nudge him, he ignores me too. Sometimes Bram acts his age, the youngest of us, but sometimes he knows way more than the universe can seem to hold. It’s disconcerting, and I know it concerns him too.

“Wait, if that’s your first kiss—” She looks at me. “Was that for you as well?”

“Sex and affection were not exactly on the top of our lists after we escaped,” I admit, and she files away that fact. “Allowing someone close enough for that means you trust them to a certain extent, and we trust no one but each other.”

“You don’t have to trust me. In fact, I wouldn’t. I’d rip out your hearts with my bare hands if this bond would allow it, but for now, I’m the one person in this world who cannot hurt you.”

“You can still betray us,” I retort.

“To whom?” She looks around. “Do you see anyone with me? I was thrown into Gehenna, Kitt.” The way she says my name has desire pounding in my temples, and my skin reacts, which I’m sure she notices, much to my chagrin. “That means nobody gave a fuck what I said. I have

nobody to betray you to. That's the bitter fucking truth. I'm all alone, and there are five of you."

"What, you want me to feel sorry for you?" I spit.

"No, I want you to understand me when I offer him this. Everyone deserves to feel that level of affection one time in their life, even if they know what comes after. At least with this, I'm not hiding the dagger I will use on you, nor will it be in your back, but in your heart." She looks at Bram. "I will gladly take your first kiss if you want it."

I want to reject her because it is cruel to offer him what he will never have. Without her, none of us have options. We will not mate again, nor do we wish to. The only way to have a person would be to share, and none of us want that, even with her. He's right, she's his only option, and I won't steal that from him. She might hate him, and she will definitely still kill him, but she's offering him this kindness at least.

"You would?" He leans forward, craning to be close to her, and she kneels between our seats, reaching for him. He flinches at first, so she softens her approach. Her hand slows as it presses to his cheek.

Soft, she feels soft.

"I'm sorry you have to," he whispers, and it tugs at my heart, only making me more furious at her.

"It is not a chore to kiss you, Bram," she murmurs, cupping his cheek, and the level of comfort there sets my teeth on edge. I feel like I shouldn't be looking, but I won't let her hurt him in any way. "You are beautiful. Any person would want you."

"I have scars," he murmurs, his eyes downcast.

"Don't we all, handsome? Do you want me to kiss you?" she asks softly, stroking his face.

He searches her eyes, confused and ashamed, but when he speaks, I already know what he will say. "Please, little beastie."

Smiling at him, she leans in slowly, tilting his head how she wants it, then she delicately presses her lips to his. She kisses him softly a few times before running her tongue along the seam of his lips until they part.

We experience it all—his need, the softness of her lips, her warmth, and her taste—and it's like we are kissing her too.

Humming in approval at his compliance, she kisses him again, sucking on his plump lower lip before letting go, and he presses closer, his desire evident.

Her teeth dig into his bottom lip, and that pain makes me hiss as my hips rise in desire. Her eyes open and turn to me, tracking that movement before a cruel gleam is revealed. Focusing on Bram, she licks and sucks his lips, sweeping her tongue over the bite mark. She takes her time with his first kiss before digging her teeth in again. This time, the van swerves, and Raiden struggles as he feels it as well, so he pulls over, the engine running as she tortures us with one fucking kiss.

It's at that moment I know she will be our downfall.

When she slides her tongue into his mouth, we are done for. She kisses him like she wants to crawl inside him, and each time, I feel it in my own mouth. Her softness presses against me until all I feel is desire burning me alive where there was once only ice.

My hands rip up the seat to stop myself from reaching for her. Emrys slips from the vehicle, slamming the door in his haste. Torrin is strapped into his seat, his eyes wild as I turn mine to him before looking at Raiden. Electric sparks fly around the enclosed space before he, too, slips into the night air, stumbling away from the desire she is forcing through us.

I won't leave Bram alone with her, not when he's vulnerable, but it's torture. My desire matches his, but it isn't me she is kissing, and for the first time ever, I am consumed by envy for him.

She slides her tongue along his, teaching him how to use it. He quickly figures it out and kisses her back, the softness disappearing into a rough, demanding kiss as they chase each other. The sounds of their heavy breathing only amp up my desire as he reaches for her, pulling her closer so they are locked together.

It's too much, and it overwhelms our bond until it's all we feel.

"Enough," Torrin says. It's not an order, but a plea. His voice is choked with need. "Please."

Pulling back from Bram, Ferol looks at us with swollen lips and her eyes widen. I expect her to make the most of it and tease or hurt us, but she simply nods. Kissing Bram once more, she releases his face and exits the car, leaving us to deal with the aftermath.

"We need to break the bond," Torrin snarls raggedly. "If one kiss can do that, then imagine how easily she could destroy us."

I couldn't agree more.

CHAPTER TWELVE



I didn't expect it to affect them like that. I pass Raiden, who has changed into his fox again and is unleashing blue sparks across the road. Emrys fades into the trees opposite, and I cross the road and slip into the forest myself to escape what I just did.

I didn't expect it to affect me like this either. Pressing my back to a tree, I cover my racing heart. Fire runs down my spine and across my skin, and desire demands to be fed. My feet turn of their own accord, trying to drag me back to them and finish what we started, but it would be cruel to all of us. We can never seal this mate bond, but it's clear this need must be alleviated. If I go back like this, we will explode. I don't want a mate, never mind multiple, and they don't either. I'd rather kill them, and they feel the same way. It just so happens this pesky mate bond has other ideas.

A kiss has never affected me like that. The whole earth moved under my feet, and every inch of me turned into fire, alive and demanding attention. Each stroke of his innocent, fumbling tongue left me wet and wanting.

Fuck. I slam my head back into the tree, trying to shake some sense into myself. I should have known better than to play with fate.

If I go back there like this, I'll end up fucking them despite the consequences. Phoenixes burn hot, which means they crave the brightest feelings—anger, love, and lust. We feed on them. I will not give into my baser impulses and ruin my chance at revenge. It's all I thought about in Gehenna, and now I have a chance. I won't waste it, no matter how good the momentary pleasure might feel.

We are nemeses, which I need to remember.

Instead, I slide my hand into my pants. Closing my eyes, I focus on that feeling as my callused hand slips into my panties, covering my wet cunt.

I widen my legs, sliding my fingers through my folds then pressing them inside my core, wishing they were bigger. For a moment, I see a flash of Bram's glowing eyes as they darken and I moan out loud. The sound echoes as I speed my fingers up before pulling them free and circling my clit. Pleasure zaps through me as I lift my shirt and bite it to muffle my sounds. I grind into my hand, pretending they are touching me as my pleasure grows. I lose myself in the feeling until a noise has my eyes snapping open.

It was a twig, and it was too close.

I see cold, dead eyes watching me in the darkness, and the sight sends me over the edge, a muffled yell leaving my lips as I come. When I blink my eyes open and slump into the tree, they are gone as if they were never here, but I saw them.

Emrys was watching me.

Pulling my fingers free, I suck them clean and think about what that means. From what I've gathered, it means all of them saw me come too. They'll probably think I was being cruel again, trying to entice them to break this mate bond. Oh well. I got what I needed, and my desire is slowly ebbing, leaving a need that has grown since I first kissed Kitt and realised what it meant. I'm good at hiding my lust, but it is getting worse—a constant, deep burn within me I choose to ignore.

I'm distracted from those thoughts, however, when something tickles my leg. Frowning, I crouch down and pick up the little creature clinging to my calf, then I lift it.

It's a scorpion.

It stares at me as I stare back, and I wonder what it means. It's a wild creature and definitely not from around here. Is it here because of Bram? I wonder if it will sting me. I watch it and wait, but it rubs against my palm before scurrying up my arm and resting on my shoulder under my hair. Unsure what to do, I just leave it there. Honestly, I've had worse things to deal with than a scorpion deciding I'm its new nest. Taking a deep breath, I collect myself and put my mask back into place, then I walk to the road.

The van is still here, and they are lingering around it. When I appear, they stop moving, their eyes locked on me. Their expressions are hostile, maybe more so than before, but I also see shock.

They know I could have run while they were weak, but I didn't.

"Well, are we going?" Ignoring their dirty looks, I slip past them and into the van, reclaiming my back seat. I need some space from them, but I also made a mistake because it smells like them back here. Nervously, I reach up to tug on my hair, hoping the pain will bring me out of my lust, but instead, I touch something alive. I forgot. I pet the little creature as the van rocks when they get in, and then we are back on the road. They are silent and stiff, just like when we first met.

Brilliant.

All I can do is let my mind wander, and since I'm back here, it automatically returns to that kiss. I push away the pulse of desire, but I remember their reactions. All of them.

"You can't block the bond between you, can you? You can feel everything the others do?"

No one speaks, but Kitt's shoulders tense, giving me the answer I need. I'm right. I file that away to use against them somehow because Kitt, more than ever, seems determined to kill me now that he knows the power I hold over them. The bitter truth is, though, that the blade cuts two ways.

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"Can we at least have some music?" I ask, already sick of the silence. Silence was all I had in Gehenna, especially for the last few years, after I pulled away from everything. Only Spike dared visit me, and even then it wasn't often. I was alone for years with only the sound of my voice. If I can't hear them despite how much I hate them, then I need something. I'm desperate for sound. It's a kindness I'm asking for, but it seems it's one I cannot afford or ask for since they ignore me.

Bram glances back to me like he can't help himself, but then his eyes widen. "Where did you find him?"

I look down at the scorpion on my shoulder and then to Bram. "Is he yours?" I go to offer him the creature, but he holds up his hand.

“You’ll offend him.” Bram focuses on the scorpion then me. “Interesting. He chose you, little beastie.”

I look from the little creature and back to Bram, my eyebrows tugging down in a frown. “What does that mean?”

He turns away, and I glance at the scorpion. “Men are all the same,” I mutter as I pet it. “Looks like I’m keeping you for now. Don’t sting me while I sleep, okay? It’s rude, and I won’t die anyway, and when I come back, I’ll crush you.”

Its tail waves in warning before it settles down, so I take that as us coming to an agreement—or at least I hope.

I close my eyes to block the guys out as much as I can, like they are stoically ignoring me. Before I know it, a memory drags me into its depths. The image has a hazy quality to it, but I know it’s a dream. Happiness fills me. I haven’t been this happy in a long time, and I remember this moment. I was so goddamn happy it hurt, thinking nothing could touch me and that I finally found my place, only for it to be snatched away just like before.

My eyes land on a familiar dark head sprawled across my body, his big hands anchoring me to him.

“I love you, Oriana,” he whispers as he looks up at me from between my thighs. Smiling, he slides up and kisses my rounded belly then over my heart before pressing his lips to mine. “We’ll make this place a home. We will.”

“Aren’t you scared? I’m terrified,” I admit as I drape my arms around his shoulders. “This is no place for a child—”

He kisses me, silencing me before stroking my face and speaking. “I’m terrified, but I’ve also never been so happy. A child is a great thing. We’ll be a family, and we’ll never be alone again, even down here, and one day, we’ll find our way out.” He smiles before stealing a kiss. “I can’t wait to see if our baby looks like you or me. Gods, I hope it looks like you. Seeing two of you running around might kill me.”

I laugh and cuddle into his arms, content as I cover my swelling belly and feel a kick. “What do you think it will be like?”

“Loud, smelly—” I smack him as he laughs, kissing my head. “Incredible. We’ll have the family we always dreamed of as kids, and we’ll raise them better than we were. We’ll protect them from the world like no one ever protected us,” he whispers. “I promise, my love, we are going to be so happy, you won’t know what to do with yourself.”

Who knew that even in hell, there could be paradise?

“That isn’t good,” someone mutters, dragging me from the dream. I wake up hot, sweaty, needy, and annoyed at the memory. Reaching up, I brush my tears away. My only saving grace is that the van is dark and they pay me no attention. Shaking it off as well as I can, I lean forward to see what they are talking about. We are stopped in the middle of the road, and before us is a creature, staring down at the car.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I refocus on said creature. “Is that a minotaur?”

“Scourge,” Torrin mutters. “We were brood mates.”

“Someone really wants you bad,” I scoff. “Okay then, friend or foe?”

“Foe, definitely.”

“How do you kill a minotaur?” I ask.

“Like we’ll tell you that,” Kitt snaps. Jeez, touchy much?

“Fine, then I’ll let you deal with it.” I settle back just as the creature lowers its head and charges with a bellow. Grabbing hold of my new friend, I clutch him tightly as we are flung across the road. The van teeters on two wheels before slamming back down. My head snaps forward, connecting with the seat, and I groan at the pain in my nose and forehead. It’s quiet for a moment as I sit back, rubbing my aching head. I can’t die, but it still fucking hurts.

Just then, another roar shakes the earth.

Can’t I catch a fucking break?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Rubbing the ache in my head, I gape as Kitt climbs from the van, swiftly followed by the others.

“I’m not being left here as bait,” I grumble as I climb over the seats and slink out behind them where they circle the bull. Steam blows from its huge snout as it turns its head to keep them in view. They are obviously communicating silently and don’t seem to want my help, so I hang back. Despite being unkillable, I don’t have a death wish, and I’m not fighting a minotaur unless I really have to.

They work together seamlessly, herding the creature where they want it until it charges, only for the others to dart in and attack. Emrys uses his guns, Raiden shoots electricity and uses his teeth, and Bram uses his hands, but he’s bigger than I’ve ever seen, swelling until he’s triple his normal size. Kitt simply smashes into the minotaur, his skin hardened. Torrin’s horns grow, as does he, until he’s bigger than the minotaur and covered in a thin layer of fur. His roar shakes the earth as he lowers his head and locks horns with the beast.

Petting my new friend, I watch them draw blood and listen to pained yells from the creature, but it still does not go down.

It’s fast and big, though, and it manages to fling Raiden away, who whines and limps, one of his paws hurt.

Torrin roars at the sound and charges the attacker before it can move, throwing his whole body weight into his opponent. Surprisingly, the minotaur flies through the air, twisting and roaring before hitting the van. It

crumples under his weight and lists to the side as the minotaur lies panting in its metal structure.

“That was smart,” I drawl, watching the minotaur yank itself from the lump of metal that was once our mode of transport. Turning to Torrin, I raise my eyebrow. “Any other smart ideas?”

He lunges towards me, and before I can even think of changing, he whirls me around. He isn’t trying to kill me, though. No, he jerks, his face twisted in agony as he roars into my face. When I glance down, I see the attacking minotaur’s horns gouging Torrin’s insides. With a bellow of its own, the minotaur wrenches Torrin up into the air, away from me, and throws him across the road. He lands in a heap on his side, blood pooling beneath him, and my eyes widen in shock as I stare at him.

He saved me. That fucking idiot.

It looks like I’m fighting a minotaur after all. I point my finger at the gleeful half beast, half man as he bucks his head in victory, warm breath blowing from his snout.

“Only I get to kill them,” I growl then sprint towards him.

He roars, heading my way, but I drop to the road and slide through his legs, using my momentum to leap to my feet behind him, and before the bull can turn, I change my arm. Fire crawls along it, and I shove my fist into the creature’s chest. It burns through organs and bones and sticks out the other side. For a moment, we are suspended like that before I yank my arm free, and the bull drops to the ground, dead with a singed hole in the middle of his chest.

My eyes jerk up when there’s a noise. They are all watching me with mirrored shock.

“Yes, I know how to kill a minotaur.” I shrug, ignoring their incredulous expressions. They come closer, ensuring it’s dead, but I focus on Torrin. This screaming pain burns annoyingly in my chest. The others don’t seem worried, but that doesn’t mean anything. I hate myself as I hurry his way. I hate even more this clenching feeling in my gut.

Is that guilt or worry?

Fucking mate bond.

As I stand above him, panic grips me for a moment before I see his chest moving. His stomach is a gouged, bleeding mess, but he’s alive.

“That was fucking dumb.” His eyes open and clash with mine. “I can’t die, remember? You can.” Despite my harsh words, I sink to my knees and

take his hand, checking his wound as the others finally walk this way.

“I didn’t want to. The mate bond demanded it,” he grumbles, his teeth clenched in agony.

“Sure thing.” I glance at Kitt since he seems the most in charge. “Now, what the fuck do we do?”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The van is fucking totalled. I manage to recover my bag, and they grab their things before Kitt and Bram get to work, stripping a door completely off, and then they slide Torrin onto the metal. Blood trails after him and he groans, his eyes half-lidded as they each grab a corner and look at me. “We’ll walk from here. We need to find somewhere to lie low, but more will be coming no doubt. Let’s go.” They set off down the road, dragging Torrin behind them. With little other choice, I fall into step with Emrys and Raiden, wiping away the blood and tissue on my arm as I do.

There’s a small tug on my hair, and I look down to see my little friend. Sparing the others a glance, I crouch near the base of a tree and scoop him into my hand before lowering him to the ground.

“Thanks for keeping me company, buddy. It’s not something I’m used to, but I like it. It’s too dangerous for you though. You’re so little, and a lot of people want to kill us. Go on and live a good life.” He eyes me for a moment before scurrying into the tree. Watching him go with a smile, I dust off my hands and stand, only to find all of the guys watching me. I storm past them, refusing to lower myself to their glowering and moody behaviour.

Thirty minutes later, though, we are forced off the main road and into the forest when it’s clear there is nothing for miles. Kitt thinks this will be a shortcut, but every rock and bump of the door on the uneven ground sends a spasm of pain through Torrin, and he writhes and roars in agony.

After five minutes of it, I can’t take any more. I storm up to Kitt and stop in his path. His eyes narrow on me. “Wait,” I demand as I kneel next to

Torrin and dig around in my bag. My hands connect with what I need just as I'm yanked to my feet by my wrist, herbs clutched in my grip.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kitt asks roughly, eyeing me like I'm a venomous snake, ready to strike.

"My mother is a mage, so I know about herbs. These are from Flora, and they'll help with the pain. If he carries on like this, he'll tear himself open and bleed out." I try to rip my hand away, twisting it in his grip, but he only tightens his hold, and I feel my bones grind together. I don't cry out or protest, even as he steps closer. Just then, Torrin lets out a wail of pain, and Kitt glances at him, fear in his gaze before he looks back at me.

"Either let me help him or he'll die. Your choice." I twist my hand again and open it to show him the herbs. "Do you trust me enough to save him, or will you let him die?"

I see him debating his options before Emrys pulls my hand from Kitt's. "Do it."

They exchange glances, talking silently, and I leave them to it as I sink to my knees and reach out, cupping Torrin's clammy face and turning it towards me. He's delirious, though, and when I try to offer him the herbs, he simply moans and writhes.

Damn it. I rack my brain, trying to remember the lessons I was taught before an idea comes to mind. Stuffing the herbs in my mouth, I chew them into a paste, grab Torrin's jaw, force his mouth open, and slide it in. Working his throat, I watch him swallow, and within minutes, his colour is better and his clenched eyelids relax. The herbs work swiftly, knocking him out, and then I relax with a breath.

"They won't last long with his size and metabolism. We need to find somewhere soon." Wiping off my hands, I stand and find Kitt watching me. "No need to thank me."

"I wasn't going to because this is your fault. Let's move," he barks, and we practically run, dragging Torrin and the metal. I keep up as we hurry through the trees before I see an old wooden sign. Darting forward, I ignore their calls and break out of the tree line with a grin.

"Found us a place!" I call as they join me. "It isn't much, but it should work, right?"

At the top of a small mountain, a lodge perches upon the rocks. This area is covered in snow in the winter no doubt, but for now, it's all grassy hills and rocks. There's a rusty, forgotten chairlift hanging high above, as if

whoever owned this place just closed up one day and left. It's abandoned, judging by the overgrowth and rust everywhere. We choose to climb the mountain instead of risking the lift, and once we reach the top, we peer into the lodge. It's one large building, with what looks like a restaurant on the first and second floors, a gift shop, and not much else, but it will do. It's also dark and cold—perfect for us monsters. The chairlift benches sway in the breeze, creaking as I yank on the handle and force the back door open. Wind billows in after us, blowing leaves in as well, but we ignore it as the guys hurry Torrin inside, pushing dust-covered tables and chairs out of the way. Leaving them to it, I head to the gift shop. Most of the products are gone, clearly taken when this place closed, but I find piles of old ski coats in boxes at the back. Clutching them, I head over and lay the jackets out in front of the fireplace and stone chimney.

“Lay him there,” I direct, and despite their hatred of me, they do so, their concern for their friend overshadowing everything else.

As they settle him in, I explore the rest of the space. The two stories aren't big, but it's quaint. There's a weird, musty smell to it, but nothing that will kill us. I hear the telltale sound of mice in the walls, but again, nothing that will harm us. All in all, we got lucky. Once I'm back downstairs, I lean against the fireplace, rearranging some wood inside, and blow onto it. Flames ignite, and I shut the grate and step back as the fire bursts to life, lighting up the darkened room and warming it slowly. The heat doesn't reach the entire space, especially to the dusty windows, but it's better than nothing.

“Don't suppose anyone has food?” I ask as they hurry around, doing their own tasks. “Hello?” I call, and Kitt clutches my bruised wrist, drags me from the main dining area, and kicks open a few doors before shoving me into what looks to be an old coat closet. There are hangers and shelves but not much else. There isn't a window either, just the door and shelves. Tossing me inside, he glares at me.

“I don't trust you around us. You'll stay here until we leave.” He slams the door and locks it.

Snarling, I tug at the handle, knowing I could break it, but then he'd only find another way to lock me up. Turning away in frustration, I begin to pace. I try to settle down after a while, but being trapped alone in the dark gets me back on my feet as old fears return.

I'm not in Gehenna. I remind myself over and over, hoping I'll believe it, but the room closes in. It's too hot, dark, and familiar. I'm trapped again.

Sinking to my knees, I cover my ears and head, rocking on the carpet as I try to distract myself from the useless panic clawing at me. I don't know how much time passes until an unfamiliar sound breaks through the madness and fear.

Whimpering.

Pained whimpering, like a wounded animal.

Torrin must be awake. The sound grows louder, and his pain calls to me. Before I can question why, I'm on my feet by the door. It's a bad idea, but I cannot stop. I can see myself doing it, but my body doesn't listen to me. I'm no longer in control, which is terrifying. The one thing they couldn't take from me was my body.

Breaking the lock, I step out into the corridor and slink down the carpeted hallway to the dining room. Bram is leaning against the chimney with his eyes closed. Emrys is sprawled in the dark near the hallway, so I have to step over him. Raiden is in his fox form, curled up on a table. I don't spot Kitt, although I know he is somewhere, but my eyes drop to Torrin. He's sweating, his eyes are screwed shut, and he's clearly asleep, but even his hands twitch in pain. It's only when I drop to my knees next to him and reach for his hand that I realise the noise he made in complaint was not out loud . . . but in my head.

Swallowing that scary knowledge, I grip his clammy hand. It dwarves mine, but I focus on his face as his eyes open and lock on me. He looks surprised to see me, almost as surprised as I am to be here.

I overheard them saying that due to the damage, it will take him a few days to heal. I guess that means we are staying here, and while he heals, he'll be in pain. I don't know why I care, but I tighten my hold on his hand as he watches me like he's terrified of what I will do. It's cute.

"I suppose I should thank you for saving me, even if I didn't need your help and wouldn't have died," I murmur, my voice low, and despite my teasing and his pain, he smiles.

"Don't take it to heart. It was those stupid Fates with the mate bond. I wish I could let you die." His voice is quiet and tight, but he isn't whimpering anymore, which is good.

"I know, but still." I look down at his stomach. "Thank you. That is the first time anyone has ever tried to save me."

That seems to surprise him, and when I meet his searching gaze, I force a mocking smile on my lips. “It was still dumb though.”

He chuckles before groaning when it pulls on his injury, his face white with pain before he breathes through it. He goes to speak, but his eyes move past me, and I turn to follow his gaze.

I meet Kitt’s eyes through the window. He’s little more than a dark shadow where he stands on the balcony of the lodge outside. I try to drop Torrin’s hand, but he grips it tighter. “Please, don’t let go. I don’t want to be alone yet.”

I look back at him. “You’re never alone. They are in your head, right?”

“That’s different.” I can tell it costs him to ask for me to remain, so I turn back to Torrin and continue to hold his hand. “Please.”

It’s my undoing. Despite how much I hate this bond and them, I cannot deny that soft plea. It’s a weakness he would never allow himself outside of this moment.

I understand. It’s not about who I am, per se, but about the hand in the dark when you’re suffering, alone, and scared. You cling to it, no matter who it is.

After all, didn’t I do the same? Look where that got me.

I must have fallen asleep at some point while tending him because when I wake up, my head rests on Torrin’s shoulder and our hands are still entwined. My mind is fuzzy with exhaustion. I was up most of the night washing his sweaty face, offering water and herbs, trying to get him to settle, but the last thing I remember is seeing the sunrise. The rest of the room is empty, so I turn my head and find the others in the dining area behind us. Glancing at Torrin, I ensure he’s asleep—some colour has returned to his skin—then I carefully extract my hand from his. He winces as he reaches for me, but I manage to get away without waking him as I rise to my feet.

Rolling my stiff muscles, I stare at the guys, my cheeks flaming at being caught, but they remain silent as I walk their way and snatch some food.

“How long will it take for him to heal?” I murmur, keeping my voice low so I do not disturb him.

“Why? Anxious to get moving and break the bond?” Raiden smirks, but it lacks heat, and there’s a tightness to his features that has me rolling my eyes.

“Two days at most, then he’ll be able to move, but it will be a few more days after that until he’s fully functional,” Bram says, and Kitt throws him a glare. “What? Like she doesn’t deserve to know. I didn’t see you holding his hand all night while he cried out in pain.”

“He was hurt because of her,” Emrys remarks as he comes inside and hangs up his hat, pushing his hair back as he glances at me then the others, that faraway look coming to his eyes again.

“You know, I’m getting really sick of you talking about me in your little mind bond,” I grumble, exhaustion and irritation causing me to say it out loud.

Emrys’s eyes narrow, and he steps closer to me, his nostrils flaring. Up close, his eyes are stunning and almost too bright, and those scars . . . I ache to taste them with my tongue—wait, what the fuck? No, I don’t. “I told them that unless they want me to go feral, I need to feed soon. Are you offering, meat sack?” There’s a silken quality to his voice, but also an undercurrent of hunger, and now that I’m really looking, I notice his hands are shaking. He looks like he’s ready to pounce.

“Emrys,” Kitt warns as he slowly stands. Emrys’s head snaps around as he bares his teeth. “Brother.”

Emrys shakes his head, closes his eyes, and stumbles back. “It’s been too long. I pushed it,” he admits, turning away as he takes deep breaths.

“What does he need?” I ask the others. I’ve heard stories, and I know from the ones I’ve spoken with in Gehenna too, but I want to know if he’ll admit it and ask for help.

“Flesh, girl, I need flesh,” he hisses, glancing back at me. “And soon or I’m going to start taking bites out of you.”

“I might like it.” I chuckle, and his eyes narrow. “Okay, how do you normally feed?”

“We hunt,” is all Kitt says, and he stands. “I will go with him.” No one seems excited about the idea, but it’s obvious they have done it before.

“I’ll go.” I shrug.

“No,” Kitt snaps, and Raiden and Bram look between us, still eating.

“Fine, then I’ll stay with Torrin,” I grumble, turning to walk his way.

“Never.” Kitt’s violence wraps around me, and I spin, fire burning inside me.

“You don’t trust me to stay with Torrin or go with Emrys. Make up your mind,” I snarl at Kitt.

“We don’t have time for this,” Raiden says, and we follow his gaze to see Emrys twitching, his hands jerking at his sides. “We need to feed him now. Both of you can go with him. We’ll stay here.”

I give them no other choice. I want some fresh air, so I stride to the balcony and descend the steps, walking towards the forest. Moments later, I feel them behind me. Emrys doesn’t speak, almost as if he cannot, his teeth grinding and hands jerking involuntarily at his sides. Kitt watches him carefully before scanning the horizon.

“Do not think we are weak right now,” Kitt warns as he stomps to my side.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“It would be my duty to end him if he went feral. I will not let that happen today.” He moves ahead, and I roll my eyes. We only trek for fifteen minutes before we hear gunshots. Birds take flight, and I tilt my head, listening.

“That way,” I murmur, following my heightened hearing. I lead the way for five minutes before Emrys moves past me, snarling. When I manage to catch up to him, he has a man on the ground, who’s screaming below him as Emrys’s teeth rip into his throat. A gun lies forgotten at his side, as do a few rabbits tied together. His eyes meet mine for a moment, begging for help as Emrys lifts his head and roars to the sky. Blood runs down his mouth and chin before he continues to work on the hunter’s flesh.

The hungry, satisfied noises coming from him should horrify me, but instead, I’m relieved—fucking mate bond. The man’s dying cries, however, do not even make me flinch. Leaving Emrys to feed, I briefly meet Kitt’s eyes before ignoring him and staring into the forest as Emrys slurps and chews on the silent man.

I keep my back to him as he feeds, protecting him while giving him privacy, knowing he will feel shame for this. Most ghouls do. They hate what they are, or so I was told.

“You don’t seem shocked,” Kitt mutters over the sounds, and despite his stern expression, his eyes reveal his concern. For Emrys or what this

means? I don't know, but it must be hard for Emrys to feel their thoughts about this at all times.

"I've seen much worse things in Gehenna than a ghoul eating to survive. Some do it for fun, and others play with their food before they rip them apart piece by piece and eat them alive for no other reason than they can. You forget that I have been to hell. Anything you can do would never shock me."

He lapses into silence. "It wasn't so bad before. He was fed on a tray, and he didn't need to hunt. I did this to him." He glances behind them, and I frown at his words. "It's my fault that he has to do this, something he hates. He'll feel guilty for weeks after, wondering who the person was. Were they good? Did they deserve it?" Sighing wearily, he turns back and watches me before realising he was talking to me and stiffening, stepping away.

That information raises more questions about these men. First of all, who is the collector, and why is he after them? The way Emrys was talking makes it seem like they were somewhere else before, somewhere they were cared for, so why did they leave?

Who are these men?

I suppose I will never truly know. Besides, it's not important in the long run. Either way, they will have to die. It might make things easier not to know more about them.

We stand in silence until the noises stop, and my legs go numb from the lack of movement. Eventually, Emrys walks up behind us. I don't glance back, but I feel him approaching.

When he passes me, he doesn't look at me. His mouth is stained crimson, his eyes are downcast, and shame and anger are etched in his features. "I'm done."

I don't know what provokes me to speak. I wish I could blame the bond, but it's more than that. I recognise him right now. He reminds me of . . . me.

"You do what you must to survive," I call, and he freezes with his back to me. "There is never shame in that. Anyone who tells you differently has never had to face that choice. You are a ghoul, Emrys. Embrace it."

Suddenly, he stands in front of me, his bloodstained hand on my throat. "And what would you know about the cost of existing? Do you have to feed on humans to survive? Do you worry you will fall into the darkness and hunger and never wake up, all while knowing your body would still be here,

hunting those closest to you, and they would feel the aching chasm of where you were but still see you? Do you even fathom what we have lost?”

“I know loss.” The response is pulled from deep within me, and my hand lowers towards my stomach before I drop it. “More than you can ever imagine.” For a moment, I let him see the truth in my eyes before I shield it. “If anyone finds him, they’ll think it was an animal attack. Come on, we better get back.”

I don’t glance at his kill. I simply head towards the lodge, and they follow, lost in their own woes.

Aren’t we all just so fucked up?

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN



She surprised me. I expected her to be revolted and horrified, but instead, she showed understanding and kindness.

When we make it back to the lodge, the others are waiting. Torrin is still resting, but I check on his mind before wandering past their shrouded eyes.

I hide like usual after a hunt, needing to put myself together. Once I find an employee locker room, I sit heavily on the wooden bench, my gaze going faraway, not seeing anything in front of me.

Their thoughts float across my mind, and I try not to listen, not wanting to hear their worry or disgust. Unlike them, I have no choice. What was done to us was horrific, but in some ways, I think I might have gotten the worst of it. Either I return and be fed there or I have to hunt and kill innocents. There is no winning.

If I could die, I would have let myself pass a long time ago, not wishing to be a burden, but even if I could, it would break this bond and the others along with it.

If one of us perishes, we all do.

I wonder if Ferol knows that?

Shaking off the morbid thoughts, I glance down and sigh. There's blood on my chest, but luckily, there are only a few splatters on my shirt since I don't have a change of clothes. Still, I shrug out of them, carefully laying my outfit and boots on the bench.

My leather holsters, hat, and boots were from the first person I ever killed after escaping. He was a cowboy with a brilliant smile, and he was

stupid enough to follow me into the woods. After I feasted, I felt bad, so part of me honoured the kill by keeping him alive this way, and I guess it stuck. Turning away from the guns, I step beyond the rusty lockers, finding some toilet cubicles and a few shower stalls. Cranking the silver tap, I stick my hand under the sputtering spray. It remains cold, but water is water and I've had worse. Slipping under the inconsistent flow, I press my hands to the wall and hang my head, letting the spray wash away the blood. I watch it pinken as it slides down my skin and circles the drain. The cold water eventually numbs my skin, just like I wish it could numb the feelings inside me.

A noise has me looking up and pushing my hair back. I tilt my head and listen—breathing. It's behind me, but it isn't from one of us, so it's her. Anger and hatred filter through me at what she sees. I suppose part of me wants to horrify her and prove I am the monster she thinks I am, so I turn. Her eyes stay on mine for a moment before dropping to my body, running over every jagged scar. One side of my entire pec is dissected with sharp lines, and there are more across my shoulders, abs, hips, and legs. I'm a walking wound, and I know what I look like. One time, the collector showed me to a visitor, and the woman screamed when she saw me.

Ferol does not. She runs her eyes over every inch of me as if leaving no scar unseen before raising those strange orbs to mine. "It must have hurt."

Shock filters through me, and I turn away, hiding my face as I turn the shower off and shiver.

I whirl sharply when something warm and soft wraps around me, and I glance down to see a towel before looking at Ferol, who is holding it for me.

"Getting me to like you won't make a difference. You know that, right? I'll still kill you."

"That isn't why I'm doing this," she murmurs.

"Then why are you?" I ask, staring her down, daring her to pity me.

"Because your pain called to me. You wear your scars on the outside, Emrys, but I wear mine on the inside."

"What do you know of pain, little girl?" I hiss.

She reaches out, and I flinch as she closes the towel tighter around me with a soft, gentle tug before looking up at me. Like before, in the forest, I see the pain in her eyes. "I had a child."

Shock fills me to my core, and I know the others feel it too.

“She was due in a few weeks. I was going to name her Hope. I lost her, and the very same night, I lost everything that was left of my humanity and innocence. That’s a feeling I’m assuming you know well. We all have our secrets. Well, I do. Maybe you don’t from each other.” She smiles. “You should warm up and get dressed.” She leaves me, and I just stare at the space she occupied.

She had a child? Bram’s soft voice is horrified. *What do you think happened?*

More like what happened to the father, Kitt mutters, but he seems gentle for once.

She was a kid herself when she was thrown in there, Raiden adds. *Shit, this is getting complicated.*

Don’t like her or feeling sorry for her, I think as I walk back to my clothes. *It changes nothing. We have a job, and without it, we lose our freedom. Did you forget?*

I didn’t. I just think the price is a lot higher now than we thought it would be, Bram replies.

I don’t say anything, but I know they sense my agreement. Each moment we spend with her makes it harder to hate her because when it comes down to it, she’s not a bad person. She’s lost, suffering, and angry at the world, and she’s seeking vengeance, something we understand. Deep down, she’s good, and mate bond or not, we will have to kill that good person.

Our freedom depends on it.

I couldn’t sleep that night, so I volunteered for sentry, leaning into the balcony outside and scanning the forest. The sound of the chairlift creaking keeps me company as the others rest. We should be able to move the day after tomorrow, and we need to be ready. Staying in one place too long is never good. She’s not the only one with enemies.

The night passes slowly, and I boredly scan the horizon until something catches my attention. Frowning, I step closer to the railing and peer into the darkness, trying to find what I saw.

I wait for the movement again, and then I see it. A shadow leaps onto the first chair on the lift, the swinging creak getting louder, and then the shadow leaps to the next one. The snap is loud as part of the chair falls, but the shadow keeps moving, and I step back. I reach for my gun as I send an alert to the others just as the thing opens its mouth, and a horrifying screech reaches my ears.

The chairs continue to move as the noise grows, and the others join me outside.

“What the fuck is it?” Kitt mutters out loud.

“Nothing we know,” I reply just as the screeching grows closer, and I realise it’s a word, not mindless noise.

A name, actually.

Her name.

Ferol.

Turning my head, I meet her gaze as she stares, shocked at the approaching shadow. “What the fuck is that thing?” I ask her.

Her eyes linger on it before she glances at us.

“Someone who will not stop until we are all dead. We need to move now.” The panic in her voice has me tensing up.

“We can take it,” Raiden scoffs.

“No, you can’t.” She actually looks worried as she steps back. “He will kill all of us.” Running inside, she reaches into her bag before waking Torrin, and we have no choice but to follow. We hurry out the back, that scream following us across the mountain.

We run at breakneck speed, Torrin held between Bram and Kitt. She glances behind us, her eyes hard, but there’s fear in her gaze.

“Where the fuck is it from?” I ask.

“Gehenna,” is all she says.

“Why? How?” I hiss, panting as I keep up.

“Someone let him out,” she replies.

“Why?” Raiden snaps, glancing behind us before gritting his teeth at whatever he sees.

“To make sure I’m dead. I guess whoever hired you doesn’t trust you as much as they said.”

Fuck.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



We don't stop moving until we get down the mountain and past a few lodges that are inhabited. There, we find a minivan, and Kitt and Raiden work together to get in and start it, and then we are on the move once more. Torrin groans in pain, lying in the boot, while we scrunch into the back seats. Glancing out the window, I search for signs of *him*, but I don't see anything but darkness and trees. Surely he's not fast enough to keep up with an engine?

He was obviously following our trail somehow, but hopefully the vehicle will throw him off. At least, I hope so because if he finds us again, we are done for. That's why I didn't kill him back then. I couldn't, no matter how hard I tried. Like me, he is unkillable. I suppose no being is truly unkillable, though. It's just about finding the right method. Unfortunately for me, I never could, so I locked him away to suffer and go mad.

"What the fuck was that thing?" Kitt asks as he looks at me. Now is not the time for lies or games.

"More of a beast than a man now. He barely thinks, just functions with one thought—kill me." It's the truth. The last time I went down to see him, he was crazed, clawing at himself and the walls while screaming my name. That was a year ago, so I can't imagine he's gotten any saner.

"Brilliant. Why?" Raiden asks from the driver's seat.

I shrug. I won't tell them anything else. It's my past, not theirs, and they don't seem inclined to share why someone is sending monsters after them.

“Fine,” Kitt snarls, glancing back at Bram and Emrys, who’s tending to Torrin. “How do we kill it?”

“You can’t. You cannot kill a god. That’s why he was trapped in Gehenna.”

“A god?” Emrys’s head whips up, his mouth dropping open.

I just look out of the window again. “Or what was once a god,” I murmur.

“Fucking hell,” Bram mutters. “First the collector and monsters, and now an insane god.”

“Someone got him out of Gehenna,” Kitt muses, glancing at me with suspicion.

“You think the one who ordered you got him out and sent him after us?” I raise an eyebrow, truly curious what they think even though I have my own suspicions. Sometimes playing the fool is better. “It’s possible. If he thought you failed or wanted you gone as well so you couldn’t come knocking. He’d do anything to hide what I know.”

“Neither bodes well. We need to hurry,” Raiden grumbles.

“If we are going to face this thing, then we need to know everything,” Kitt admits as he looks at me.

“Oh, like how I know everything about this mysterious collector and the pets being sent after you?” He stays silent, and I smile bitterly. “Exactly. Our secrets are our own. Let’s just hope we outrun him.”

“How likely is that?” Bram asks.

I don’t respond, and I guess that’s answer enough.

“We are so fucked.” Raiden chuckles, seeming amused. “I guess we aren’t the only ones who hate you.” He glances at me through the mirror. “You’re not good at making friends.”

“We were never friends. We were something much worse.” I close my eyes and bite my tongue, disregarding their probing looks and contemplation.

I don’t sleep, but I ignore them all the same. I can nearly hear their buzzing thoughts, but when Torrin whimpers, I snap my eyes open and turn to look at him. His face is pale, and whatever progress he made in healing has been reversed.

“We can’t keep moving him,” Bram cautions. “We need to get him somewhere safe to rest. I know we are on a time crunch, but—”

“I know, I know,” Kitt grumbles. “It’s our only choice for now.”

They have no intention of telling me their plan, so I settle back, but a large hand reaches through the seats and captures mine. Jerking around, I find Torrin's eyes on me, and he looks at our hands. Understanding dawns, and I grip it even as I turn forward, holding his sweaty palm and doing my best to ignore the others. It's clear they have an idea where to drive now, so I sit back and enjoy the ride.

Teenage me would have hated this because my need for control was my worst trait. I had to know everything at all times so I could control every outcome before my mother would find out or judge me. Gehenna stripped that from me. It's hard to control the wildness in the world, so it's better to go along with it.

We drive all night and into the next day, not daring to stop. The road is taking its toll on Torrin, but we see signs of civilisation coming up as we travel from the national park. It's clear we are driving to the coast, though I have no idea why. Again, though, even if I asked, they wouldn't answer.

"I'm going to be sick," Torrin slurs, and we have to pull over. We help him from the van, leaning him against a tree so he can vomit and get fresh air.

Kitt glares at me, so I step away, shoving my hands in my pockets to keep them warm as I rock on my heels, staring up at the sky. It's strange how quickly I've gotten used to freedom, despite craving it so much when I was in Gehenna. I thought I'd never take the sky for granted again, but I guess we've had much more pressing matters.

Closing my eyes, I just breathe in the fresh air and allow myself to be present in this moment. Nothing before, nothing after, just right now. It's something that helped me survive in Gehenna with the never-ending sense of doom I felt. For one moment, I am free, but I come crashing back to reality. My eyes snap open as a familiar scent hits me, and I turn, fear racing through my veins.

"Back in the van now!" Before I can even finish shouting my warning, he materialises in front of the vehicle, as familiar as my own face.

Jax.

Bram roars and races at him, but he is tossed away with a flick of Jax's head. Emrys tries to shoot him, but the bullets fall from his chest as his flesh heals. Before Kitt and Raiden can attempt anything, he lifts his hands and slams them down, and every single one of them hits the ground, pinned

by his power, then he starts to close his fists, and their pained moans finally snap me back to reality.

“Don’t!” I scream, holding my hands up. “Don’t hurt them.” His head swings to me in an unnatural way, and the eyes I once stared into and loved so deeply are completely gone. His hair is ragged and long, as is his beard. He looks nothing like the man I once loved, the one I shared my heart, peace, and body with.

He seems to forget them for a moment, keeping them pinned as he prowls towards me. I don’t back away or run. My nostrils flare as I try to tame my anger and panic.

Once he reaches me, I stare into his face. It’s soiled with dirt and dust, and he seems older despite being immortal. He now looks like the monster he is, but part of me aches as I search his eyes for a hint of the man I once loved with everything in my naive heart. All that’s left is pain and fury.

We stare, each betrayed by the other.

I expect him to end me right here and to keep doing it until it sticks, but he surprises me when he drops to his knees. Frozen in place, I gape in horror as he presses his cheek to my flat stomach before looking up at me, his mouth moving awkwardly as if he’s trying to talk.

“Don’t,” I whisper before clearing my throat. I feel a tear slip from my eye and trail down my cheek. “You did this.”

The noise he makes is inhuman as he presses his face deeper into my stomach. Looking up at the sky, I breathe through my agony and push the tears back before shoving him away. He falls to his ass, his claws ripping at the cement.

“We can never recover what we lost or what you took from me,” I hiss, my fists clenching at my sides. “This is your fault.”

We stare at each other, two broken beings who once loved each other more than life.

My heart skips a beat as his eyes harden, filling with violence, and he lunges through the air. My eyes close, preparing for pain, but then he soars past me, my hair moving with the force. Spinning, I open my eyes and find him on top of what looks to be a partially turned werewolf, ripping him to shreds.

Blood covers him as he looks at me, his chest heaving and head jerking ever so slightly. He’s telling me to go.

I don't understand, but then there is a hand in mine, yanking me to the van. When the door slams shut, I realise he saved us.

Why?

Glancing into the rearview mirror, I watch as more wolves materialize on the road, and he roars as he tackles them, giving us time to escape. Snapping my head forward, I refuse to feel sorry for him or soften, but every eye is on me.

"He didn't kill you," Bram murmurs.

"No, he was saying goodbye. Whatever was left of the man I once loved stopped him from ending it. It won't happen again." It slips out before I can stop myself, and I feel shock fill the air.

"What was he doing—with your—" Raiden stops, his eyes jerking to me and rounding in horror. No doubt they all know about my conversation with Emrys, when I mentioned my child, and they are putting pieces together.

"That—that god was the father of your child?" Kitt asks.

Grinding my teeth, I look dead in his eyes, refusing to back down. "That man was someone I loved, and we prepared to spend a life with the child we were bringing into the world . . . until he got both me and that child killed. So yes, he'll kill me next time, just like I will try to kill him. I locked him away and tortured him for years. They say gods are immortal, but I intend to prove them wrong."

I close my eyes once more, refusing to see their expressions.

There are many minor gods in the world, and he was one of them, sent to Gehenna after doing things he would never share. I was young and lost, and he was solid ground, something good to cling to. I never meant to get pregnant, but I couldn't deny the love I felt for my unborn child.

When he betrayed me to those who came in exchange for his freedom and they killed me, I lost my baby, and I lost that love. You see, as a phoenix, I could survive rebirth, but my child could not.

I lost everything I was that day, and any humanity with it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



She's quiet and her eyes are closed, but I know she's not asleep. She's hiding from us, and I don't blame her. She lost a child, and that man was responsible. That's a lot to swallow, especially with having to face him again. Everything is getting a lot more complicated, and I can't help but feel sad for her. She's clearly had a very hard, traumatic life and is doing her best to survive. In another world, we might not be enemies. I wish we weren't. Part of me wishes I got to keep this bond, the one that's growing stronger every day.

They are in my head, have been since the collector's experiments to create a hive mind, but she is in my soul, and I worry yanking her out might cause irrevocable damage, just like losing one of them would. They hate it and think I'm softer than them, but the bitter truth none of them want to admit is that they feel it too. This bond tightens around us and her, making it harder and harder to tell which way is up.

I don't know how to comfort her, and even if I did, there is nothing that will make this better, so I do the only thing I can—I fill the silence and give them something to escape into that doesn't include memories or pain. It's something in the present to cling to when the tidal waves become too large.

I sing.

The low, soft song of foreign words has always been part of my soul. I do not understand the lyrics, as they are bigger than me and this place. They flow from my lips, wrapping around us and offering solace, at least for a little while. I have no control over the lyrics or the melody, and when it's finally through, I slump in my seat. It leaves me exhausted, though I never

know why, and I find my eyes slipping closed just as Ferol looks at me with tears in her own.

It's not a dream. I know that instantly as a strangely familiar place forms around me. It's my gift as a scorpion, a guardian of time and space. My powers have always been . . . twitchy. With no one to teach me, and after everything the collector did to me, I have very little control over when and how it will appear.

I am here, yet I am not. I am a speck of time, particles of this world, but I have the power to change it all. I did once, and it was not something I could ever undo. It cost us all.

I am in Gehenna, or at least it looks like the places we passed through when we were there—dark rock and formidable heat. The cavern is empty until they move into my vision.

Ferol is on her knees, being dragged. She's younger and her hair is longer. Her stomach is round, and she's curled protectively around it as faceless men throw her to the ground and start to beat her. I step forward without meaning to, wishing I could alter this, but if I do, I'll alter the future. Her eyes lift as if she can see me, and I read so much agony and fear in her gaze, it chokes me, and then it's gone. I'm at the entrance to Gehenna, and as I watch, she is pushed off the edge, her scream filling my ears. I reach for her with a yell, but I'm thrown further back.

She stands before a frozen lake, so very young, with long blonde hair, yet she looks desolate and lost, and when she turns, there is anger etched on her features.

"I know what you did."

With a gasp, I jerk upright, and Kitt looks at me worriedly, no doubt feeling my power. "You didn't," he demands.

"I didn't," I promise, but I wanted to. I wanted to change her fate, but doing so would mean she would never meet us. It would alter the entire universe, the consequences unimaginable. That's something I didn't understand before. Like dropping a rock into a lake, you don't know how far the ripples will go.

As a guardian of time, it's my job to make sure it's not messed with, yet I did it once and I changed everything. I won't do it again, not even to stop her pain.

"We are here," Raiden interrupts, and I glance out of the window. I was gone longer than I thought. It's dark now, and the ocean is crashing against

the shore to our right as we traverse the road. At the iron fence, Kitt gets out and keys in a code. It opens, admitting the stolen van, and we get out.

“What are we doing?” Ferol asks, but we don’t answer. I help lift Torrin, and we get him down to the dock.

She follows silently as we walk to a small boat. It’s a squeeze to get us all on board, but then Emrys controls the motor, and we are on the crashing waves. There’s nothing out there, unless you know where to look, and he kills the engine, allowing us to drift just as we reach deep water. Kitt puts his hand out and connects with the ship, anchoring us. Even if it’s not visible to our eyes, habit has made it easier. Reaching over, I take Ferol’s hand and place it on the ladder I know is there, and her eyes widen. “Up,” I murmur, and she follows Kitt as I heave Torrin up. Between Emrys and me, we manage to get him over the side of the boat and lay him on the deck.

The lights come on, strung across the entire area, including the leftover shipping containers we turned into an armoury and shooting range. The old oil tanker is huge and slow, but it does the trick. The blue metal is comforting, reminding us that we are home.

“Magic,” Ferol murmurs, “conceals this entire place.”

“Not just conceals, but protects too. Nothing can enter. It’s safe, our hidden sanctuary and our home,” I admit. “Come on, I’ll show you to the empty cabin.”

Kitt’s orders have already spread through our heads. Ignoring her, Kitt, Emrys, and Raiden carry Torrin below to his cabin. I take her through the iron door, and we head down a different set of steps.

“Cafeteria and kitchen are there,” I explain, pressing my hand through the swinging door to show her. “The bathroom for this level is here.” I indicate another scratched blue metal door opposite before reaching the door at the end. “This is where you’ll be for now.”

“Will you lock me in?” she asks as I open the door to show her. The room is small and has no comforts, just a single bed pushed against the wall, a small window, a desk, and a wardrobe. The area is barely big enough to pace, but it’s safe.

“There’s nowhere for you to go here, so you won’t be locked in. I wouldn’t cross to the other side though. That’s where our quarters are, and Kitt won’t like it.” I slip past her and look around the room. “I’ll bring you some spare clothes. They’ll probably be too big, but still.”

I hesitate as I reach the door, and she looks at me.

“I’m sorry.”

Her eyes widen as she stares. “For what?” she whispers.

“For everything, for what you have gone through, what you will have to go through, and what you will have to do.” I clench my fingers on the door, feeling it dent. “I wish I could change it for us all.”

“We make our own paths, Bram. Wishing doesn’t change anything. It’s all about choices, and we both made our own. You don’t need to be sorry.”

We stare at each other before I duck my head. “I’ll get you those clothes.”

By the time I return, Ferol’s room is empty. Hesitating, I peer down at the folded T-shirt and jogging pants. The closest thing I could find to her size were Raiden’s garments. He won’t be happy about it, but I can’t imagine she wants to keep wearing those bloodstained, filthy clothes.

I hear the shower running, so I turn and stop at the door. She’ll want the clothes after, but if I walk in, that would be rude, right? I’m so used to living with men with no boundaries that I genuinely don’t know.

Lingering awkwardly, I lift my hand to knock when the shower shuts off and the door opens. She’s rubbing a towel across her hair, completely naked and dripping with water as her eyes lock on me, and she raises an eyebrow.

“Er . . . clothes,” I blurt, thrusting them at her in a panic, trying not to lower my eyes, but they can’t help it as she tosses the towel behind her and accepts my offering.

Uncaring about my gawking, she dresses, her slightly damp skin sticking to the material as I turn, cover my eyes, and try my hardest not to remember what I just saw.

She looked like heaven.

“I’m hungry. Are you?” she asks as she steps past me and heads to the kitchen. I trail after her, my throat dry and my body reacting oddly. There’s a fire burning through me, and I don’t understand as I watch her scan the room. It’s small despite the size of the ship, just a few tattered leather booths and a swinging door to a galley. On the side are nonperishables, and she grabs two tubs of noodles and puts them under the hot water machine. Within minutes, she sets them on the table before she slides into a blue

booth. I do the same on the other side as she pushes one across to me. The instant noodles are still steaming as I open the lid and twirl it up as she starts eating hers. The silence is loud but surprisingly not strained.

“What does it feel like to die?” I ask as I play with the noodles.

She purses her lips, her fork poised in the air as she thinks. “It hurts every time, but for a moment, there’s peace . . . a comforting darkness that I never want to leave, but then I’m thrown back. It’s like holding my breath for too long and finally getting to gasp in air. It leaves me shaken for a moment.”

Nodding, I take a bite and think through her words before I come to the same conclusion. It must be agony, and she has endured it ten times. She may be stronger than any of us.

“What does pleasure feel like?” It slips out before I can stop myself. I’m unused to guarding my questions. There’s no shame, distance, or secrets with the others. She blinks, and my face heats. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

Despite my embarrassment, she seems more surprised than anything as she takes a bite and chews, thinking it through.

“You’ve never had pleasure, not even from your own hand?”

I can’t exactly explain how we lived, nor the fact that I would have died before I let the collector see that.

“You are all very curious beings. None of the others have so you could feel it?”

I shake my head, dropping my gaze shyly.

“You felt something when we kissed though, yeah?” she asks.

“Yes, a lot,” I admit, glancing at her through my lashes. Luckily, she doesn’t humiliate me for that.

“Okay, it’s like that but ten times better, like explosions through every part of your body. It feels like you’re flying, and nothing else exists but that feeling. It’s addictive, which is why most monsters chase it in every form.”

“Oh.” I think for a moment, and I feel her watching me. “Did you find it with your god?” I don’t understand this feeling that washes through me at the idea of him touching the perfect body I just saw. Her head tilts, but I don’t meet her gaze, struggling with what’s washing through me.

“That is jealousy, and it’s normal for mates,” she murmurs, and I snap my eyes to hers as she smirks. “It’s what you were wondering about, no?”

Wiping her mouth, she pushes the tub away and leans back as she watches me. “Do you want me to show you what pleasure feels like?”

My eyes widen at her offer. The organ in my chest speeds as I struggle to breathe, my cock hardening to the point of pain. Usually, I just ignore it, but with her looking at me like that, I struggle.

Kitt called her dangerous, and I understand why now.

“I—we—I shouldn’t be asking these things. I shouldn’t be alone with you,” I murmur as I stand, yet I don’t leave. I stare down at her, filled with thirst. She grins at me, her fingers playing on the table in a mesmerising manner.

“Shouldn’t, shouldn’t, shouldn’t . . . Live a little, Bram. We’re going to kill each other anyway, so why not have a little fun before we do?” Standing, she steps around the booth and presses against me, and I start to sway.

“Why would you want to?” I murmur.

Her hand strokes across my chest, and my body’s reaction is immediate. Just like when she kissed me, I light up. Time warps, and everything glows brightly as all my nerve endings ignite.

“You want to know what it’s like, and I want to forget,” she whispers as she presses up on her toes and brushes her lips across mine. “What do you say?”

A noise leaves my throat, making me sound like an animal, and I don’t even remember moving, but I have her in the air then slam her down onto the table. The force breaks the front leg before I freeze with my hands on her hips.

“I won’t break,” she promises. “Do whatever you wish, whatever you’ve always wanted and been curious about.”

It’s all the permission I need. Grabbing the edge of Raiden’s shirt, I rip it up and over her head and toss it away, staring in amazement at her chest. Her stomach is tight and rippling with muscle, her defined abs making me lick my lips hungrily, but it’s her breasts I can’t look away from. They are tight and high, with rosy nipples I want to play with.

“Touch me. I can tell you want to,” she murmurs, leaning back on her hands as her legs angle between mine. Glancing from her face to her chest, I can’t tell which I want to look at more. My blood burns with the need to possess, mark, and claim, and I try my best to be gentle as I lean in and slide my hands across her abs and up. She’s so soft and perfect beneath my

hands, it doesn't seem real. One touch of her skin against my rough palms and liquid leaks into my pants.

I stare at my hands on her bare breasts. They are so big, they cover her chest completely, and I squeeze, drinking in the sound she makes as she arches for more. My eyes zero in on her lips as she makes a noise again. Pressing closer, I kiss her like she kissed me. She begs for me, biting my tongue and lips until I growl and slide down. Driven by an instinct I don't understand, I pinch her nipple between my teeth and bite.

She gasps loudly, her legs tightening around my waist as I sweep my tongue around it, my hand on her other breast playing with that tip until it hardens beneath me.

"Just like that," she directs, reaching over to cup the nape of my neck and tug me closer. "You don't have to be so gentle—" Her words end in a moan as I suck on her nipple. She slaps my shoulder before I release her and turn to her other bud. I bite and suck her chest until it's pink from my mouth. Groaning, I press into her, grinding my hard length into the heat I feel between her legs.

Lifting one of her thighs high, she changes the angle so I have better access, and every time I press closer, she whimpers.

Pleasure, and I want more of it.

I find her lips once more, craving her kiss as I hand myself over to these feelings. I want more, though, so I break the kiss and return to her nipples, playing with them until she tugs at me, gasping my name loudly.

My fangs descend, but I ignore them as I swoop in to kiss her. Her eyes are closed and her lips are parted. She's so beautiful. It's my thought even as something hits my chin, and before I can contemplate what it is, I'm being grabbed from behind.

Suddenly, I fly through the air, hitting the door and smashing through it, then I soar into the metal wall with an audible bang. Climbing to my feet with a hiss, I stare at Kitt through the broken door as he stands in front of a half-clothed Ferol.

"Away, now!" he roars, and something about his tone pierces the madness. Realisation sets in, and I stare at her in horror before running as far and fast as I can, but I can still taste her, and I know it will never be enough.

I nearly killed us all for just for a taste.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I stare at where Bram just was before Kitt steps in front of me, blocking my view. He looks angrier than I've ever seen him. He has to lower his head to even fit in the room. He's pure clay and stone right now, his skin a mixture of browns and greys, his voice gravel as he towers over me.

"I warned you," Kitt snarls in my face as I roll my eyes, uncaring about my exposed chest. "He could kill you—"

"So? Most I have been with could have—"

"He has no control!" Kitt roars, smashing his fist into the table at my side, and it cracks, sending me sprawling to my knees as I glare and leap to my feet, staring him down. "You are playing with him. It's cruel."

"I wasn't playing," I argue.

"Enough. Did you not see him? He's a scorpion, and he's venomous. One taste and you would have died, and then we all would have."

Oh. Realisation hits me. Is that why he stopped us? I hadn't noticed anything wrong, but I was trying to lose myself in the pleasure his innocent fumbling caused.

Fuck.

"I didn't know. I didn't think—"

"You never do. You don't care who gets hurt as long as you get whatever you want. You're selfish, unreliable, and obsessed with revenge." His nostrils flare as he lowers his head to glare at me with those bright eyes surrounded by unmovable strength. "You're the monster here, Ferol, not us. I hope you get that." He storms from the room, leaving the door cracked and hanging partially off its hinges.

The worst thing is, he's right.

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I retreat to my cabin and stare at the ceiling. I can still feel Bram's kiss and touch, and despite the unanswered pleasure, I feel guilty. I don't like that. I didn't know anyone would get hurt. Maybe that's why I roll from the bed, slip on some large boots I found in my room, and head to the deck upstairs. I don't know if I was seeking him or not, but I find Kitt. He's perched on the edge of the railing, staring out at the darkened ocean, the moon high above him. Taking a deep breath, I cross the deck, leaning back against the railing next to him and staring at the boat. He ignores me.

"I was wrong. I'm sorry." He startles, and I feel him staring at me, but I don't meet his eyes. "You're right. I didn't think it through. It was selfish, risky, and dumb. I just—" Licking my lips, I finally meet his eyes, searching that granite gaze for something, but I just find never-ending oblivion, so I look away again. "He was sweet, kind, and good, and I wanted that. I wanted to feel that again and forget everything for a moment, no matter the cost. I never meant to hurt him or any of you. Despite the complicated mess between us and what will happen, I don't want to do that before I have to. Seeing Jax today—" Closing my eyes, I grip the railing until my hands ache. "Being reminded of what happened and what I lost chipped a piece of my armour. I guess I was trying to patch it up the only way I know how."

"He's blaming himself now, despite what will happen between us. You did that. You don't understand the power you have over us, especially him, because of the bond. That's why I want it broken—not because I hate the

idea of a mate, but because it would ruin everything and they would be hurt again. They deserve better than that after everything we have endured.” Kitt’s voice is honest and raw, surprising me.

“I don’t know what happened, but I understand loyalty. I mean my apology. I don’t ever offer one, but I am apologising to you, and I won’t push him again. I won’t do anything like that again.” Nodding, he looks out at the water. “It must be hard keeping them all together.”

“We are one. You’ve figured that out. No one leads—”

“They all look to you.” I glance at him again. “Despite that, they look to you, listen to you. That pressure must be hard.”

“I bear it willingly,” he responds before heading to the other door.

“I wish—” He stops for a moment, looking at me then the ocean before meeting my eyes. “I wish I didn’t have to kill you. I wish I could give you your freedom from this as well, but if I have to choose between my future happiness and their lives, I will always choose them. I will always put them first, but for what it’s worth, I don’t want to kill you. Not anymore.”

“But you will still try.”

He smiles and barks out a laugh. “Yes, I’ll still try.”

“Well then, I guess we’ll have fun trying,” I tease as I push away from the railing. “Good night, Kitt.”

I walk back to the stairs, and I swear as I descend them, a whisper reaches me.

“Good night, firebird.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



It's late or early, depending on the way you look at it, when something wakes me. I expect it to be one of the other's nightmares, since that's usually the reason, but something else pulses through me, making me frown as I sit up on the hammock in my room.

Pleasure.

It slams into me, and I fall back, my body twisting and arching as my cock hardens and my heart skips a beat. The feeling is so strong, my eyes cross and roll back, my hands spasming as I hold onto the hammock.

It's not theirs; it's hers. Even from here, even across the boat, separated by steel, I feel her pleasure building, and I cannot ignore it. This fucking mate bond. Does she not know or care? That heat is a never-ending wave, pushing through me until I fumble with my pants, freeing my solid length and fisting it. I stroke myself as pleasure pulses through me, dragging me higher until I fuck my hand. Flashes of bright hair and mocking eyes fill my vision, and when she smiles at me, I come, spilling in my hand with a roar. More sounds of pleasure echo mine as I slump back, panting.

I lie there for a moment, trying to recover from flipping from my hammock and landing on my knees. I shove my length away, but I don't bother buckling my pants as I open my door.

Hanging from the doorframe, I glance out as Bram comes to his open door, catching himself on the metal frame. He's panting, his eyes hard and nostrils flaring, his trousers wet in the front.

"I guess we all felt it?" I tease, my voice rough. "What the fuck?"

“I’m going to kill her.” Emrys materialises from the dark. There’s no wet patch on his pants, but his cheeks are flushed and his eyes are bright.

“She probably didn’t know.”

“Leave her. Don’t go over there tonight,” Kitt mutters from his room, and I strain my eyes to see him, but there are too many shadows. “We will discuss it tomorrow when everyone is calm. Now rest, you’re waking Torrin.”

“No, she was waking Torrin,” I mutter, “and my cock. Jesus, I haven’t felt pleasure like that—”

“Enough,” Kitt snarls, and then his door slams, but I feel his turbulent emotions—shame, fear, and anger. I guess we aren’t the only ones who are confused. I share a look with Emrys, and we look at Bram. He turns on his heel and slams his door too.

“Well, I suppose we’ll have good dreams now,” I joke before clambering back into my hammock. Emrys chuckles and steps into my room, taking the other bed. Unlike the others, who like their privacy, we both hate being alone, so we share. I don’t know where he was when the pleasure hit, but it wasn’t here.

“I was on deck, checking the area. It was a lot worse up there.” He shows me through our connection, and I groan, watching as he sinks to his knees, choking on the scent of her desire. He crumpled to the deck, coming right there.

Chuckling, he takes the thought away as he lies back and puts his hat over his face. “Good dreams indeed. It’s better than the bed, I guess.”

“Too fucking right. What are we betting that Kitt will kill her tomorrow?”

“You have to be naked for a week if he doesn’t,” Emrys responds. The fact that we are speaking out loud surprises me, but I don’t change to talking internally.

“Fine, but I get one of your guns if he does.” I settle back, swinging gently. “If it felt so good just feeling her come, then what do you think it would feel like if she touched us?”

“Dangerous,” Emrys responds after a pause. “I don’t think we’d ever recover, and we definitely wouldn’t be able to kill her. Kitt is right. It’s better to stay far away from her.”

I have nothing else to say to that, so I close my eyes, slipping into a dreamless sleep. It’s early when I wake. Emrys is still making those weird

growls he does when he's deeply asleep, so I automatically check in on the others. Kitt is awake and with Torrin, clearly having no intention of facing her. Me, on the other hand? I'm hungry, so I troop up the stairs, only wearing my shorts. When I reach the deck, I stop to soak in the morning rays before descending the other stairs.

Ferol is awake, sitting at a table and eating when I enter. I smirk as I head to the coffee machine—the only new thing we splurged on after I begged. The smell of warming beans almost makes me drool, and I protect the mug as I sit opposite her, staring.

“What is it?” she demands, raising her eyes to mine. I hide my frown behind my mug. Her eyes are bloodshot and surrounded by dark circles, and unlike her usual fire, she looks . . . tired. I don't know how to comfort her or if I should even try, so I raise my shoulder in a lazy shrug.

There is one way I know how to get a reaction—pick a fight.

“Oh, nothing. If you're going to service yourself, then please don't do it when we can feel it or at least give us a heads-up.” I expect her to feel humiliation or shame, but she simply blinks.

“Huh, you felt that, pretty boy? That means the bond is getting stronger.” Her voice is calm and uncaring.

“Do not do it again. Kitt wanted me to tell you,” I grumble, annoyed it didn't work.

She shrugs, chewing on her apple. “A girl has needs.”

“Clearly, because you can't seem to keep your hands off us.” Leaning in, I grin as I lower my voice. “Liked winding Bram up like that, didn't you?”

Her eyes brighten with anger, and she sits taller, looking more alive, more like her normal self. I can't help smiling, ignoring the relief flooding me. Stupid mate bond.

“You wish. I was just bored and you were here.” Standing, she steals my mug and sips it. “Stale and tasteless, just like all of you.” She saunters away, and I gawk.

She did not—

I follow her, slapping my hand against the door when she tries to shut the bathroom door in my face. Shoving it open, I step inside of the small room, narrowing my eyes on her.

“What? Do you want a repeat?” She whirls, glaring. “Are you that desperate for a woman? Fine, fucking stay, I don't care.” She slams the mug

on the counter, and my precious coffee topples over the edge and onto her hand. Grabbing her wrist when she hisses, I lap up the liquid, dragging my tongue along her skin, only to freeze when I realise what I did. I can taste her.

Jerking away, I lean back into the door. “You wish. Just making sure you don’t plan to hurt anyone again.”

What the hell am I doing?

I should leave, but then she’ll know she won, and I can’t let that happen. My determination waivers, however, when she narrows her eyes and stares at me. She tugs her shirt over her head and stands before me, naked. I keep my eyes on hers for two seconds before they drop unwillingly to her exposed skin.

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Fuck.

I can’t breathe as I stare at her. I knew she was fit and strong, but she’s goddamn beautiful as well, a walking juxtaposition. Her soft, golden skin gleams, stretched over hard muscles. Her thighs are as thick as my own, and I ache to touch her high, tight breasts. My cock is so hard, it hurts as I gape, and she lets me, completely unbothered.

Laughing, she turns the shower on and steps inside, not bothering to close the curtain as she tips her head back and lets the spray wash over her. “Feel free to watch. See if I care.”

I press myself against the door, trying to escape. Her pheromones fill the air, wrapping around me so tightly, I can’t think. I dared her, and now there’s no going back. The worst part is, I don’t want to, even as part of me screams.

If I do this, I’ll never be the same.

I’ll have a taste of heaven, and then it will be taken away from me, leaving me in darkness once more.

Swallowing hard, I watch as she slides her hands down her body, washing it before she turns to me, patting her thick thigh, and I track the movement.

“I fucking hate you,” I snarl.

“Back at you.” She shrugs, sweeping her hands across her body. “Hate sex is fun. Sometimes it’s even better than when you’re in love. It’s dirty, dark, and messy, and you don’t care what happens to your partner. It’s addictive. You can hate me and still want me, Raiden.”

Popping her fingers into her mouth, she hums, focusing those blazing eyes on me as she pulls them from her lips, down her chin, her breasts, then between her thighs. A moan slips from her lips, going straight to my cock.

“Let me see,” I demand.

She teases me for a moment before pressing one of her feet against the low shelf, exposing herself to me. I drop to my knees, unable to hold myself up as I stare, desperate for taste. She’s pink and glistening.

“What do you want? You felt me last night. Did you imagine me?” she purrs as I slide closer, gripping the tiles to stop myself from reaching her as she parts her folds and circles a pretty, swollen bud, a moan leaving her lips.

“Inside yourself,” I hiss, and with slow, torturous movements, she slides her glistening fingers down and into her hole, groaning as she does so. I watch them press deeper before she pulls them free.

She offers me her hand, and I whine and lean forward, licking her skin like I did before, only now I taste her, not coffee. She was right.

She tastes like heaven, like brimstone, fire, and sweetness rolled into one. It scorches my throat and body, burning me from the inside.

Ferol slips her fingers back inside her channel. My fists hit the tile until they bleed, and I close my eyes, trying to hold myself back, but I’m unable to leave or move forward until a breathy moan leaves her lips. My eyes snap open, locking on her as lightning crackles over my skin, the ozone making my hair float as my powers flare.

Her eyes lock on me, a sneer twisting her lips as she fucks herself with her fingers. “Touch yourself, I dare you.”

It’s a taunt. She doesn’t think I will.

No!

For the first time ever, I ignore their voices in my head as I shove my zipper down and fist my cock, pulling it free. Moaning loudly, she inserts another finger inside herself, spreading her fingers wide for my greedy

gaze. Her lower lip is caught between her teeth and her eyes are narrowed on me as I squeeze my length. Pleasure ricochets through me, stronger than anything I have ever felt. I don't usually touch myself because it isn't fair to the others, but now, all the repressed hunger and need spill through me. Entranced by her rhythm, I copy her speed, thrusting into my hand as I imagine it's her glistening hole. The texture of my rough hand isn't what I want, but I can't deny that it feels good. My balls draw up as a storm rages inside me, acid dripping down my spine as I gasp out a choked noise.

"Good boy, let me see," she orders, her voice silken as I slide my thighs wider and lean back. I thrust into my hand, my eyes locked on her pussy. I can't get enough. Madness consumes me as she circles that bud once more before shoving her fingers inside her core with a cry. "Is this what you want? To see me come like this? Or are you wishing it were your hand . . . your cock?"

Lightning crackles along my skin, hitting the wall and tiles around me. I gasp and arch up, my eyes alight with the storm I feel.

"Yes, yes," I repeat, shaking my head, trying to hold the storm back as I raise my eyes to hers and lose myself in their flames. "I wish it were me." My voice is stricken, rough but truthful.

Kitt hammers against the door, but we both ignore him. "Raideen, do not!" he bellows, but I ignored him and lose myself in the pleasure arcing between us.

She is worth their ire and violence, because this frenzied passion is unable to be held back.

"Come for me. Let me see your first real orgasm," she coos, and her voice makes me shiver as something takes over. I rut into my hand before pleasure explodes into a dazzling display of light and ecstasy that consumes me. I shatter, spilling over my hand and lap. I can't see or feel anything else, but then I hear her cry out.

Forcing my eyes open, I focus on her as she slumps into the wall, rolling her hips slowly before stilling as she tugs her fingers free.

Beautiful, so beautiful.

When the ecstasy finally releases me, I drop to the floor, my eyes wide in shock as she runs her gaze over me, arching one eyebrow in triumph.

"Show's over." She looks down at me, crumpled in the corner, then washes herself quickly. When she turns the shower off, she looks at me once more. The sneer on her lips is beautiful and infuriating as she steps

over me and opens the door. Kitt leans against the opposite wall, swaying and glaring at us. She simply blows him a kiss and walks to her room.

“What did you do?” he roars as he staggers to the door and looks at me.

Swallowing her taste, I close my eyes, feeling like I’m flying and will never come down.

“What we all wish we could.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY



The sun warms my skin and stings my watering eyes, but I refuse to close them. I thought I would miss creature comforts the most, and I did. I missed a warm bed, clothes, and showers, but this was what I craved—feeling the sun baking my skin and the breeze washing across me. I'll make the most of it while I can, especially while they argue loudly in their quarters. After this morning, I'm betting a few of them are furious, but it just happened. I never intended to cross any lines with Raiden, and it's clear he didn't either. This stupid, pesky mate bond keeps dragging us together. I'm just glad we didn't give in and fuck. It would have been great, but not worth the consequences, like a slimy one-night stand.

Blocking out their voices, I stretch on the metal compartment that covers the stairs to my quarters. It's not huge, and the scarred blue metal is sun warped, but right now, it feels like a five-star resort.

That is, until the sun disappears, blocked by Kitt's huge frame as he appears above me, shielding me from warmth and freedom. I open my mouth to instruct him to move when he yanks me up by the neck and leaps down. Before I can fight him, he holds me over the edge of the railing above the ocean. His expression is furious and hard, and his skin changes before my eyes as he growls.

This isn't Kitt. This is the golem.

Fury washes through me as I stare into those dead, hateful eyes. I grab his hand on my neck, but if I break the hold, I will fall. I dig my nails in anyway, but they break against his clay. My legs kick softly in the breeze, my hair blowing back as I stare at him.

“Do not ever touch one of us again.” His voice sounds like crashing boulders, and my eyes begin to bleed from the grating strength. I knew he was mad from the dent in the bathroom door, but this? This is a whole new level. Their arguments only infuriated him further, and now he’s taking it out on me, like I was the only one involved and wanted to cross a line with someone I hate. I promised myself I would never get close to someone again, yet I can’t fight this bond no matter how much I wish I could.

I start to get angry, and when I get angry, I get bitchy. My smirk grows as I tighten my hold on his hand before letting go, dangling from his grip. “Do you wish it were you?”

His eyes narrow, the skin hardening across his face and cracking as he grinds his teeth. I arch an eyebrow, waiting for his response. His hand uncurls from my neck, leaving me to plummet to the water below—cold water that extinguishes fire. I don’t know how a phoenix would react, but I’m not about to find out. He wants a fight? Fine, let’s finally have this out once and for all. It’s been a long time coming.

Before I can hit the water, the change flows over me easily. The first time I died was hard. It took months for me to complete one change, where I was stuck and in agony. Now, it’s second nature, and just as my wings brush the water, I push up and soar above the deck, my eyes narrowing as I scream. My flaming wings flap as I dive, my talons scoring the deck as he rolls out of the way, but in my next swoop, I capture him with one talon across his neck, the other on his chest. I lower my beak and scream in his face.

Despite my anger, he smiles. This is what he wanted. He wanted an excuse to kill me. He wants to find an outlet for all his frustration. The careful control he always carries is gone as he slams his rocky fist into my side, sending me flying through the air towards their shipping containers. I hit the side hard, denting it before pulling myself free.

Slamming his fists together, he gives me a challenging look, so I soar towards him. He meets me head-on, and we clash, tumbling across the deck. Both of us try to kill the other despite the pain it’s ripping through the bond. My talons almost break against his body, but I use them anyway, trying to crack his exterior, rip his chest open, and feast on his black heart. He wraps his arms around me, trying to squeeze the life out of me, but every time one of us would manage a killing blow, the fucking mate bond stops us, making us hesitate so the other gets the upper hand. His blood

coats my changed form, his rock cracked and pierced in places, and we fight until neither of us can anymore.

I slump to the deck at his side, my chest heaving as my form slips away, leaving me human again. I'm exhausted and bleeding but alive. Turning my head hurts, no doubt from his arms wrapping around my neck, but he is very much in the same condition. His rock recedes to reveal a sliced face that begins to heal as I watch. His husky frame shakes from his breathing, and his arms and legs are spread like he doesn't have energy anymore. He turns and meets my gaze.

"Feel better?" I grit out.

"Fucking mate bond," he grumbles, and I nod. We lie side by side for a moment.

"Fucking mate bond," I agree, staring up at the sky.

"Ferol?" I turn my head again to meet his turbulent eyes. "We shared a great kiss, but you are not worth risking everything for."

"I wasn't asking you to," I grumble.

"Then let's stay apart until we reach land. We have set course towards your mother's and our employer's home. When we get there, we will break the bond then finish this fight."

Swallowing against the lump in my throat, I nod. We both know where we stand. Even if we wanted this mate bond, he wouldn't accept it. Their job comes before everything else—the very same job for the person I want dead. We are enemies through and through, but a part of me aches at the thought.

Climbing to my feet, I leave him behind, swaying slightly on my legs, but I find the others watching intently. I ignore their gazes and head down to my room, needing to be alone.

I'm not sulking or feeling sorry for myself, I repeat internally as I stare at the ceiling of my cabin hours later, refusing to see them. I don't want this mate bond or for them to want me, but what Kitt said hurt.

Stupid feelings and stupid magical fate.

Okay, maybe I'm sulking a little. It's just that I finally have my freedom and a shot at revenge, and I'm laden with five mates who hate my guts and

want me dead. Oh, and they also want to give me back to the man who's responsible for all this. Nice going, fate.

I hear one of them coming, but I don't speak, even when I sense their presence at my open door. I considered closing it, but that felt childish. Besides, it wouldn't stop them. I don't lift my head, but my muscles tense just in case they want another fight. I don't sense any murderous intent, but I never know with them.

"I came to check on you." It's the last person I expected—okay, second to last. Kitt would be the last, but Torrin is a close second, mainly because he's hurt and resting, but for that, he seemed to hate me more than all of them combined. Swallowing my nerves, I try to act casual.

"Liar." I turn as I roll my head to see him at the door where he lingers. "None of you care if I'm mentally or physically okay, so what do you want?"

"To hate you, we all do, but we can't seem to. I really did come to check on you. I didn't even know why, but I found myself here." He enters the room, swallowing the space with his huge frame, having to duck so his horns don't catch on the door as he sits on the very bottom of my bed, careful of his healing side. He stares at the opposite wall, quiet and contemplative.

He looks better, though he's still moving with a wince and favouring his bad side, so I guess he's not completely healed. It's nice to know they aren't untouchable.

I don't know what to say, so I remain quiet, waiting for the true reason he's here, and it's not just that. I can sense the questions he wants to ask, but with a man like him, I can't push. I have to wait for him to be ready. He doesn't trust me, and rightly so. I don't trust him either. Eventually, his curiosity must win out over his jaded feelings.

"What did he do?" Torrin asks roughly, and I stare at the side of his face. "Our employer, what did he do that he believes your death will hide?"

His question surprises me, and I think it through before speaking. Words carry weight. "Do you care?"

He looks at me. "It won't change anything. We will break the bond and complete the job. It's the only way we'll remain free, but I'm curious."

"Well, at least you don't lie," I mutter as I sit up, pressing my back against the cabin wall and stretching my legs out, almost touching him. I deliberate it for a moment before giving him the truth. "It's bigger than him

or me. It's bigger than all of us, and I can't trust that if I tell you, it won't get out and hurt those who need to be protected."

He frowns. "You were a kid. Who could you protect?"

"Nobody, as it turns out. I was foolish, but I tried. Your employer is as bad as they come. He's also my mother's mate." The last word is a sneer. She always knew how to pick them.

"And your mother believed him over you regarding whatever happened?" he surmises.

"Years of manipulation helped, but when it came down to it, she had to be seen punishing one of us, and he was more powerful and more helpful to her. I was just her useless daughter. The irony of it all is that I might never have come into my powers if she hadn't thrown me away." I don't sound bitter at all.

"But still, Gehenna, for a child?" he mutters, eyeing me.

"What I knew would ruin everyone. He knew that, and he told her it was for the best. She is the strongest mage to ever exist, so if her daughter betrayed her and spread lies, then she must be punished severely or my mother would be considered weak. It didn't take much convincing."

He stares at me sadly, and I roll my eyes.

"Don't pity me. There's nothing worse."

"I don't. I'm just sad for you. The person who was supposed to protect you hurt you badly." His words surprise me, as does his soft tone.

"I'm over it," I respond like a child.

"No, you're not. You might tell yourself you are, but you're not and you'll never be. That kind of betrayal leaves a scar." He speaks like he knows.

"And how would you know?" I retort, sitting up so we are practically face-to-face.

"Because my father sold me to the person we are running from. The amount would only help him cover his drug obsession for a few months. I was a child, his child, and he sold me, so yes, I know better than most."

All my anger dissipates in the face of his earnest pain. "What happened to your father?"

"I checked when we found our freedom. He overdosed on poppy just a few years later."

"Poppy?" I frown.

“It’s the drug of choice for many poor monsters, the only thing that can get you high, but it’s addictive and deadly.” He smiles bitterly. “I never even got to confront him for what he did to me. It died with him.”

“The person you escaped from, who bought you, is the person after you, isn’t it? This . . . collector?” He turns away, ready to leave, but I stop him by placing my hand on his arm. “What are you so scared of?”

He’s stiff for a moment, his eyes swinging to me before dropping to my hand on his arm. I go to pull away when he stops me. “Don’t.” It’s a soft croak, but I keep my hand on his skin, feeling his warmth as he watches it before swallowing hard. “Yes, we all belong to the collector, or we did until we got our freedom. Now the only thing that keeps us that way are the jobs we take. The money and power keep us from being dragged back there. You might have actually been in hell, Ferol, but we came very, very close.”

“The nightmares, the fear, the way this collector is hunting you—”

His face pales. “Please don’t.”

The pure terror in those words lets me know my suspicions are right. “They hurt you, didn’t they? Badly?” I whisper softly.

“Worse than you could ever imagine. I was one of the lucky ones. A minotaur isn’t overly rare, but the collector likes to have one of every kind of monster. The others are rare. They were special and got the attention. I wouldn’t even be with them if it weren’t for the fact that when the experiment to link us like a hive mind started, they needed someone solid to anchor them—someone replaceable, so if it failed and I died, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Wait, you weren’t all born with this connection?” This shocks me to my core. A psychic connection like that is usually something that occurs at birth. I’ve never heard of one being created.

“No, the collector created it between us after a lot of experiments and pain. We thought it would kill us at first. The neurological overload was . . . very bad. I’ve never known pain like it, but we managed to survive, and now we use it to our advantage.” He slams his lips shut, like he said too much.

“I’m sorry.” My apology appears to surprise him, and his eyes widen so much, I see the sclera. “For what you all went through, and I’m even sorrier another connection is being forced on you now.”

No wonder they hate me so much. They had no choice before, and even less now.

His gaze drops to my hand, and he nods softly. I debate pulling it away, but honestly, the connection, strength, and warmth are nice. I'm anchored here rather than floating away on bad memories like normal.

"Thank you."

I rip my eyes from the door to him.

"For holding my hand and staying with me while I was hurt. I don't know why it felt good, but it did."

"Don't overthink it. It's just those stupid, artificial feelings from the bond."

"But still, you didn't have to. Thank you."

Twisting my lips, I fight a smile "What, no more growling and threatening to tear me apart?"

He laughs and nudges my arm with his, almost sending me sprawling into the wall with his strength. "Maybe later." Heaving himself to his feet, he winces when he bangs his head. Rubbing it, he walks to the door, and I have the strangest urge to beg him to stay.

But I'll beg no man, not ever again.

I lost everything before—my freedom, name, and life. Never again, not for anyone, no matter how delicious it could be.

At the door, he stops with his back to me. "Kitt is just scared, you know. Scared we'll lose to you and scared it will get us all killed when he has given so much to keep us free. You scare him more than any other monster in the world, Ferol."

I watch him go, but the truth is a bitter pill to swallow because they scare me too.

I'm terrified I will soften towards them, and I can't tell if it's the bond or my actual feelings. I don't want to let someone else in to hurt me again . . . or lose them, just like everyone else who ever meant anything to me.

After a few hours, I get sick of feeling sorry for myself, so I work out in the small room. I run through my usual routine of crunches, pull-ups, and push-ups until my body is covered in a sheen of sweat. When I'm done, I hear voices. Wiping my face with my stolen shirt, I walk to the kitchen and

freeze. The kitchen is full of them, and all gazes turn to me as they pile their plates high.

“Come eat, little beastie,” Bram says. I meet their eyes, but there’s no protest, which is surprising.

It seems there is a truce in the air despite everything that happened as I take a seat. Everyone is here except Kitt, but he eventually filters in, glaring at me. He sits as far away as he can, but not before he drags Raiden to the free seat the farthest from me.

I roll my eyes. “I’m not going to jump him.”

“Gods, I wish she would,” Raiden mutters, and Kitt glares at us.

Ignoring them, I pile my plate with food and start to eat. “How long until we drop anchor at wherever we are going?” I know we are heading to my mother’s court, but there’s nowhere close to that remote outpost to shore up a boat, so they must have some other plan in place.

“Two days,” Emrys replies. “When we get there, we will hire a car and drive the rest of the way. We will be with your mother in three days. I just checked the weather conditions. There will be a big storm tonight, so stay indoors.”

I swallow the now tasteless bite of vegetables. “You mean no more ocean? Thank the gods,” I joke, and they relax. None of us want to talk about what that means. We all know what will happen, but like me, the mate bond is making it harder to imagine and even harder to talk about.

“What did you eat in Gehenna?” Raiden asks curiously.

“At first, I starved a lot. I ate bugs, rogue animals, anything I could get my hands on. I was sick often, and my body was not used to it. After a few years, I hunted with Spike and the others and ate if I had to. That was before I found froken.”

“Froken?” Kitt asks then seems to hate that he spoke.

“Hmm, I don’t know if that’s the actual name. Spike said it was an ancient plant. Great food source, but it lacks any protein. It kept me alive, though, and I added other things when needed. Luckily, phoenixes are adaptable. A lot of creatures starved down there because they were unable to do what it took to survive. Still, this food is only marginally better.”

“Hey,” Bram protests. “I cooked this.” I wink, and he smiles at me, blushing.

“You ate people?” Kitt asks.

I refuse to cower or be ashamed. “I ate the dead. I never killed them. Flesh is flesh, especially if they were animals. It’s no different than that lamb you are eating.” He drops his eyes first, not me. “I had things to live for, like my revenge, my bab—I had to eat, no matter what I wanted. After the first few times, I got over the horror.”

“No wonder you didn’t blink at me.” Emrys huffs, but he seems relieved. “Did you do anything for fun down there, or was it all murder and survival?”

“Eh, I played rocks with Spike sometimes. There was even a pair of mermaid brothers who would put on shows occasionally. It wasn’t all bad.”

“You sound wistful,” Raiden murmurs. “You miss them?”

“We weren’t exactly friends, but being down there together connects you in a way I can’t explain. Some of them are better there, since they wouldn’t be good up here to the population or themselves. They deserve it, but they are still friends.” I shrug as I take more bites while they process my words.

“What was the worst or best creature you met?” Bram asks, leaning forward.

Chuckling, I suck my fork clean, and he watches the movement before swallowing. I ignore it as best as I can so Kitt doesn’t start trying to murder me again. “The most legendary was probably Dracula.”

“*The Dracula?*” Raiden exclaims.

“Eh, who the stories were based on. He was just a very old sanguis who was powerful and had some great stories, right up until he pissed off Spike, who ate him.” Their horror makes me laugh.

“What’s the wildest monster you hunted in your jobs?”

Kitt cuts them a look, but Raiden leans forward with a smirk. “There was this slug shifter. Have you ever seen them? A nasty son of a bitch. He kidnapped someone’s kid and was holding them hostage, trying to make little slug shifter babies.” He shudders in revulsion. “I couldn’t get the slime off me for days.”

Grinning, I shake my head. Surprisingly, we talk for hours, never about anything serious like our past or futures, just jokes and stories. Despite Kitt’s anger, he joins in. When I retire to my cabin that night, I can’t stop smiling.

Maybe I’m not the dangerous one. Perhaps they are.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I wake with a gasp, fear coursing through my veins as I struggle from the sheets, trying to figure out what happened until memories slide back into my head.

The feelings of hands on my skin, of being torn apart and sewed together, of them cutting pieces off me and forcing me to perform flood back to me, and I realise it wasn't my dream.

It was Emrys's nightmare.

Something screams inside me even as the boat rocks. The storm must have hit while I slept. I stumble from my cabin and up the stairs. The sound of rain lashing the metal is loud as I fight to open the door, the wind trying to slam it shut in my hands. I hold the metal with a death grip, struggling to see through the rain as it pours down on the rolling boat. Waves hit the side and sweep up and over the deck, and then I see the silent figure moving through the storm like he doesn't even notice it.

He's focused on something far away. His hat and guns are gone, and his wet clothes are stuck to his body as he slowly shuffles to the railing, grabs it, and swings up and over.

"Emrys!" I shout, but I still feel the clinging nightmare. He's not seeing the storm, the boat, or me. He's back there, and he's trying to get away. Terror rips at my chest as I step out into the storm. My hair and clothes are drenched, and I shiver as I run through the turbulent weather, slipping on the slick deck. When a wave comes up and pushes him back, also knocking me to my ass, I choke on the salty water. Struggling to my knees, I watch

him get up and calmly grab the railing, still trying to get away in the nightmare he's locked within.

"Emrys!" I bellow, but the storm swallows it whole. Lightning cracks across the sky as more waves wash over the deck, causing us to tip and turn.

He's going over. I can see it. Unlike me, he won't be reborn. He'll sink and die, washed away like he never existed. I lunge to my feet and grab the back of his shirt, but my hands slip, and he goes over the edge. I grab the railing and his hand in one swift movement. He dangles above the water reaching up to consume him, angry and boiling as I cling to both.

"Emrys, please!" I yell as I struggle to pull his dead weight up and over. Suddenly, other hands help me, and we fall back to the deck. Emrys lands on top of me, coughing and shaking. Sitting up, I roll us over and brush away his sodden hair, cupping his freezing face as he blinks, finally seeing me above him.

He reaches up, brushing away my wet hair, and for a moment, I'm in his head, seeing what he sees—myself, drenched, with frantic eyes, and he thinks I am so beautiful. I can barely breathe as I snap back into my own head and see his tears mixing with the rain.

"Come on, we need to get you warm." Hauling him up, I drag him downstairs to the kitchen with the others' help, who appear out of the dark. I grab my blanket and rush back, where Emrys is stripping. His hands tremble as water drips down his skin. I try not to notice how beautiful he is and how his scars only add to his appeal. Once he's naked, I wrap the dry blanket around him and help him sit as Raiden sets coffee before him. Emrys simply blinks, almost like he's not really here.

"You need to dry off and get warm too," Kitt mutters, and I glance at him then myself. There is a puddle forming under my crouched form, and it's then I start to feel the cold. Nodding, I spare Emrys a look before hurrying to the bathroom. I strip, shivering at how cold I feel, then grab a towel. I dry off before wrapping the last blanket around my body. It barely comes to my knees, but it's better than nothing. I hold it in place as I hurry back into the room. I sit next to Emrys and offer him my body heat as he stares at the coffee, unseeing. There is more life in his eyes, however, and he flinches when I press closer.

"I was back there, trying to get out of the tube. It was opening, and I was free. I didn't even see—" He croaks, lowering his head in shame.

"We know. We saw it," Bram murmurs softly.

“We were there too,” Torrin admits, his voice tight with repressed emotion.

“We nearly lost you,” Kitt whispers, sounding broken. “I couldn’t fight my way from the nightmare. If it wasn’t for Ferol, we would have.” I turn at his words, finding those granite eyes locked on me, swirling with relief and fear.

“I saw it too. Something was wrong.” I shrug as Emrys finally looks at me with fear, shame, and disgust warping his pretty gaze. “Don’t take it to heart. Only I get to kill you.”

His lips curve softly for a moment before he lowers his eyes and shuffles closer, resting his head on my shoulder and relaxing. It’s no doubt a temporary loss of inhibition, the mate bond offering him solace and comfort. Hell, even I feel whole with him touching me. I lean into him as I look at Raiden, who is lingering nearby, wringing his hands.

“Coffee, *please*,” I say, tacking on the nicety. His eyebrows arch at my politeness, but before he can move, Emrys silently pushes his mug to me. Reaching out with my hand farthest from him, I wrap my fingers around the mug and warm it, wanting the heat more than anything as the boat continues to be thrashed by the storm. Closing my eyes, I lean into him, trying not to think of what I saw or the things I felt. I lied. I didn’t see this tube they are talking of. I saw what happened before.

I saw him being created and tortured, and it made me angry on his behalf despite our muddled feelings. My poor, scarred boy has been through so much.

“I’ll get you some clothes,” Kitt mutters, and then he leaves.

“I’m sorry, Emy,” Raiden murmurs, his voice sadder than I’ve ever heard it. “I didn’t see you get out of bed until it was too late.”

“It’s not your job to keep me safe, Ray,” Emrys replies without opening his eyes. “Thank you, Oriana.”

My original name startles me, but I don’t move away. How long has it been since anyone called me that? Oriana died in Gehenna, but I don’t punish him for saying it, not when he’s clearly struggling. I feel tremors moving through his body, and his hands have a white-knuckle grip on the blanket. He’s barely holding on. For now, while the storm rages on, we are stuck together, and for a moment, we aren’t enemies. We are just two people reaching for each other through madness and pain. I felt it when he looked at me—hope for what I represented to him.

Kitt returns soon after, but when he offers us clothes, I look at Emrys and wait. When he doesn't move or open his eyes, I close my eyes with him and begin to drift to sleep. When I wake, Emrys is gone. They all are. The clothes are folded on the table, and there is another mug in front of me that's still warm. Sighing, I slip the blanket off and dress in the borrowed shirt and trousers, having to roll them up, but they are warm and smell like them. As much as I want to deny it, it's a comforting scent.

I'm just folding the blanket when I see a radio on the side. I head its way and crank it on. It's old, with a wide antenna, and for a minute, I only hear static. I keep turning the dial until it crackles, then a soft song drifts through the speaker. It's unfamiliar, but the husky female voice is entrancing, and the music sounds vintage. I sway back and forth as I listen.

I missed music and dancing with my friends and, when no one was watching, singing my heart out—something else they stole from me.

"Allow me this dance?" The voice startles me, and I spin in shock. I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear Emrys enter.

He's dressed, and his hair is wet and pushed back. There are no weapons in sight, and he looks . . . soft, somehow. The lights are low, with the room occasionally brightening from lightning as waves crash against us. I shouldn't, but I put my hand into his, laughing when he yanks me into his hold. Smiling down at me, he swings me up in an arc. One hand is in mine, and the other rests on my back as he moves me around the kitchen, swaying to the song before spinning me out and back in. I can't help but smile. For a moment, I'm a teenager, dancing for fun and uncaring who is watching. Right now, I'm not Ferol or his enemy.

We are lost in this stolen time.

The music wraps around us as we sway, slower and slower until we barely move, his hand tightening on mine as he looks at me. "Thank you for saving me," he whispers as the song finishes, then he kisses my forehead, lingering before pulling away. Without a backward glance, he flees, and I'm left staring after him with my heart in my throat. Sadness engulfs me.

For the first time, I wish things could be different.

I wonder what it would feel like to be loved by them rather than hated . .

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



I'm dripping wet from the storm as I push into the kitchen and see her. She spins, her eyes widening when they land on me, and sadness fills her gaze for a moment. She thought I was Emrys coming back. I've been fighting it, standing in the storm to stop these feelings surging through me and the hive. My chest heaves as I stare at her, and she blinks, her sadness changing to confusion as she watches me warily.

That's fair, since all we do is fight, yet it's the last thing on my mind as my eyes drop to her lips.

"Kitt?" she murmurs. "We were just dancing." She rolls her eyes, her sass getting under my skin. "Let me guess, it's another thing you'll try to kill me for."

She needs to shut the fuck up before I make her.

Her heart slams loud enough for me to hear when I lunge at her, stopping in front of her so my wet clothes press to her dry ones. "Kitt?" Her eyes search mine, and whatever she sees has her swallowing and her cheeks tinging red. "Kitt?" This time, it's softer, a plea. It does something to me, something I can't explain. Not even the cold water dripping down my spine can repel the fire she started in me.

"Fuck it," I snap. I grab the back of her neck, ignoring her protest and the fire burning across her skin as I crush my lips to hers. We both freeze, staring at each other. Everything rushes through me, all the others' thoughts and feelings. Their anger, envy, and need mix with my own. The bond demands I carry on and give in, and the stone wall inside me cracks until heat floods inside and melts my clay, making me putty in her hands.

I close my eyes and kiss her harder. When she opens her lips for me, my tongue surges in, tangling with hers, and my groan echoes around the room as she reaches up and grips my arms. Her nails dig in, but I can't stop. The kiss is feral and cruel, tasting like blood and sin and mistakes, yet I can't slow down. My hand slides up into her hair, fisting it to drag her closer as she gasps into my mouth.

"We can't." She pulls away, her lips swollen and parted as she stares into my eyes. There's no love or softness, just hate and need, and it burns my skin. "We can't do this."

We stare at each other for a moment before our lips crash together again despite her protests. Both of us know this is a very bad fucking idea, but we are unable to resist anymore. The ship rocks with the force of the storm, one that echoes through me as her hands slide up to my shoulders, and she leaps. I catch her with one arm and almost send her flying into the air as her legs wrap around my waist, letting me feel the heat between her legs. Her ankles cross behind me, her thighs crushing my torso as I turn us and slam her onto a table. I drop her onto the wood and come down on top of her.

The way Raiden watched her and ached to touch her haunts me, and I can't deprive myself anymore.

"Kitt, seriously, we can't. You'll turn around and blame me."

By the gods, I've never wanted her to shut up as much as I do right now. I don't want logic. I want her body.

"Shut the fuck up," I snarl. I don't need to be nice to her. I want to fuck her more than I want my next breath or even my freedom, but I don't need to be nice to her, and her eyes widen before burning bright at my harsh command.

"You shut the fuck up and put your mouth to good use," she retorts, thinking I won't, but I have no patience left. I want what she offered.

Dropping to my knees, I watch her eyes flare as I grab her trousers and tear them off, leaving her bare as I force my shoulders between her spread legs.

"Kitt—"

My eyes drop to her exposed cunt, a shudder rolling through me when I see the slick, pink flesh begging for me. She controlled Raiden, but she won't control me. I don't care what she wants, but I need to have her all over my mouth or I might die. Dragging her to the edge of the table, I press my face into her pussy and inhale deeply, my eyes rolling shut in ecstasy.

My cock swells and jerks, begging for attention, but I ignore it. My fingers dent her flesh before I remind myself to be gentler. She isn't breakable per se, but I'm strong enough to tear apart buildings. All I want is her pleasure, not her pain right now. She smells like brimstone and sweetness, so good I want to take a bite.

I sink my teeth into her inner thigh until she smacks my head hard. I don't flinch, but I feel it, and then she fists my hair, and I lap at her flesh, wanting more of her taste. When I do, she gasps above me.

"Kitt, fuck!"

Concentrating on the bud I saw her touching through Raiden's memory, I press my tongue against it, trying different things until she squirms, pressing into my mouth. My eyes focus on the hole begging for attention, the one she fucked. Slipping my tongue down, I thrust it inside her, feeling her channel tighten around my invading flesh. She's so hot and wet, I groan in need, pressing closer.

There is no technique or finesse. I know I'm not the first to do this to her, but I don't care. I take her pleasure with my brutality, and her reactions make me believe she loves it.

I can't hold back the change. My skin swells and shifts, and when I drag my tongue down her slit, it's hard and bigger, and she cries out, tugging on my hair as she grinds into my face. Encouraged by her reaction, I speed up, tasting every inch of her before forcing my tongue inside her, and she screams. Her cunt clenches as her sweet cream spills into my mouth, her thighs clamping around my head with impressive strength. When they finally relax, I pull my tongue out and lap up the desire leaking from her hole as she gasps above me.

Pleasure spills from her and into me from the bond, and it's addictive—almost as addictive as her silence.

Lifting my head, I wipe my mouth and lick my hand clean as she pants on the cracked wood of the table, her eyes sliding partially open to see me. "For someone who hates me, you sure came hard on my mouth, firebird."

"It's the only thing your mouth is good for. Either shut up or get out."

I surge to my feet. She thought I would stop and walk away. Her shock is evident as I grab her and flip her, my hands on her hips. I press my body to her back, and she is dwarfed by my size, so I have to press her feet on top of mine as I thrust my fingers into her channel. Her nails extend and scratch

the wood as she pushes back. Her head is below mine, and the scent of her hair under my chin makes me wild. “Kitt, shit, fuck, I need more.”

“I know what you need, firebird.” My tone is gravelly and laced with my own unrestrained hunger as I shove my trousers down and fist my cock just like Raiden did. I’m big, especially now that I’ve changed, but she doesn’t seem to mind as I pull my fingers free and press against her entrance.

“Wait, go slow, you’re—” Her words end in a scream as I thrust into her, impaling her on my length. Her voice fills the air as she presses forward, trapped between me and the table. Her tight cunt grips me as I grunt, pulling out and shoving back in.

“Fuck!” she roars, clawing at the wood as she struggles to breathe. “Don’t stop!” she hisses, and I flex my hips, burying myself deeper as she groans. I swell as the change takes all of me, but I don’t hold back. I don’t want to be nice, even if I could, and she doesn’t either. I feel the desperation linking us, a need so strong we can’t fight it anymore as I hammer into her, fast and hard. I claim her hot channel as I spear her with my cock.

This isn’t mating or lovemaking. This is hate sex. Both of us are angry at this bond, but we are unable to deny the need and attraction we feel, so we take it out on each other.

One of my hands drifts down her neck, tearing her shirt off so I can touch her breasts, cupping and squeezing the tight globes as she whimpers, pushing back to meet my thrusts.

There are no words, only animalistic cries as we come together in a way no others could survive. She’s made for me, and I was made for her. Every inch of me was made to pleasure her like this, and as she clenches around my swollen, hard length, I know she loves it.

The table creaks and cracks further down the middle, but we ignore it, our bodies slapping together as I pinch and twist her nipples.

“Kitt!” My name leaves her lips in a plea, and whatever humanity that was left in me disappears. Fucking her body to the point of pain, I take what I want, and she burns alongside me, her flames licking my skin, melting some of my clay, until pleasure arcs through us. The bond wraps around us like rope, tightening until we explode.

My roar shakes the boat as I spill my release inside her, pleasure claiming every inch of me until I’m shaking and limp. I struggle to breathe as her cunt grips me, milking me for every drop as she whines, shivers, and

shakes against me. The rope continues to tighten, drawing out the pleasure until it stops and sinks into our skin, becoming unbreakable.

My granite hands hit the wood on either side of hers, framing her deadly claws as I hang my head and surround her for a moment, trying to recover.

The entire world has shifted and changed around me. One touch, one taste of her body and I know I will never be the same again.

“Kitt,” she cries out. For a moment, there’s no hatred there, just need and all-consuming feelings. We are little more than this ship housing us, adrift in the storm.

“Shh, I have you.” It slips free as we press together, adjusting to this new sensation. When I finally catch my breath, I pull from her body, and she spins, struggling to stand upright, so I catch her. We stare into each other’s eyes, the mate bond demanding I take her again and mark every inch of her as mine.

“Shit,” she says, and it echoes my thoughts as I stare at her, wide-eyed, feeling that mate bond wrap around me tighter. When I look at her now, the hatred slides away, replaced by possessiveness.

“Shit,” I repeat.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I stare up at the four incredulous faces. Kitt is next to me, silent and ashamed, looking embarrassed by this lapse of control as they stare us down. His hands cover his cock since he's still naked, though it seems more accidental than for modesty purposes. The nagging mate bond demands I pull them off and take what is mine again. Pursing my lips, I avoid looking at the ruined table or thinking about the cum sliding down my leg since they stormed in here before I could even get fully dressed. I have a shirt on and not much else.

At least they let us finish, I guess.

"Seriously?" Torrin demands as he looks between us. Their faces are flushed, and it's obvious they felt our pleasure from their wide-eyed looks and the stains on the fronts of their pants . . . and they are pissed.

I would have thought having an orgasm would make them feel better. These guys are weird. I was feeling pretty good until they stormed in here and started interrogating us, and all those happy, post sex, blissful feelings dissipated as the reality of what we did settled in. Even now, I find myself pressing my shoulder to Kitt's arm, liking the contact a little too much.

Fucking mate bond.

"It was an accident," I say. I feel like a teenager again, when my mother caught me messing around with Flora's nephew and was furious. I think it had more to do with whom I chose to sleep with rather than what I was doing, but still, that same embarrassment tries to corner me now, even though we are both consenting adults.

“What, you slipped and fell onto his dick?” Raiden scoffs as he crosses his arms.

“Yes?” I reply, and he rolls his eyes, but I grow tired of their irritation. “We had sex. Get over it. It happened.”

“And now the mate bond is stronger than ever. What were you thinking?” Emrys snaps, looking at Kitt.

“I wasn’t,” he admits, and he shuffles a little ways away from me before stopping with a pained expression. The bond is particularly demanding right now, trying to seal us together. It even reaches out to the others, commanding I claim them. My soul aches, like I am not quite whole, and I know they could fix that. It’s a drugging feeling, and I sway with the need to seal the bond and claim them.

“All this time, you’ve been pushing us away from her, and then you go and do this.” Bram waves his hand. “You just wanted her for yourself.”

Kitt’s head snaps up, his eyes narrowing. “Just because I feel guilty does not mean you can speak to me like that. Remember who I am.”

“Oh, I do, the one determined to break the bond, but here we are, locked tighter to her!” Torrin yells, steam emerging from his nostrils. “You’re a goddamn hypocrite.”

Their argument only gets worse, but their words become a haze as the bond constricts around me like a naga, making it hard to breathe. It’s like now that I’ve acknowledged it, it refuses to be ignored. It wants them, and it’s tired of waiting. They are right in front of me, ripe for the taking. Licking my lips, I try to push it back, but they move closer and I can smell them.

Fire burns deep in my core, and I bend slightly to contain it, closing my eyes.

“I seriously can’t believe you. What do we do now?” Emrys snarls, and my eyes lock on him and the way his lips move. I have to grip the bench below me to stop myself from lunging at him. I’m out of control, and I know I can’t hold this back forever.

We unlocked the door and now it’s surging forward, and I don’t stand a chance.

“Get out,” I grit through my teeth, but everyone ignores me, continuing to argue until I vibrate with anger and need. My thighs are slick with it, as if preparing to take all of my mates. My body is awake and alert, no longer mine.

Gods, I can't do this.

It hurts.

"Get out!" I roar, and every gaze swings to me. I'm barely hanging on, my eyes wild as I shiver and jerk. "The mate bond is demanding I finish this. Unless you get out right now, I'm going to fuck all of you."

Raiden actually gulps as all their eyes widen.

The idea that I would lose control is unfathomable, but I can feel it. Kitt made me weak. Fuck, they were right. It was a big mistake. I am disgusted at myself and angry at them and this stupid fucking unfair bond. A tear squeezes from my eye and trails down my cheek. They are silent, but I can still sense them, and when one of them moves, my eyes snap open, tracking him like prey.

"Now," I hiss, and I don't know what they see, but they scramble to the door. Their arguments are forgotten, but Bram gets too close in his haste and I lunge for him.

I fly through the air, tackling Bram to the floor. His eyes are glowing below me as I pin his hands to the wood before I roll off him. Shaking and groaning, I curl into myself, trying to regain control.

"Go." My voice is barely human.

"Ferol—" I feel Bram reaching for me as if to comfort me, and I move away, warding him off with my hand out as he crouches near me.

"Don't." I swallow the rest of my words, and he nods, giving me a worried look before slowly backing away. He disappears through the door, but I can sense them on the other side. I don't know if that's good or bad. If they were too far, I would hunt them down, but they are so close that the air is filled with their scents. I can smell them, taste them, and still feel Kitt's drying cum on my thighs and pussy.

The mate bond is tired of waiting, and it only gets worse. I've suffered before, so I can deal with this, or so I think, but wave after wave of burning heat washes through me. I bite down on my cries of agony until I taste blood. My muscles lock up tight as I curl up. I claw at the floor, my nails breaking and bleeding as I try to get to them. When I realise what I'm doing, I throw myself back, panting and writhing.

Agony courses through my body, leaving me shivering and my skin on fire. I've never felt like this before, but I've heard of it. I'm in a mating heat. I denied the bond for too long, so my soul and body made the decision for me, and now the only way I'll find relief is through them.

I can't let that happen.

Kitt feels what I feel. I can almost see through his eyes as he paces, his hard cock leaking. Fuck! I bang my head into the tile, rolling it around as my hair sticks to my sweaty skin.

I will not seal the bond further. That's the only thought that holds me back, but if I carry on like this, it could kill me or take my choice away.

"Little beastie, are you okay?" Bram calls, his voice laced with concern, but fire engulfs me from his nearness, stealing my words and thoughts. If I don't do something, I'll crawl out there, begging for their cocks, and I won't live with that embarrassment.

Flopping back, I rip off the remnants of my shirt so I'm naked, the tiles cool against my overheated spine as I reach between my legs and touch myself.

My fingers slide through Kitt's cum mixed with my desire, and I shove it back inside myself, groaning. My legs fall open as I fuck my fingers, hoping it will help, but all it does is stoke my need. Turning, I press my face to the cool tile, rubbing my clit. I try to come, but I can't. Tears gather in my eyes as I keep building my pleasure, but just when I would fall over the edge, the bond stops me, as if I'll only be satisfied with my mates.

Fuck it.

Fuck fate.

Fuck those men.

Fuck everyone and everything.

Turning to my side in exhaustion, I ride my fingers shamelessly, trying anything to lessen the flames inside me. I need more. I need them. Their scents wrap around me, and I need to taste them. Pulling my fingers from my dripping cunt, I shove them into my mouth, tasting Kitt and my cream before shoving them back inside myself, but it's not enough. Another wave consumes me, taking me under until I'm burning alive.

The heat is killing me, and I know I'll be reborn, only to feel it again and again. This is never going to stop. We waited too long.

Then, like an oasis, light breaks through the haze, and Raiden is crouching before me, looking sad but determined. His scent and closeness breaks through the inferno. Whining, I roll to my front and crawl towards him. My hand circles his ankle, the touch of his skin against mine making me take a full breath of air for the first time in what feels like hours.

“I’ll help you.” The words are low and tight, as if he’s sacrificing much, and I suppose he is.

We all know the cost of helping me.

There are no romantic declarations between us, just a need that demands to be sated. We are two people with no choice, wishing they could cling to the hatred they feel.

I didn’t expect him, and he must read the confusion in my gaze. “We made a decision. Another one of us can’t hurt more than this, so I’ll help. Bram would give in to you too much, Torrin might hurt you in this state, and Emrys can’t control himself with all these pheromones, so I guess I’m your sacrifice,” he jokes, his mismatched eyes glowing with hunger as he watches me. Despite our animosity, I want him more than I want my next breath. He came in here as a willing sacrifice, and I’m going to take it.

He must read my decision because he nods and a cocky smirk crawls over his lips. “Use me. Drain me dry all you want.”

I don’t care anymore. My hand tightens on his ankle, and I yank him to me. He flies backwards, hitting the floor, and then I crawl up and straddle him.

“Ferol—wait, it’s okay—” His words end in a groan as I slip my hand in his pants. “Fuck, fuck, darling, if you want me to last long enough to help, then don’t do that. Remember, you’re my first.”

Growling, I rip his pants down and tear his shirt with my nails. His eyes blow wide as he reaches for me, holding my hips as I straddle him and grip his hard cock. I line myself up and sink down on his length. My hands shake, and my body is tight and hot, but when I feel him inside me, a smidge of relief pushes the burn back.

“Gods, I didn’t know it would feel like this,” he rasps below me, his eyes hooded. “I felt it through Kitt, but this is different. Fuck, you feel so good.”

My nails dig into his chest, drawing blood, and he hisses, but then I start to move. His eyes roll back in his head as he lifts his hips, burying himself in me. I ride him hard and fast, taking what I need, uncaring if he enjoys it, but each gasp and plea from his lips only encourages me. My talons claw at his flesh, and he glows from inside, lightning flashing under his skin like it’s trapped there. When his eyes open, they are midnight black, with crackles of blue and white flashing through them as he growls. The ozone

around him causes our hair to float up and around, as if we stand amidst a storm, and I suppose we do.

The mate bond lashes us together, and unlike the tight, hard edge of rope it felt like with Kitt, this feels fluid. Lightning holds us together as we move. Raiden's hands and hips lift me as I ride him harder and faster, clawing his skin to release the lightning inside. It hits my skin, absorbing into my body, and pleasure forms. When it arcs down across my cunt to my clit repeatedly, I scream, losing myself, but I still can't stop. The relief I chase grows closer and closer until he bellows and arches up, his lightning ricocheting around the room.

His cum fills me, splashing inside my core, and the relief is instantaneous, like water cooling the fire enough for me to slump against him. Breathing heavily, I bask in the cooling relief, but the burn quickly returns as we both lie together.

Wiggling my hips, I slip farther down his hardening cock, feeling his cum slip from me as I sit up. His eyes narrow as he reaches for me, but before I can make a noise, he rolls us and pins me to the floor, his hips slamming into mine with the force of his thrusts.

He's a fast learner as he lifts one of my legs, pressing my heel to his shoulder and driving his huge cock into me. Our bodies are wet as they come together, his hair lifting with his own ozone as his eyes flash like lightning. Goosebumps erupt on my skin, and electric currents flood me. I reach for him like a lifeline, and he captures my hand, pressing it to his bleeding chest.

"Use all of me. I'm yours."

His words shouldn't pierce my resolve, but they do, and I cry out, arching up to meet his brutal thrusts. Lightning hits me, and my heart stops. When it restarts, the ache is insane, pain mixing with pleasure as he leans down and bites my nipple. His fingers pinch and twist the other sensitive bud as lightning arcs from his skin. I scream, thrashing below him, but he doesn't stop. He controls every inch of me, sending me flying towards another release. I shout his name as it claims me, my pussy clenching around him as he fights me, snarling against my skin as he sits up. He looks like a god, but then he falls for me, his eyes rolling back as his hips stutter.

"More, give me everything," I beg, desperate for the relief his cum can bring.

Snarling, I feel him spill inside me.

“That’s it, take all of me,” he hisses and pulls his cock out of me, jerking his length and spraying more of his release across my belly and cunt, flooding my skin with it. I reach down to smear it in, arching up to demand more.

“Ray,” I murmur, reaching for him. “Please.”

“Please what?” he asks. “Look at you, being all nice just because you want my cock. If I knew this was the way to get you to behave, then I would have done it before now.”

Fury tightens my body, and I lunge at him, tackling him back and forcing his face down to the tile. “Watch your mouth or I’ll use it instead,” I hiss, some of my control returning. “Clean up the mess.” I press his face tighter to the floor where my cream is, and he struggles for a moment before his eyes meet mine. They are narrowed and angry, but his tongue darts out and laps up the mess, tasting me. “Good boy. Clean it all up.” He does as he’s told, licking my cum as I release his head and slide under his body, taking his cock into my mouth as he cries out.

He hardens swiftly, the bond humming happily as I take him as deeply as I can at this angle, sucking him like he’s the only thing keeping me alive. He tastes like both of us, and it’s an addictive flavour as I cup his balls and bob on his cock quickly, wanting more of his cum. He rubs his face in my cream on the floor, wild as he thrusts down my throat.

For a moment, I feel Kitt staving off his own release and trying to block the others, but then all I feel is Raiden.

Hungrily, I lick and suck his cock, wanting to drink his release as he groans, jerking below me. “Ferol, shit, fuck, darling—I can’t—”

When he comes this time, electricity sparks from him, hitting me and bouncing around the room. My heart stops again before the electricity absorbs into my skin as I suck his cock, draining him dry as more lightning bounces from him with a bellow.

Pushing me away, he crumples into the floor, rolling onto his back, his heaving chest torn apart by my talons.

Licking my sore lips, I peer down at him as the heat slowly creeps back into my body, demanding to be felt. I grab for his soft cock, working it as I look at him.

He won’t open his eyes, and no matter how much I lick his cock, it won’t harden. I whine impatiently as the heat returns full force. A hand grips my hair, yanking me up to my knees.

“He can’t help you anymore,” Torrin grumbles as he towers above me. “You’ve used him up. Look.” My eyes widen as I stare at Raiden, my thighs tightening as I rub for friction.

Torrin keeps me in his grip as I hiss and make needy sounds. “Behave and I will take his place.”

My eyes narrow at his words, and before he can retreat, I pin him to the floor, my cunt pressed to his mouth as I grip his horns. He bellows as I tighten my hold on them and grind into his mouth.

Torrin heaves below me, but I grind my knees into the tile, keeping him in place as I slide across his mouth until it opens. “Can you taste him inside me?” I hiss as his tongue presses against me. I look down my body at him, and when my hands tighten on his horns, he jerks below me, and I realise they are pressure points. Interesting. “He didn’t like it when I behaved, and neither will you. You came in here, and that makes you mine to use. You want inside my cunt? Make me come. Push back the heat.”

His eyes narrow as he bellows below me, the warmth from his nose washing over my cunt. Hair sprouts across him as I tighten my hold on his horns.

Dropping my head back, I hand myself over to him, focusing on pleasure as his tongue finally touches my cunt. Pulling me down farther, he lashes me with his tongue, wild and hard until I buck on his face. I hold on for dear life, winding my hips to seek more. Pleasure rolls through me until I can’t take any more. I come easier than I ever have, this fucking mate bond wanting me to fill every inch of my body with them.

Whimpering, I slow down and sag into him as he lifts me, so I kneel, struggling to stay upright. Despite coming all over Torrin’s face, the heat has only grown. It seems only them coming inside me brings relief. Fucking bastards.

He knows it as he rises above me, naked, his muscles clenching. His cock leaks his desire for me as he starts to shift, trapped somewhere between his bull and human forms, and I ache to feel him.

“You want this?” he growls, stroking his length as I whine, opening my legs for him. “Beg for it.”

I never beg, nor will I start now. I’d rather die.

His head jerks from the force of my slap, and when his eyes land on me, they are furious, even though I feel his arousal. His hand cuffs my neck, squeezing until I see stars. “If that is how you want to play, then let’s do

so.” His hand tightens further. “You want it rough? You want me to use you like you used Raiden? Like a hole to fuck and satisfy my urges? Look at you, dripping with cum and begging for more. You love it, don’t you? Love me even saying this shit.”

Arching up into his touch, I lick his lips until he hisses, his nostrils flaring. “I won’t break. Fuck me or get out so someone else can.”

He throws me across the room, and I hit the tile hard. Before I can get up, he’s on me, one hand on my neck and the other ripping my thighs apart. Torrin thrusts his huge cock inside me, and it’s so long and big, it actually hurts despite how much we have done tonight. I feel him in every inch of my core as he roars in victory.

I actually cry, tears sliding down my cheeks in both relief and pain as he pulls from my body and slams back in, pushing me across the tiles as he makes my pussy his home.

My face crushes to the tile as he fucks me from behind, pinning me with his body. The strength I feel in his hands only makes me want it more. Gods, he’s so big, he is practically tearing me in two, and I love it. It pushes the heat higher until I’m nothing more than a beast pushing back to take him deeper, but then he pulls from my pussy.

“You wanted it hard, and I want to fuck you where no one else has,” he growls, and before I can speak, he forces himself into my ass. It hurts, but the pain only makes my pleasure grow as I claw at the floor, crying out as he forces himself all the way inside, pulls out, then slams back into my ass, forcing me to take him.

“Look at you. You love this, don’t you? Love how we are all desperate to be inside you.” He leans down, and I feel his fur press against my back. The new angle has me seeing stars. “Want to know a secret? I know you want us more.”

I want to argue, but I can’t. I can’t even speak, can only hold on as he takes me where no one else ever has. I don’t know if it’s the mate bond or just me, but I love how he tosses me around and uses me so easily. I’m always in charge, the strong one, but right now, I’m weak and needy. When he pulls out of my ass and takes my pussy again, I actually scream for him. Flames lick at my skin, no doubt singeing his fur, but he doesn’t slow down.

His huge cock spears my pussy then my ass, taking me in both holes, and it keeps me on edge as he wrings release after release out of me. The heat seems to climb from me to him, though, because he’s feral.

My eyes lock on Raiden as he sits up, watching us, and his cock starts to harden.

“Your mate”—Torrin spits the word, filled with hatred—“is still needy.” He drags me over the floor. “Give her what she needs so we can be done,” he demands as his big hand grips the back of my head and forces me down onto Raiden’s cock. He falls back with a cry, his eyes screwed tightly closed as he reaches down, replacing Torrin’s hand with his and shoving himself down my throat. I gulp him hungrily, held between them. It feels so right, the mate bond sings. Raiden’s lightning covers my skin, and a large metal chain constricts me, sinking deeper and pulling me closer to Torrin.

I lose myself in the sensations as they use me. Raiden’s hand is vicious on my head, my cheeks aching as he hits my throat with brutal thrusts. Torrin swells inside me, hitting nerves that have me teetering on the edge of no return.

The bond squeezes us, and the only thing we can do is explode. Our cries of pleasure mix as cum fills my throat, forcing me to swallow, and more quenches the fire in my cunt.

Relief and ecstasy wash through me until I’m boneless, only their hands holding me up until I finally come back to myself.

I release Raiden’s cock from my mouth, and some of his cum spills down my chin. His chest rises and falls, so he’s still alive, but he’s out cold. Turning, I find Torrin sprawled on the floor, breathing heavily. His muscular, hairy thighs shake, and his cock is nestled between them. I need more, though, and he’s there.

I crawl towards him, lowering to lick his cock. His eyes open as I crawl up his body. When he reaches for me, I slap his hands away before turning and lowering onto his cock. I drag his hands up to my breasts to tweak and play with my nipples as I stare at Raiden.

Torrin groans behind me, squeezing and playing with my nipples as I roll my hips, rocking closer to the edge. Our bodies move in sync, his furry thighs below me taut and beautiful as I sway above him. I lose myself in his body until we both find our release again. Slumping into his legs, I nuzzle his fur while I wait for my hammering heartbeat to slow. I expect the mate bond to feel heavy, but if anything their chains seem to ease the weight inside me. When I pull myself off Torrin, he remains silent, so I glance back to check on him.

Torrin is out cold too, and for a minute, I am satisfied and the heat is diminished, but then it returns stronger than ever as I jerk from the force, a cry leaving my throat.

Gods, please make it stop.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



She's going through them, draining them dry. I feel them slip into pleased oblivion and look at Kitt. His jaw jumps as he grinds his teeth.

None of us want the bond to grow any deeper, and she's now locked to three of us, but as she starts to make that crying noise in the kitchen, I know we have no choice. He nods, agreeing with my silent assessment. Taking a deep breath, I step into the room. If I thought the pheromones outside in the hallway were bad, they have nothing on the true force of lust when they smack into me as I step inside. I actually stagger, and my cock hardens so rapidly, it hurts.

Breathing through my nose, I try to stop myself from sinking to my knees and coming, the smell of them all together driving me to the brink of oblivion, and I haven't even touched her, but I want to. I want to touch her so badly. I saw and felt what they did, and I want to be inside her. I want her to claim me like that, and despite what it means, I no longer care.

Mate bond or not, not even Kitt could keep me from her as I cross the room to where she lies, surrounded by my sleeping brothers.

She doesn't even appear to notice me, writhing on the tiles as I stand above her. When her eyes finally land on me, they are dazed and tight with pain. "Help me," she whispers.

"Shh, I'm here, little beastie." Sinking to my knees, I gather her into my arms and cradle her as I stand, taking her from them just in case she decides to use them again. I move us to the booths, kicking two bench seats together to lay her on their softness. Her skin is red and raw, glowing with sweat and cum. She parts her thighs, exposing her glistening, used cunt. Her lips are

swollen, and there's bruises on her throat, hips, and breasts. She looks well fucked, yet she reaches for me. I need to know she sees me, though, and nobody else.

"Little beastie, say my name." My voice is soft and caring. I don't want to hurt her, not like Torrin did. Despite everything she stands for, I like Ferol. She's a survivor, and she is kind to me when she has every reason not to be. She makes mistakes, and she's brash and harsh, but she also makes me feel warm inside. It could be the mate bond, but I don't care. Either way, I have wanted her since the first moment I laid eyes on her, and I'm not holding back this time.

She blinks her unfocused eyes at me. "Bram." Her voice is hoarse, but she's present. "Do you think I'm fucking dumb?"

I smile. That's our girl right there, despite the mating heat she's in. She's in there, and that's all I needed to know. "No, beautiful, I think you're magnificent." She seems shocked as I slide my hands up her thighs and over her tight abs. "Now, tell me what you want from me."

Unlike with Torrin or Raiden, she lets vulnerability enter her eyes as she watches me. "It hurts." I know it cost her to admit that. Ferol is strong and unbreakable, so she would never admit to being in pain, even if she were dying, not unless she trusted you. She had to be that way to survive, but right now, she's depending on me, and I like that. "Make it stop, please."

"With pleasure."

I'm soft as I touch her, and her arms drape around my neck as I come down across her. She's struggling with the mate bond, pain, shame, and embarrassment. I feel it all, so I go slowly, kissing her skin and stroking it. When she relaxes, I pull my cock out and press it to her entrance, my mouth brushing her ear. "I've got you, little beastie," I promise as I sink inside her, giving her time to adjust to my size. When I start to move, she sighs happily into my skin, lifting her hips to meet my lazy thrusts. Despite my need and desire, I hold back, even as she comes apart for me, crying my name, her channel clenching around my cock. When she lifts her head, her burning eyes meeting mine, I stiffen.

"I won't break," she whispers.

"What if I do?" I retort as I feel the bond wrapping around us, made of time and different versions of us. It presses down on us as I struggle. My heart beats rapidly in my chest as I stare into her bright eyes and realise what I have been trying to fight all along.

I love her. If that is past, present, or future her, it doesn't matter. I do, and I know she is going to break my heart.

Swallowing, she presses her lips to mine in a chaste kiss. "I'm sorry." It's all she can say, and honestly, I understand. She will always choose revenge, and I will always choose my brothers. We are without choices, but right now, we have one—each other.

I hold back the words that want to spill off my tongue, and instead, I bite her throat, leaving gentle marks before licking them clean. She clamps around me with a whine, and I speed up, giving into my desire.

"Bram," she whispers into my ear, shuddering below me as she wraps her legs around my waist. The new angle has us both groaning as I avoid her lips, feeling my teeth sharpen as the change tugs at me. New strength comes with it, and when I slam inside her, she cries out, arching up, so I do it again, handing myself over to the frustration, hunger, and hate burning in me for everything I want and love and can't have. My movements become cruel, but I can't stop, and when she kicks me on with her feet, I know she doesn't want me to. The pleasure warps me, changing me, and only Kitt's warning keeps me in check as I take what is mine—her.

Keeping my mouth from hers despite her searching lips, I try to staunch my venom. She might not die, and even if she did, she would be reborn, but I'm not risking it. I won't risk her life on a whim, even if I want to kiss her more than anything at this moment. Instead, I press my face to her neck, breathing in her scent, wrapping her in my embrace so tight, she groans as the bond finally seals and sends us flying together.

My groan is loud as I fill her with my release, and she sags in happiness and relief as we lie together, struggling through the aftermath, but it's not long before her hips move again. Through the bond strengthening between us, I feel the fire she experiences and it makes me hiss.

I have no idea how she fought it for so long. She's so strong, our mate.

Rolling us, I spread out on the seats, watching in ecstasy as she gasps above me, her breasts jiggling with the movement. Her scarred hands press against my chest as she starts to move, my cock hardening inside her greedy pussy. That slow, seductive roll of her hips has me swallowing my venom, my nostrils flaring in need, but I let her use me. I'm hers.

Sweat drips down our skin as we come together, time muddling as my powers flare, skip, and change. I feel my cum drip from her and know we've fucked more than once, but everything moves so fast, my powers

acting up. I try to slow them down, wanting to experience all of this. My muscles burn as she cries out, her head rolling in ecstasy as she speeds up once more. Her hands slide down my chest until she can rub her clit. Reaching through visions of time in my peripheral, I find what I need and blink them away, focusing entirely on her.

My hands change to pincers from the past. Knocking her hand aside, I close one of them around her clit, tightening with each roll of her hips until she screams for me. The threat and promise of violence are even more heady than pleasure, and right now, we are both riding that edge.

When my tail slides up and presses against her other entrance, her eyes widen, and she lowers her head to see me as a bead of sweat rolls between her perfect breasts. "Bram."

"Trust me, little beastie," I murmur as I push it into her. The tip is deadly, as is my venom, but I would never harm her. I stretch her wide, filling her until she cries out my name, riding every part of me I have.

When our bond slams our souls together, we are helpless against it, crying out each other's names as it steals our independence, transforming us into one and shattering us with an ecstasy so forceful, I lose all sense of time and space. I finally come back to myself, spent and used below her.

Slumping into my chest, she gasps as I struggle to breathe, exhaustion consuming me. It feels like I'm dehydrated and nothing more than an empty skeleton, drained of everything inside me.

Despite the darkness clawing at my vision, I reach for her as she whines in pain.

"Shit," Kitt whispers out loud. "She's going to seal the mate bond." He looks at Emrys. "Go, run, and hide. Do not let her find you. You're our only hope of keeping our sanity and freedom." He wades towards her to sacrifice himself to her mating heat.

I finally allow the darkness to claim me, knowing she's safe in his hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



When will the pain stop? My embarrassment fled hours ago, as did my need to remain quiet and strong. I hate that it's reduced me into a dripping, pleading mess, but when heaven is right in front of you and you know it can make it stop, then nothing can prevent you from doing what it takes. Rational thinking isn't possible, not right now. Flickers of thoughts, like knowing this is wrong, cross my mind, but they are soon consumed by flickering flames that scorch me alive.

Then he appears, my salvation and damnation. Kitt stands above me, blocking out everything else. His name floats through my mind for a moment, as do reminders of why this is a bad idea, but they are quickly swallowed by a hunger that is out of my control. I reach for him with a groan, and he takes my hand, guiding me away from Bram. The contact makes me hiss and throw myself at him, my mouth sliding across his skin as it starts to harden under my desperate touch.

Dropping me none too gently on the floor, he comes down above me, shoving my legs open as he glares at me, furious even as I see the longing in his eyes.

"Firebird. It's apt, isn't it? You're burning for us. I can feel it. Don't say I'm cruel after this."

"You bastard—" My words end in a groan as he yanks me down onto his cock, spearing me on the huge length. I had him earlier, but I'd forgotten how big he gets, and it's everything I need as he kneels between my thighs.

He grabs my calves, lifting them up and out to create a V as he drives into me, the position allowing him to thrust as deep as he can. I watch as the

change crawls along his chest and arms to his fingers, turning him to clay and stone.

I thought I'd feel better, but if anything, I only feel worse with each one I fuck. The relief is temporary, but the madness claws at me until I have no inhibitions—nothing but the need to seal the bond and tame the heat.

He drives into me relentlessly, his eyes locked on mine, refusing to let me escape their glowering depths. My hands cover his on my skin, and I sink my nails in as I give myself over to him.

Beautiful, so fucking beautiful. Gods, she feels so good, like she was made to take my cock, made to be bred like this for me.

I slip in and out of his head, and I feel him in mine as flames dance across me, consuming who I was in their wake.

I feel my cunt as it tries to squeeze his cock dry before dropping into my own head to feel his hard length spearing me. It's dizzying yet addictive, and when the pleasure crests, neither of us stands a chance. We are swallowed whole, burning alive in its inferno.

He shatters in more ways than one. His stone skin crumbles, revealing his soft, normal skin below me as his eyes roll back. Slumping against his chest, I feel him wrap his arms around me with a groan. The bond snaps stronger into place, humming in satisfaction until it hurts again, whispering for me to finish this. Lifting my head, I scan the area like a hunter, trying to find Emrys, but then Kitt distracts me, lifting his hips until I refocus on him. When I whimper, he lifts me off him, spins me around, and presses my face and chest to the floor as his hands come down on my ass, dragging me back onto his cock. I feel vulnerable and exposed, knowing he can see everything, but that soon fades into pleasure so strong, it changes me.

For a moment, I see through his eyes, watching my ass jiggle as his cock slides in and out of me. The sight is so fucking sexy, I cry out as I return to my body, drooling as I press my overheated forehead to the tile and push back to take him. He hits so deep inside me, I feel my insides rearrange around him—I am him, and he's me. I lose myself to the madness in our bond, and we cry out each other's names once more.

Pleasure and despair come together, filling me with temporary relief. I collapse onto the floor, hoping that's the end, but the bond pulses again, reigniting the fire . . . demanding to be fed.

Crawling away from Kitt, I clamber to my knees, my hair a sweaty mess as I look around, but none of them move. Quiet snores fill the area, and I

know they are out cold. A whine escapes my lips as I slap myself, trying to force the heat back. I know what it wants. It wants Emrys, but a small part of me screams that if I find him, there will be no going back. The bond will be sealed. We will be mates.

“Kitt, help me,” I beg, pressing my overheated face to the tile. “Don’t let me do this.”

He doesn’t answer, and despite my best efforts, the heat swallows me once more and I stagger to my feet, following the call through the door and up the stairs, stumbling and swaying the entire time. My hands catch on the railing as I try to stop myself. I don’t want this. I don’t want to be mated. I don’t want anyone that close again. The heat swallows my protests, and I throw myself forward, crawling the rest of the way onto the deck.

The storm is raging, and the booming thunder echoes my heartbeat, making it hard to hear. The rain and seawater cover his scent, and a desperate growl leaves my lips as I stumble across the deck.

“Emrys!” My yell is loud before it’s swallowed by crashing waves. There can’t be many places for him to hide on this boat, but I try my best to not search him out. The rain lashes against my overheated skin, giving me a slight reprieve. “Help me!” I bellow, unsure if I’m asking for him to knock me out or fuck me. I don’t even care which anymore. I just can’t stand the hunger and heat for one more second. “Please, please make it stop.” Dropping to my knees, I dig my talons into the deck, trying to anchor myself as heat flows from me in waves, and then I hear it over the waves and thunder.

My head tilts and turns, and I peer into the darkness of the open armoury shipping container. The growl comes again, low and threatening, echoing around the metal as I climb to my feet and peer inside. The sound grows in intensity, and then I see glowing orbs before something flies out. My eyes widen as it wraps around my neck, tightening as I glance down to see a rope. My hands come up to grab it right before I’m yanked off my feet. A yell escapes me as I’m dragged into the darkened space, and the rope hauls me up until I hang in the air with a noose around my neck as I struggle to breathe. I swing slightly as hands grip my hips and spin me, and I peer into those glowing eyes.

Emrys.

His hat is gone, and so are his guns. His nostrils flare, and that growl still escapes his lips like he can’t help it. “You want this, mate? Then fine,”

he hisses. “I cannot hold back.” His warning is swallowed by a growl. I struggle to breathe as dots dance in my vision. Emrys’s hands slide up my hips to my sides as I shiver, and despite my lungs screaming at me, I whine and lift my legs, wrapping them around his head so his face is between them. His long, stitched together tongue rolls out and licks a line down my messy cunt.

“You taste like my brothers and prey, like flesh and blood,” he growls, grabbing my ass and lifting me higher, giving me a little relief from the rope, but then he eats me. His slightly cold tongue creates a balm to my overheated flesh. His red eyes lock on me as he lashes my clit before thrusting his tongue inside me, repeatedly, until I shatter for him. He doesn’t stop, eating every inch of my cunt like he eats people. The thought should horrify me, but instead I roll into his touch, grinding into the scar that presses to my clit. The pressure is overwhelming and borders on painful, yet within seconds, I come for him again.

The second release has me silently screaming as I sag in the rope. It digs into my neck, cutting off what little oxygen supply I had left, as he drags me down and onto his length. I jerk and scream as he impales me. He’s so fucking big, and he feels slightly cold as the roughness of his cock slides along my walls, making me clench down on him. Pleasure rocks through me as the heat retreats, but with it, so does the buffer I had against the pain in my body. I struggle not to pass out as blackness edges my vision.

“Emrys.” It’s a gasp, a plea, a warning.

His knife comes out, slashing through the rope just as the darkness was about to claim me. I plummet to the ground, my legs giving way, but he grabs me and shoves me against the metal wall, kicking my legs open and forcing himself back inside me. I lift and bend a knee, hooking one over his shoulder as my palms hit the metal. His own scarred hands press against the top of mine as he drives into me. Each hard thrust brutally pushes into that metal. I feel my ribs break from the force, but I don’t care.

The relief is instantaneous.

Dragging him down by his hair, I kiss him hard, his tongue tasting of cum as he devours my mouth and body. The mate bond sings happily as rope made of human flesh digs into us, pulling tighter and tighter. I swear I taste blood on his lips, but neither of us care, lost in bliss until we have to break away to breathe.

I struggle to inhale as he lifts me higher, my other foot leaving the ground as he finds his way back into my aching cunt with strong, jerking thrusts. His scarred cock drags over my nerves until pleasure begins to build, forming an overwhelming ache in my head and soul, only one he can take away. I pull him closer, rolling my hips to take him as deep as I can.

“Prey,” he hisses, and when I glance down, he’s gnashing his teeth and his eyes are wild. It’s dangerous being this close to a ghoul on the verge of going feral, but I can’t stop, even with the threat right there. He bites his lips until they bleed, his hips jerking roughly as he thrusts harder and deeper. The pain almost becomes too much, but I crave it and want the relief he can provide, even as what was left of his humanity dissipates from his eyes.

“Hungry,” he growls, his voice ragged and animalistic.

“Then eat,” I rasp. “Just don’t stop, Emrys, please.”

I grind down, riding his massive cock as his head jerks and twitches, his hands slamming to the wall repeatedly behind me as if he’s fighting for control, but I’m past it. I reach down and drag him closer, pressing his mouth to the curve between my shoulder and neck. “Don’t stop,” I beg as I clamp down on his cock, so close I can taste it.

I roar in agony as his teeth dig into my flesh and tear it apart. He’s completely a ghoul now, which should scare me, but we both know he can’t kill me. Instead, the pain morphs into pleasure, and I come with a scream while my blood flows down his face and mouth.

The sight is horrific, yet it sends me over the edge, and he roars, his cock swelling inside me, and then he comes. He fills me with his release as he bellows into my skin, filling me with relief.

The bond snaps into place, finally complete, like a spiderweb of different materials inside my mind, connecting us all, and with it comes clarity. It seems to cut through the insanity for Emrys as well because he blinks at me, and the redness in his eyes retreats.

He staggers back, pulling from my body, and I land heavily on my bare feet. Horror crosses his face as he looks at me, covered in blood with a chunk of flesh missing. “I’m sorry,” he rasps before turning and stumbling from the armoury, but I’m not done yet. The mate bond is fresh and fragile, and if I let him go now, we’ll lose him forever.

I run after him, finding him heading for the edge of the boat to throw himself off. Tackling him, I drag him down to the deck, flipping him as he

stares up at me. In the middle of the storm, I sink down onto his hardening cock. I rip at his clothes, exposing the scars I want to see so badly. The brutal sight below me makes me moan loudly as I clench on his cock, feeling my blood trickle down my skin, mixing with the need between our bodies.

Leaning down, I lick along the rough edges of his scars as he tries to push me away. "I'm a monster. Let me go."

Licking up his chest to his mouth, I taste myself on his lips. "I like your monster," I murmur before sitting up and grinding down on him. "Can't you feel?"

"It's the heat—"

"Not now." The heat is gone. This is all me, all him. No mate bond. Just reality.

His eyes widen and he stops struggling, letting me ride his length. Biting my lip, I drop my head back. Water pelts my face as I ride him, and when I open my eyes, he's watching me with wonder. For a moment, I'm in his head, seeing me. Lightning flashes above me in the stormy sky, and bloody water rolls down my glowing skin. Wonder, need, hunger, and possession fill him before I'm back in my body.

His hands hesitantly frame my hips, feeling my movements before they clench, that red haze returning as he snarls below me, meeting my thrusts and taking over until he fucks me from below.

"Yes!" I scream to the heavens. "Like that!"

Sliding one hand down my body, I gather water, blood, and cum and offer it to him. His lips seal around my fingers, sucking hard as I groan in pleasure and grind down, pressing my clit against his skin. With each thrust, I feel the sensations inside and out. When one hand glides up, pressing to the wound on my shoulder, tugging and playing with the jagged edges, pain flashes through me, mixing with ecstasy and stealing all thoughts and words from me. Agony rips through me, and I watch in fascination as he shows me a piece of torn, bloody flesh before he throws it in his mouth and chews.

It should disturb me, but for some fucking reason, I clench on his cock, consumed by need. The idea of me sustaining him, my flesh and blood running through him, is insanely hot. My head falls back with pleasure, and I'm unable to take any more as my eyes shut. Lightning flashes as I cry out, but I can still sense his need.

Dropping my head forward, I reach for him once more and press his mouth back to the wound. “Finish, it’s okay.”

He hesitates before his tongue rolls out, gently lapping at the wound. The pressure of him tugging on it has pain spasming through me, but it mixes with pleasure, and my moan is swallowed by thunder.

Five minds mix, feeling it all.

It’s overwhelming, and I crack and burst, screaming my release to the gods above, who are probably horrified by the monstrous creatures they created. His length jerks and swells inside me, and his groan is swallowed by my flesh as I feel him come. His seed is thicker than normal, almost like it’s determined to fill my cunt and stay there.

Ecstasy rolls through us all until finally releasing us. The rainwater cools my overheated skin as I hesitantly take a deep breath, the first in hours, only to realise the heat and drive are completely gone.

Curling into his chest, I feel whole for the first time ever. The emptiness is gone, and so is the heat, leaving me shivering, wet, and well used as I close my eyes and slip into the waiting abyss, relieved and sated, just as the storm breaks overhead.

TWENTY-SIX

T



I don't think I've ever been so exhausted or slept so deeply. By the time I wake up, Kitt is nursing a mug of coffee, looking pale and drained. Raiden is leaning against him, snoozing. Bram is still curled up asleep with a blanket over him. Staggering to my feet, I drop into a chair. I'm naked, we all are, and we are covered in marks.

"Where is she?" I mutter as I reach for a mug and take a gulp, soothing my sore throat.

"Can't you feel her?" Kitt grumbles, and now I know why he's sulking. The mate bond is secure. I feel it now that he mentioned it.

It's different than how I feel them in my head, which is as natural as breathing, but she's there, in my heart and soul. A rope connects us, tethering her to me, and her heart beats alongside mine. I worry if she's okay, happy, and safe, not like I do for the others.

My eyes turn to the door as I fight the need to see and touch her. "Shit, it's strong." I scrub my hand across my face. "What the fuck are we going to do now?"

"I say we just enjoy the ride," Raiden mutters, cracking an eye open and grinning. "I know I did last night."

"Enough," Kitt grumbles. "Emrys is locked away. He's worried."

"About what?" I rack my brain, but last night is a blur except for her.

"He went feral," Kitt admits, and I stiffen. "Ferol brought him back, but you know what he's like when something like that happens."

“He’s blaming himself.” I nod, feeling it now that I focus beyond her, eclipsing their thoughts. “Who wants to talk him down?”

“I will.” Ferol’s voice has us whirling around to the door, but she’s gone. We share a look, but minutes later, Emrys is dragged into the room by his collar. He struggles and grumbles but doesn’t really resist. He could get away if he wanted to. Ferol pushes him to the table then moves to Bram, gently waking him, and he joins us, yawning as she grabs a chair and sits on it backwards. I cross my arms to avoid reaching for her, so I understand her distance.

“We need to talk. Clearly, last night was a mistake.” Her cheeks heat, and I feel her shame and worry. “I didn’t know the heat would take over like that.”

“None of us did,” I admit, taking her side. “It wasn’t just on you.”

“Still, it changes nothing. We will break the bond.” She gasps and covers her heart, struggling to get the words out before shaking her head. “Break it,” she forces out through clenched teeth. “I wanted you to know that. Now, let’s not make this weird—”

“You mean because you fucked us dry?” Raiden teases, and she narrows her eyes on him as he chuckles. “The way I see it, we’ll have fun until the mate bond breaks.”

“You just want sex.” Bram smiles and winks at her. “I’m with him.”

“Enough. We had no choice last night, but we need to ignore the bond as much as we can. I’ve checked the conditions. We should reach land tomorrow, so until then, we’ll stay away from each other,” Kitt snaps.

“Good idea.” Nodding at us, she moves away. “I’ll head to my room.”

When she’s gone, I look at Kitt, who’s watching her go with a confused expression on his face. He hates the mate bond more than any of us, worried about our freedom being taken, but maybe he’s starting to hate it less.

Or is that wishful thinking?

She hasn’t left her room at all, which is making me wary. There’s this nagging feeling in my chest, so after three hours, I give in and knock on her

door, trying to block the others out, but it's useless. When she doesn't answer, I frown and crack it open.

She's lying on her bed, but she doesn't move when I step inside. Moving closer, I stand above her, automatically reaching for her, but when I touch her skin, I hiss.

She's burning up, sweaty, and tossing. "Ferol . . . Ferol!" I shake her, and she snaps awake, her eyes wide and terrified before she spins us and pins me to the floor.

She blinks and comes back to herself. "Sorry. Habit," she mutters, and it's then we both realise she's astride me. She winces and goes to move away, but I grab her hips and keep her in place as her eyes snap to me.

"Nightmare?"

She nods, looking at the bed, but she doesn't attempt to move away again. "I get them sometimes."

"I have them nearly every night," I admit. "I was worried."

"That's the bond," she scoffs, detangling from me and standing. "Don't overthink it."

"Bond or not, it doesn't matter. I can't ignore it or you . . . and I don't want to," I tell her.

"Torrin, you hated me. It's the bond." She presses to the wall, her hands fisted. "Leave."

"Or maybe I hated you because I knew what you would mean to us and it terrified me. I can't change how we met or how we treated you. Maybe it is the bond, or maybe I just don't care right now. Tell me you don't want me in here and I'll leave. Tell me you don't feel the same way and I won't bother you again."

She hesitates, and it's all I need.

Throwing her onto the bed, I follow her down and hold her when she would fight. Sighing, she stiffens in my arms, looking everywhere but me. "Kitt will be mad."

"Kitt is scared." That has her looking at me. If she focused enough on the bond, she would probably feel it, but it's clear she's ignoring it as best as she can. "And right now, he's jealous, wishing he were here. It could be the mate bond, you're right, but the mate bond cannot make you love someone. It can only bind you and enhance feelings, so whatever we feel is what we felt all along, just exposed. You know that."

“I can’t trust anyone like that again,” she whispers, vulnerability shining in her eyes. “Not after him . . .”

“We are not him,” I murmur. “We have an end time, we all know that, but I’m going to make the most of it and cleanse my horrors with your warmth and pleasure. You can fight it if you want, but I’m giving in.” I don’t wait for her to respond. She needs time to think, but I know I’m right where I want to be.

Wrapping my arms around her, I close my eyes and absorb her scent and warmth, relaxing just like she does. “Sleep, little one. I’ll keep watch.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



I wake slowly, comfortable, happy, and relaxed—something I have not felt since I was young. Opening my eyes, I realise why. I’m wrapped in Torrin’s arms, and he’s snoring softly, his horns pressed to my bed as I peer into his face. Even asleep, he looks strong, confident, and beautiful. I should move away, but instead, I untangle my hands from his and slide my fingertips over his face softly, obsessed with the strength in his features and arms, as if nothing could ever get past him to me. It’s not real, I know that, but he’s right. It’s nice to feel this way, even for a short while. A noise has me lifting my head, and I find Kitt in the doorway. He jerks his head, and I nod.

Kissing Torrin’s nose, I slip from his embrace and walk out of the room, padding after Kitt. As I pass the kitchen door, he yanks me inside, pinning me to the wall.

“I didn’t—” I start, thinking he’s mad about Torrin being close after what we discussed this morning, but then his mouth is on mine. He kisses me hard, eating at my mouth until I kiss him back, but then he rips himself away, steps back, and leaves me blinking in confusion.

“I needed that . . . needed to know,” he admits, his chest heaving from the force of his breaths.

“Know what?” I ask, searching his gaze, feeling nervous and off balance. That wasn’t the heat, that was all him, and it felt like lightning hitting my core. Torrin is right. The bond just enhances feelings, making it even more dangerous.

“If it felt the same.” He steps back, his jaw jumping. “It does. I thought it was the mating heat—”

“But it’s just as good, and you can’t stop thinking about it.” I nod, pushing from the wall, annoyance running through me at him using me like that. He made me feel all these things and then stepped away like I’m nothing. It’s cruel, but then again, two can play that game. “Neither can I. Remembering your hands on me and the way you felt inside me—”

“Stop,” he croaks, warding me off. “Please stop.”

“The way I’ll feel empty forever now, and how you touched me . . . marked me.” I stop close to him, letting him decide. We had no choice last night, but now we do. Maybe I’m like Torrin, tired of fighting this, or maybe I want the peace I found in their arms again, knowing what is coming . . . or maybe I just like secretly torturing Kitt. “The way it felt when you filled me with your cum and we fell together. It’s all I think about.”

His hands fist, and the change crawls over him as he bulges, and then he yanks me to him, making the first move. Despite it all, Kitt wants me and the bond, and I can feel it. He wants his family to be happy and complete. He’s just scared, like the rest of us—scared of me hurting them, scared of losing me and what that would mean, and scared he doesn’t deserve this.

We all have our problems, nightmares, and scars, but when he touches me, I forget all of it. I forget I am anything but his, and I want that. I’m so used to being strong and independent, but I’m tired, so I let him manhandle and hold me, taking the choice away.

The bond hums in approval, happily moving between us as his lips crush to mine again, stealing any more mocking, cruel taunts I would throw his way.

I knew you couldn’t resist, I think, and he snarls into my mouth, making me chuckle. There is something about angry Kitt that just does it for me.

Breaking the kiss, he spins me, slams me into the wall, and tears my shirt off before kicking my legs open. My bones creak from the force, breaking and reknitting, even as his thick fingers thrust inside me, forcing me higher as my nails claw at the wall. He doesn’t give me time to ride them, though, pulling them free of my cunt, his voice floating in my head.

You’ll take me however you get me since you are so desperate.

Desperate? Desperate!

I go to spin, to rip him apart, but his arm wraps around my throat, and he pins me with his body as I feel the head of his cock at my entrance. Just as I suck in a breath, he impales me on that hard, unyielding length, forcing a scream from my throat before it chokes off as his arm tightens.

Gnashing my teeth, I rip at his skin with my talons as he pulls from my body, the slight pain at his size leaving me wetter than ever as he fucks me. He takes what he wants, his thrusts cruel and cold, just like him, but under it all, I feel a heat so strong, it rivals mine, pushing down the bond—a need to possess and claim. Fuck, it has me pressing back to take him deeper.

Everyone I have ever been with has either pretended to love me or been kind with my body. Not him. He uses it against me, trusting I am monster enough to take it. He doesn't care about appearances or being liked. He's just Kitt.

"You're dripping for me, firebird. Is this what you wanted? To be slammed around and fucked? Look at you. All that fire and strength, yet you're water in my hands."

His voice is rough in my ear, and despite the words, he's not as unaffected as he acts. I can feel his blazing hunger blasting through the bond as I push back to take him, clenching on his perfect cock.

Not as much as you. One look and you beg for more. All that determination and bravado, and you're nothing but a monster while taking me. Where is that control now, baby?

I can't speak out loud because of him, so I make my thoughts loud, hoping he hears, and when he snarls, I know he did. His thrusts turn savage, pummelling me into the wall until my hips crack from the force, yet I want more.

His bicep wraps tighter around my neck from behind, squeezing and keeping me trapped, as if I would want to escape, as he drives into me from behind. I cling to it, cling to him like he's dry land in this storm. Maybe he is, but he's also the master of it, forcing pleasure through me with each hard thrust, and when his other hand slips between my legs and pinches my clit, I am torn away from reality and swept into rolling, never-ending waves of ecstasy.

I return when he roars in my ear, his cock buried so deep inside me, it hits my cervix as I feel him spurt his release. Groaning, I rest my head between his arm and the wall as he pants in my ear, his cock twitching inside me until we hear a sound.

He pulls from my body, the movement making me hiss as he releases my throat and stumbles away. Spinning, I lean back into the dented wall, chest heaving, my neck sore, yet the afterglow has me smiling as we face the figure framed in the doorway. It's a testament to how distracted we were that we didn't feel him approach through the hive and bond.

"Well, well, well, so much for staying away," Raiden teases as we look at him, guilt and satisfaction warring within me, especially when I feel the jealousy flowing from him. "And I wasn't invited? How rude. I want a taste too."

"Enough, we can't," Kitt begins.

"I wasn't asking you," he snaps, surprising me with the venom in his eyes. "She's my mate too." His eyes slide to me. "You're not the only one who can't stop wanting her."

"It just happened," I admit, though I have no idea why I feel the need to defend myself, even as I move away from Kitt before realising what I did.

"I saw that. Want to play with me too?" he teases.

"Raiden—" Kitt begins.

"Stop. You do not control us no matter how much you think you do," Raiden snarls, his eyes flashing. His hair floats in the air, letting me know his storm is close to the surface.

Kitt snarls, sparing me a look, but then he storms from the room, and Raiden and I watch him go. I'm coming between them. I can see it happening, but what can I do? I tell myself it's a good thing because it will make it easier when I have to break the bond and kill them, but it hurts as well.

His smirk grows as he looks at me. "I wasn't joking."

"I'm not in the mood," I dismiss as I turn away, but he turns me back.

"I wasn't," he replies, and his anger and jealousy flee in the wake of something vulnerable and real. "I want you so badly it hurts." I swallow his words, peering into those glowing eyes. "It's quickly becoming my favourite colour," Raiden whispers, staring at me.

"What is?" I ask, confused.

"Your eyes," he murmurs, and my heart skips a beat as his hands slide up and cup my cheeks. "One kiss, please, one taste."

"Alright, pretty boy." I see his glee and feel his happiness at the nickname that started out as a cruel taunt, but has quickly changed into something far scarier.

One kiss can't hurt, right?

When his lips press to mine, I lose myself in the softness and grab his shoulders. He presses closer as his tongue sweeps in, tangling with mine and making me moan. I tear myself away, staring breathlessly into his beautiful face. "There, one kiss." My voice is rough with desire, and he smiles as he reaches for me, but I back away, watching his smile drop.

He can no doubt feel my need for him, even as I hold back, so he changes tactics, advancing on me and pressing his face to my neck. "I need you."

It's raw and honest, and it does more to me than any pretty words he could offer, but I still stand my ground. Every time we touch, it brings us closer together, and I don't know how I will ever be able to walk away. He doesn't seem to care as he kisses my neck, making me jerk as he slides down my body.

His face presses to my stomach before he sinks farther down. "I'll be good. I promise," he whispers, meeting my eyes as he presses open-mouthed kisses across my skin. This is a bad idea, a really bad idea. I can't keep getting close to them and letting my guard down.

This is more than sex between us. It's changing what and who we are. I need to put a stop to it, but all that resolve weakens as I stare into his puppy-dog eyes.

"I swear it, I'll be a good boy. I'll do whatever you ask." His pretty lips part as he shuffles closer, so no room exists between us. "Please, play with me. I'll be good. I'll be so good."

Raiden is a walking juxtaposition. He likes to be in control, aloof, and cruel with words, but when it comes to it, deep down, he wants to be dominated, to be put in his place and used.

Swallowing my shrieking thoughts at what a bad decision this is, I fist his hair, watching his eyes fill with pleasure at the pain. "You'll be good?" I ask.

"Good," he repeats breathily as I lean down.

"How good?" I whisper.

"So good," he croaks, arching up to kiss me, but I keep him away, and I swear his eyes are glassy with tears.

Need her so much. I need to know this is real, that I'm not going crazy. I need to feel whole—

His thoughts filter through me, and despite this being a bad fucking decision, what little control I have left snaps. I have a beautiful, powerful man begging on his knees for me. How can I resist?

Lifting him by his hair, I drag him across the kitchen and toss him. If he wanted to, he could stop it, but he doesn't. He lets me have my way.

His back hits the booth, and before he can reach for me, I swing my leg across his waist, straddling him as my eyes sweep over his beautiful face. I cup his sharp cheeks with my palms, rubbing my thumb across his pouty lips. "You really are a pretty boy."

"And all yours," he whispers before sucking my thumb, electricity arcing from him to me, but I'm used to it by now. It's part of him. "Don't you want me as badly as I want you?" he whispers around my flesh.

"You know I do. You can feel it," I murmur as I stroke under his eyes.

"I want your words. I've lived with the others' thoughts my whole life, but now I've become addicted to hearing yours from your own lips," he admits, kissing my thumb.

Leaning down, I nip his lip until he gasps. "You were supposed to be good, but right now, Ray, I want you so badly it hurts. I think you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and even when you drive me crazy, I still want you and dream of these plump lips and perfect hands."

His eyes slide shut for a moment as he shudders below me, and when they open, they blaze with lightning. "Then take me. I'm yours."

"Hands up," I order, and he lifts them into the air, smirking. I tug his shirt off, exposing his pale chest marred with red healing marks from my talons. Groaning, I drag my hand down his skin to his pants as he bucks. Licking my own lips, I unbuckle them and tug them off, leaving him naked for me.

His hard cock bobs for my attention, pressing against his stomach and smearing his need across his skin as he watches me. I straddle him once more, dragging my talons up and down his chest to his cock, which I circle until his hips buck. The control I have over him is heady, and when I tighten my hand and stroke him, he cries out, lifting his hips as he bucks for me.

"Ferol," he begs, grabbing my hips.

When he touches my skin, I stop. "Did I say you could touch me?" I snap, and he lifts his hands, pressing them to the leather, his chest heaving as he waits for instructions.

I keep playing, stroking him before cupping his balls. He gasps, thrashing his head into the leather. My pretty boy is wild with his need, just like the storm that lives inside him.

When I lift and hover over his length, he watches with restrained hunger. "Ferol, please, I've been good."

"That you have, and good boys get rewards." I sink down onto his length, both of us crying out as electricity sparks from his cock inside me, stimulating all my nerves until I slam down, taking him all the way.

Groaning, he lifts his hips, but I keep us still for a moment, pressing my lips against his in a hurried, messy kiss before I start to move with slow rolls of my hips. When I can't take my own teasing anymore, I move faster, letting his thrusts meet mine as I slide my hands up his chest, across his arms, and to his hands. My fingers interlock with his, and we swallow each other's moans.

The bond purrs in happiness as our pleasure flows through us, one big circuit growing stronger as the loud slap of our bodies fills the room.

Gods, he feels so good. The electricity warms his cock inside me and sparks every time I bottom out. It drives me mad.

I lean backwards, my back almost touching the floor as I stretch out, feeling him deep within me, but he grabs me and hauls me up, holding my hips and back as he lifts and drops me, taking over. My good boy takes what he wants as he kisses my chin, neck, then my chest. When lightning arcs from his skin, I know he's lost control.

"Ray." I gasp, pressing closer before grabbing his hair and watching his face. His powers are extensive, and I felt how he held them back last time, but I want it. I want all of him.

I want to ride his storm and survive.

"Let go. I can take it," I promise, and he shatters.

His mouth opens in a scream, but all that comes out is the fury and wonder of thunder as lightning flashes around the room, blinding me for a moment. He comes apart until every inch of his skin glows from within, and he fills me with his release. He is so beautiful, I can't look away, can only cling to him as his pleasure sends me over the edge. I cry out my release as I'm swept up on his wild ferocity.

We exist in the centre of the storm for what seems like infinite time before it slowly ebbs away. When I slump into his chest, I feel his heart hammering as he wraps his shaking arms around me. When he looks

around, I see the destruction we caused through his eyes, and I can't help but laugh.

"Kitt is going to kick my ass," he grumbles, even as he kisses my head. "Worth it, you're worth it."

It's a throwaway sentence, yet it hits me like his lightning did. Worth it? I've never been worth it, not to my mother, my court, my love, or my friends.

Could I ever truly be worth it to him?

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



I thought they would avoid me, but I'm staring into the fridge, trying to decide what to cook, when they file into the room. Moving me out of the way without a word, Bram lifts me and perches me on the counter, handing me a drink with a wink. They don't speak as they start to prepare a meal. I suppose I could help, but I just lean back and watch. It's almost comfortable. Even when I was little, I didn't have this. Meals were prepared and serviced by the lower staff, so I was never involved. I never got to help and watch, and meals were cold and utilitarian, lorded over by my mother. I'm also not hunting and scarfing down whatever I can get.

I enjoy watching them work together seamlessly, their hive mind allowing for that. When we sit down to eat, they even try to talk to one another out loud.

It's jerky and more random thoughts than conversation, which lets me know it's probably what they would be saying internally, but it's the effort that counts, and that scares me.

"Alright, what's going on?" I demand when I'm done eating.

"What do you mean?" Emrys asks, wiping blood from his mouth since he had his steak raw.

"This, being nice to me, including me, talking out loud. It's weird. Are you planning to sacrifice me to the gods of the sea or something? Spoiler alert, I'd make them my bitch." Raiden's lips twitch, and Kitt rolls his eyes. Torrin winks at me, reaching over and shovelling down Bram's leftovers. Bram looks at the others then me, struggling with words.

“We’ve decided,” Bram states somewhat seriously and sadly, “that tonight is our last night with you before we hit land tomorrow and break this bond, so we are going to make the most of it. Tonight, we’ll give in, and tomorrow we’ll go back to being enemies.”

Right, I forgot about that. I guess time passes oddly at sea.

The stubborn stab of pain in my chest makes it hard to breathe.

“All that drama for that?” I joke, covering my turbulent feelings. “If you wanted a gang bang, you should have just said so.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Bram sputters as I chuckle, and a few of them join in.

“I know, cutie. I was teasing. Don’t look so glum. Us fucking changes nothing. We always knew how this would end. You’re right. Let’s enjoy tonight and the journey.” I look at Kitt, expecting his protest, but he shrugs.

“I voted yes as well.” That surprises me wholeheartedly, but then he narrows his eyes. “I’ll still be driving a knife into your heart when the bond is broken.”

“That’s more like it.” I clap, leaning back. “So what’s for dessert?”

“Please say you,” Emrys mutters.

“I was thinking more like you,” I retort, looking around at them. “Allow me to broaden your horizons again.”

Wiping my mouth, I stand and step back, raising an eyebrow at them as my fire consumes me for a moment. It burns away my clothes, and I step through their ashes. “Well?”

They share a look before diving at me, a tangle of limbs and scrambling bodies. I laugh as I’m tackled to the floor. Truly, it is the only space big enough for all of us, but I don’t care as hands and mouths run across my exposed skin. I close my eyes and just let them have their way with me. The mate bond burns brighter and hotter, happier than ever to have them all touching me.

A mouth finds mine, and I groan, reaching for them, touching scars, which tells me it’s Emrys as he eats at my mouth before disappearing into the tangle of broiling bodies. I’m dragged up and onto my knees, then my head is lifted, and I meet Kitt’s smirking gaze as fingers slip inside me, stroking my walls and nerves, while a mouth seals around my clit. More suck my nipples. There are so many hands and mouths, I cry out as pleasure slams into me from them and myself. I almost sag under its weight, my cunt slick with need as I push back for more. Kitt’s hand strokes my chin,

forcing my mouth open with his fingers, which I suck. His dark eyes harden before he looks behind me and nods with a smirk.

“I think our mate needs us. We better not keep her waiting.” His voice is taunting, but I can’t complain, not when a cock spears my cunt from behind, making me cry out around his digits. Pulling away, I glance back to see Emrys stroking my back to my ass before he pulls from my cunt and crawls under me. His scars rub against me, and then he’s back inside me, the new angle making me lower my head as much as Kitt allows. When that scarred cock pulls free of my clinging cunt, another replaces it. It’s longer, different . . . warm. Raiden. His hands touch me, and electric shocks spark across my skin as he fucks me slowly.

I reach for Kitt. “More,” I demand as Raiden pulls out, and Emrys fills me with his length once more. I feel the wet tip of Raiden’s cock at my ass. Widening my thighs, I send my thoughts to him.

What are you waiting for?

He’s unsure at first, pressing to my hole and working his way past the ring of muscles with a slow thrust, while Emrys fucks me from below with measured thrusts that aren’t enough to get me off. Sick of waiting, I roll my eyes and slam back, impaling myself on Raiden’s cock. Both of us moan as he stretches me to the point of pain. The electricity has me writhing, even as Emrys stretches my pussy around his cock. I show them what to do, throwing the image at them, and seconds later, they move. Raiden pulls out as Emrys slams into me, finding a hard, fast rhythm. Their hands are so different but perfect, sliding over my skin as Torrin and Bram join in. I feel it as they stroke me, but Kitt just stands above me, observing.

“Scared you’ll come too soon?” I taunt, and his eyes narrow.

The change crawls over his skin as he shoves his trousers down, freeing his cock. Not one to be left behind, he forces my mouth open and shoves his length inside me, all the way to the back of my throat, so I’m choking on him.

The bond throws pleasure at me from all sides, their thoughts and feelings overwhelming until all I can do is hold on.

I thought everything would calm down after the heat, but I was wrong. It only feels better and stronger. Each slide of Emrys’s scarred cock in my cunt has me sucking Kitt’s cock harder, and when Raiden pummels my ass, I claw at the tiles below.

I'm taut between them, used but in the best way. Not one inch of me goes untouched and tasted. I am theirs, and they are mine. There is no outside world, fears, or past, only this feeling and the pleasure we find together as our souls snap into one. I feel Emrys's hips stutter, and I know he's close, so I clench down on him, but it also does the same to Raiden, and the pleasure is enough to almost make me bite Kitt's cock before his hand grips my jaw, stopping me. Snarling, he pulls free of my mouth, all the way to the tip, and then slams back in, thrusting down my throat.

With each plunge, Kitt pushes me back and onto Raiden and Emrys. The stretch, the burn, and their pleasure are too much. I throw it out, only for it to hit Kitt. He actually staggers, his eyes widening as his heart stops, and then he roars his release.

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I have no choice but to swallow his cum, even as I find my own release as waves of his ecstasy hit me. I clench and come around Emrys and Raiden, dragging them with me. Raiden cries out, lightning hitting us as he fills my ass and stills. Emrys roars below me, biting my chest until I feel blood dripping from me as his cock swells and jerks inside me, his thick cum spurting deep in my channel.

Kitt pulls free of my mouth, staggering back and falling to his ass, and stares at me with wonder and something softer. Coughing, I feel my eyes water even as I swallow the taste of him, and a whine leaves my lips as Raiden slowly works out of my ass. Glancing down, I meet Emrys's eyes as he kisses his bite and lifts me from his body until I'm empty and dripping with cum. Sweat cools on my skin as I struggle to breathe.

I don't get a break, however, because hands pull me back to my knees until I'm kneeling. Bram's big, solid chest presses against my back, and then Torrin is before me, looking down at me. Smoke billows from his nose as he unbuckles his pants and pulls his length free as I shiver. Bram trails

his fingers down my sides, so I slide my thighs wide as his hard cock bobs between us.

“Our turn, little beastie,” Bram whispers wickedly in my ear. Lifting me with one hand into the air, he slides me down onto his cock, spearing my cunt with it. Emrys’s come and my need makes the glide easier, and I cry out, trying to fall forward, but Torrin jerks my head up and shoves his cock into my open mouth. My eyes water as I meet his glowing orbs, and he fills every inch of my mouth with his massive length. Bram starts to move, helping me ride him from behind.

“Perfect, little beastie. They had no idea what heaven we would find when we took this job,” he whispers into my ear before his voice lowers. “I did. I saw it all—the possibility, you, and I wanted it . . . wanted you.”

The truth shocks me, but I don’t have time to ask questions because Torrin slowly slides out of my mouth and back in, shoving my head back. My teeth come down slightly, and he groans as they drag along his length, so I do it again as he thrusts in and out of my mouth, stealing my ability to think.

Bram, on the other hand, buries himself deep inside me. The combination of Torrin’s hard fucking and Bram’s obsessed thrusts puts me on edge. Whining and grinding, I slip my hand down to touch myself, but someone is already there. A mouth sucks on my clit, causing me to cry out around Torrin’s cock and clench down on Bram’s until he hisses in my ear. That mouth is relentless and talented, laving and slurping my clit until an orgasm rips through me, taking me by surprise. Torrin roars, hammering into my mouth, and Bram cries out in my ear, his release filling me as I sag.

That is, until the world shifts, hazy around me, like it’s moving too fast.

Blinking the dizziness away, I frown when I still feel Bram inside me. He’s harder than ever as he starts to move. How? He just finished—

Then I see him going back, bringing the past with him. He’s both come inside me and not, and now he’s fucking me again. Gods. He could fuck me like his forever.

Torrin is hard in my mouth, smoke wafting down and circling me, calling my own heat, and when I reach for him, digging my hands into his thighs, his dark orbs widen.

“Ferol!” he bellows, his cock swelling in my mouth, so I pull back just as he comes. It spurts across my tongue and down onto my chin and chest,

his boiling hot cum staining my skin and soul, calling to my phoenix as he falls back, and Emrys catches him.

That mouth slips from my clit as I'm spun to face Bram. My eyes lock on his as he drags me closer and drops me onto his wet cock. We are pressed so tightly together, I can't feel where he starts and I stop. I slip in and out of his mind, feeling his pleasure, my pleasure, his body, my body . .

It's too much. The phoenix in me rips through my skin. Talons extend, and wings unfurl on either side of me, batting the air, burning with fire and beauty as I peer through their eyes. We start to lift into the air from my wings. I wrap my legs around Bram's waist as he clings to me. His lips meet mine as I ride him, twisting us mid-air until he is below me. I press my hands to his chest and break our kiss and ride him harder.

"Mine," I hiss.

"Yours," he replies, and it's the last word we can speak as pleasure overwhelms us, exploding through me like fire. It burns away our souls and differences until we are one. I have no control, just this feeling. Just us.

I finally fall back into my own mind and body to find I am cuddled into Bram, who is swaying as he holds me. My body shakes with aftershocks and my wings are still out, but now I focus on pulling them in so I'm fully human.

Exhaustion weighs on me, and hands carefully extract me from Bram, protecting me from the floor. When I force my eyelids open, I realise they are all holding me and stroking my skin. No words are spoken. We don't need them. I feel everything they do.

Desperation and longing are in all our touches and kisses. We do not speak, but none of us want to waste a moment of time together because when dawn comes, it's over.

None of us sleep a wink, but we relax in a giant pile like I have seen wolves do before, touching everyone and everything. It's a comfort I never knew, but I grow to like the heavy weight and warmth. As darkness starts to lighten, however, they silently slip away, stealing soft kisses before dressing. Not wanting to be alone and naked, I dress and follow them to the deck, standing between Kitt and Torrin.

The sun crests over the horizon as we stand in a line, as if waiting for the gallows. The sunrise is beautiful, with stunning pinks and oranges splashing across the sky. Maybe that's why wetness dampens my lashes.

None of us speak or move until Kitt's hand twitches at my side. His fingers brushing against mine before he clears his throat. "Let's guide her to shore," he orders gruffly, and then they are gone, leaving me alone as I stare at land. For the first time since I met them, I don't want to be apart.

I can't help them dock because I don't know how, which is another reminder of how I do not fit into their hive and lives, so when the gang plank lowers to the pier, I decide to head down it. I leave the boat and them, needing space to gather my thoughts, prepare to face my mother, and get ready to break this bond.

My vengeance is still what I want.

No matter how much fun we have had the last few days, fucking instead of fighting, it cannot eclipse that need, and it's time to refocus. I'm so distracted by my thoughts, I don't even feel it coming.

Something sharp pierces my neck. Spinning with a hiss, I yank it free, looking down at the needle in shock. It's not something I've seen a lot, but I know what it is, and my eyes dart up and around for the culprit as everything starts to turn hazy. I feel myself swaying as darkness encroaches on my vision, but I can't seem to stop it as I lose my eyesight.

I hear my name being roared before a whispered chuckle.

"Another pet, how fun."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



I wake with a yell, leaping to my feet before crumpling as all my strength leaks away. Whatever I was shot up with is still in effect. I remember the needle and the boat, and right now, my body is sluggish. On my knees, I pant through the sickness that rolls through me, letting it wash away, and only then do I lift my head. I take it slower this time, trying to piece together what happened.

I was drugged, but why and who? The guys? Surely not. They would relish killing me, but they'd want me alive for it. No, this wasn't them. Blinking away my blurry sight, I ignore my ringing ears as I lean forward, and my head smashes into something solid and see-through.

Glass.

I touch it, realising it's thick and impenetrable.

My hands slap the glass as I spin in a panic. There is glass on every side of the tube-like enclosure. I freeze when something startles opposite me, a groan leaving that tube. Peering closer, I realise why.

Bram.

"Bram!" I hiss, looking around for whoever did this. He doesn't move, and my eyes sweep across the tubes on either side of him. They are in a row, and in each tube, I see one of the guys, all in various states of rousing. Beyond them, though, are thousands of glass tubes. I spin to take in the giant space filled with creatures and people. None look at us, as if they don't see us.

"Kitt," I hiss as I look back to see him staggering to his feet, his eyes hard and terrified. "What the fuck is going on?"

Swallowing, he licks his lips as if he can't speak, trying to force the words out, when a bang sounds, and he jerks, pressing against the back of the tube. I glance at the others to see them doing the same. They are all awake now and terrified.

What the fuck is going on?

"Ah, good, you're awake." I turn and see a woman descending some metal steps. "How I have missed you, my pets, and you brought me something new! Something exciting!" She stops in front of me, staring at me with wild eyes. "What are you?"

"Who the fuck are you?" I hiss, banging on the glass. She doesn't even startle. She just smiles, flashing slightly sharp teeth.

"Why, I'm the collector, of course, and you? You're my new pet. How exciting."

The collector . . . This is the collector? This is who has been chasing them? Why?

"You have questions, I see," she remarks, tapping the glass. "So do I."

I stare into her strange eyes. They are vertical, and when she blinks, a second lid seems to slide across them. She is not what I was expecting at all when they kept mentioning the collector.

There's a black, wide-rimmed top hat on her head, and her hair is cut in a chin-length bob and perfectly straight. Her eyelids and lips are coloured black, and her irises are the only colour about her—a startling green. Her coat is a deep black, dusting across the floor, and she left it untied to show knee-high boots covering skin-tight, black trousers and a black blazer. She's beautiful, in an exotic sort of way, and very clearly a monster, though I have no idea what kind. Winking at me, she turns to my men, cocking her head.

"Oh, how I have missed you, pets, but we'll get to you soon. For now, you know how I like to welcome newcomers." She looks at me, her wide grin showing her teeth, but I've seen sharper. "Bring her," she orders.

There's a whirl, and then something locks onto the glass tube I'm in. Snapping my head up, I see a giant, silver mechanical hand gripping it, and then it jerks me from my place and into the air. Pressing my feet and hands to each side, I stare down as the guys yell and bang on their tubes, but she ignores them, whistling and walking underneath me as I'm brought across the room and placed inside another. I can see the glass surrounding the entire space, so when my tube cracks open with a hiss, I ram into it, trying to find a weakness, but before I can, gas fills the room and it's all I see. I

start to cough, inhaling it, and once more, my consciousness is stolen by her.

The next time I wake up, I try to control my breathing and body to give myself precious seconds to figure out where I am and how to get out.

“I know you’re awake, pretty one,” she sings, so I open my eyes, already knowing I am restrained. My ankles and wrists are chained, and when I glance around, I realise I am tied to a steel table in a similar glass room. Her coat is off, as is her hat, as she peers down at me, fingering my hair.

“Such beautiful colours. Is it natural?” she asks. I don’t answer, and her eyes narrow in annoyance. “I do not like to be ignored. You will learn, just like they did.” When I don’t bother speaking, she runs her hands across something out of my sight. “It took a while to break them as well, my specimens you were with, but I have a lot of time and patience, and when you are cowed, you will be my little pet, won’t you?” She turns to me with a sharp knife. No doubt the sight is supposed to intimidate me. When I just blink, she narrows her eyes and steps closer, pressing it to the top of my shirt.

“Let’s see what you are hiding.” I don’t even wince as she strips me bare. Being naked isn’t a shameful thing. I have an excellent body, so if she wants to see it, she can. When that doesn’t work, she slices across my chest, watching the blood well.

“So you bleed. That rules out certain creatures.” Lifting the knife, she poises it over my chest. “What are you? Answer me and I’ll let you live.”

Death doesn’t scare me. After all, I’ve died numerous times, so she’ll have to do a lot worse than that. She seems to see that, and her eyes flicker repeatedly, that lid crossing them for a moment. “I see. You are strong, but then again, I have broken the strongest, and I like a challenge.”

I just stare into her strange eyes and smile slowly. I can tell it rubs her the wrong way before she slices down my chest with a snap. I let her cut me apart, searching for answers. My eyes remain on the ceiling as she does. The pain builds, but I let it wash through me, not letting myself feel it.

When you’ve been torn apart and eaten, a little bit of knife play isn’t much to fear. Honestly, I’m quite disappointed in this infamous collector they all fear.

“What are you?” she roars in my face, finally losing her cool.

“Your hair is out of place,” I tell her, my voice calm and bored. Someone who clearly craves perfection will hate that, and she jerks back, breathing heavily as she glares at me.

“Collector, specimens 6 through 11 are losing control.” She freezes as the mechanical voice echoes through the room.

“Expound,” she commands, and the robotic male voice comes again.

“They have been since specimen 680 was taken away by you.”

She looks at me. “Interesting. They only care for each other. Their hive mind, you see.” She’s smart. I see her rolling it through her head. “A mate maybe? That is impossible though, isn’t it? Let’s see. Take 680 back.”

The same chains tilt me upright, and the table slides into the glass tube. It locks before the table disappears, and the same crane lifts from the room and returns me, where I see the guys banging and screaming in their tubes. They only stop when I appear. Eyes filled with fury sweep over my naked, bleeding skin.

“It cannot be, can it?” the collector calls, looking between us, her eyes narrowed. “Mated . . . to all of them. That is the only logical explanation.” She turns to me. “You took my belongings away from me. They are mine, not yours.” Despite her anger, I can tell she is calculating how best to use this new information against us. “It will make it harder, but never mind.”

“Collector, the investor is here,” the same mechanical voice announces.

“Saved by the bell.” She giggles, waving at us. “See you soon, pets.” I watch her leave before leaning into the glass.

“She’s a delight,” I joke, and their worry seems to lessen. “So she’s the one after you, huh?”

“That would be the one,” Raiden replies, but his voice is tight.

“Are you okay?” Emrys asks, his voice dark and eyes slightly feral.

“Eh, that was like foreplay to me. You forget, my little mates, that I survived Gehenna.” Settling down on my ass, I drape my arms across my knees. “So tell me about her. Mainly, how do I kill her?”

Torin snorts in amusement and glee, even as Bram sighs, curling tighter into himself as he copies my position. Kitt paces as much as his tube will allow, partially changed. I’m betting he’s not happy. It’s clear he hates her more than he hates me. Surprising, really.

“Nothing? Okay, then why is she after you?” I look around. “You were here before?”

“We were her experiments, her pets,” Kitt hisses before silencing himself.

“Always will be,” Bram whispers. “I knew we would never truly be free.”

“Silence,” Kitt mutters, and his gaze lifts. I follow it to the ceiling. I don’t see anything, but clearly he thinks she is watching and listening.

One thing is for sure, though. I now know why they hate the idea of being tied to someone again—her.

Time is surprisingly boring in this prison. It’s very different from Gehenna, but at least I could move about there. No wonder the other monsters here are silent and empty, undoubtedly crazed by their time.

“How long did she have you here?”

“Most since birth,” she calls and stops before me. I don’t bother getting to my feet. I just watch her. “I found Emrys after, the same with my little scorpion. I do apologise for the interruption, but business is a must in this industry.”

“And what industry is that?”

“Collecting, of course. I only like rare specimens. I keep one of each, but I sell off duplicates to other investors and collectors, keeping only the best for myself. It remains to be seen if I shall keep you. Let us continue our conversation from earlier, shall we? What are you?”

When I don’t answer, she clicks. The top of the tube is removed, and that metal hand grabs me, hauling me out and forcing me on my knees in front of her. I struggle to test its strength, but I cannot budge it. It’s too strong to break. Her cane tilts my chin up until I stare at her, then she replaces it with her hand. “If you don’t speak, I will have to start with my specimens there. Mating affects your emotions, I am told. If I hurt them, will it hurt you? You might be strong, pretty one, but are they as strong as you?”

The idea of her touching a hair on their heads combined with the whine Bram lets out sends anger flooding through me. She is responsible for their misery and pain, and unlike them, she’s right in front of me. I don’t even think, just act. Turning my head, I sink my teeth into her hand until I hit

bone, her blood bursting into my mouth as she screams and jerks back, taking her hand with her, but she leaves a chunk of skin in my mouth.

Grinning, I spit it out at her feet, knowing my teeth and mouth are coated in her blood. “Strong? You don’t know strong. Look at you, bleeding and weak,” I taunt as I spit another mouthful of her blood and grin. Her face contorts in anger and pain as she grips her bleeding hand, her nostrils flaring.

Grabbing my head, she grips my chin. “Hold her,” she commands. “Pets that bite lose the privilege of having teeth,” she hisses as metal clamps around my face, forcing my jaw open.

“No, wait!”

“Let us pay!”

Their voices blend together with protests and pleas, but she ignores them, glowering down at me as she meticulously starts to pull my teeth one by one. Agony fills me as my blood coats my mouth. I choke on it before I breathe through my nose, but I don’t give her the satisfaction of hearing my pain escape.

I stare into her eyes until she steps back, holding my teeth and shaking them. “Let’s see if you’re so strong now.”

The metal releases me, and I hang my head, waiting. When she comes close again, I jerk my head up and spray my blood across her face, laughing as she stumbles back with a yelp. I’m still laughing as I’m tossed back into my tube prison, watching her wipe her face as she flees.

My mouth hurts like a son of a bitch, but that was so worth it.

CHAPTER THIRTY



Pressing close to the glass, I make sure the collector is gone, then I tap on it, trying to get Ferol's attention. She leans back into the glass again, rubbing her swollen jaw. I can feel her pain despite her efforts to pretend she's fine, and it ricochets through us all.

"Are you okay?"

"Peachy," she replies, glancing back at us.

Her voice is raspy with a slight lisp and strange thanks to her no longer having teeth.

"I bet it would make blowjobs easier," Raiden quips, making her laugh before she groans, working her jaw.

"You shouldn't antagonise her," I mutter as I sink to my knees. "She'll make it a lot worse for you."

"Kitt, she's going to either way. That's what people like her do. Didn't you notice? She wants to see pain and suffering, so if I get a little joy out of this, then so be it." Ferol shrugs, wincing.

"What's wrong?" I ask as she covers her mouth. Leaning forward, she coughs up blood, and I bang on the glass. "Ferol, Ferol, Ferol!"

"Damn, give me a minute," she grumbles, wiping her mouth then flashing me a pearly white smile—teeth.

"Your teeth grow back? That's fucking handy," Torrin mutters.

"I wasn't sure, but I usually heal. Either way, they are just teeth," she says, wiping her mouth again. "So, what else can we do for fun in here?"

"Nothing," Emrys answers darkly. "You are put on parade, tortured, played with, and experimented on."

Watching us closely, she runs her eyes over us. “You spent a long time here.”

“Too long. We were finally free, but I was foolish,” I rumble. “Try to rest. You’ll need it.”

Nodding, she curls up against the glass as I press my palm to it, wishing I could touch her. “I’ll keep watch.” That seems to surprise her, but she gives me a rare, soft smile before closing her eyes again.

“So, were you always connected in some way, or was that one of her experiments?” Ferol’s voice, hours later, startles me, my eyes going to her. She’s talking quietly, and I realise the others are asleep too. There isn’t much else to do, after all. The lights are lowered, which is the only way we know if it’s day or night. We spent years like this, yet after just one day, I’m back to old habits and routines. I guess it’s true what the collector said—the mind can adapt to anything if you give it enough time.

I hate that I adapted to this place.

“She made that happen,” I admit. “An experiment. She’d tried to do it before, but they all died. She kept trying. For some reason, it worked with us. The neuro overload almost killed us, but we survived. It made us her favourites. She would never sell or kill us. We were her preferred toys to play with. The only good thing is, it stopped the extreme torture.”

“Like Bram losing his tail.” My eyes find hers. I’m betting she saw it in his nightmares.

“Like that and worse. She didn’t want to accidentally kill one of us in case it broke the bond she so joyfully showed off to her buyers. She did, however, experiment on how pain worked between us, amongst other things.” I don’t bother hiding anything. What’s the point? She’s facing our reality, our past. Shame makes my body heavy as I lean my forehead into the glass. “I thought I’d got them out. It was my one job.”

“You did. It’s not your fault she found you again, but you’re not alone this time. I’ll get you all free,” Ferol says, and she speaks so confidently, I can’t help but chuckle. “What?”

“Nothing. I just—how can someone who’s spent their entire life locked away in Gehenna be so . . . kind?”

“A prison is a prison. I escaped Gehenna, didn’t I?”

“With my help,” I tease.

“Still counts, even if it was a long time. There’s always hope, Kitt. Always. Besides, she’s one woman, and we are five monsters, which gives us an advantage.” I can’t help but soften at her grim smile.

“You’d help us, even knowing what waits out there?” I whisper.

“We’re mates. It’s what we do.” She winks before softening, pressing her hand to the glass as if we are reaching for each other. “We can’t help what we have to do after this, Kitt, but right now, we have a choice, and I chose you.”

“I knew you liked us,” I mutter, making her grin.

“Well, isn’t this sweet?” We both whirl around to find the collector at the top of the stairs, looking between us both. There is a gleam in her eyes I don’t like. She had it before when someone was determined to buy me, and she ended up killing them. Stiffening, I shoot Ferol a warning look then meet our captor’s reptilian gaze. “I knew you were mates, but seeing it? I find myself oddly . . . jealous. He is my specimen. Mine. I don’t share, and I don’t think I want to share them at all.” Heading to Ferol’s glass, the collector glares at her. “Maybe I don’t care what you are. Maybe I’ll just kill you.”

“You could, but killing me would kill them, so it seems like a dumb idea, but then again, judging by your outfit, I’d say you are more than likely used to that.”

Fuck, her smart mouth is hot, but it’s going to get her in trouble.

“I’ll find a way to keep them alive. I always do. They don’t need you. They are mine. Let’s prove it.”

She turns to me, and before I can voice a warning, a dart hits me from above, making me docile. The drug moves through my system, familiar and infuriating. Swaying, I crawl away from the glass, pressing against the other side just as the front lifts away, and she ducks inside. She moves to my side, making sure Ferol can see me. My eyes meet hers as I blink through the haze. She’s banging on the glass, her mouth forming words, but it’s clear the collector silenced her tube, wanting only her attention, not her input.

Anger washes through me, fighting against the numbing drug as her hand reaches out and strokes my face. “We used to have such fun together. Don’t you remember? We will again. Let’s show her who you belong to,

shall we? You will always be mine—my pet, my specimen. I am your master.”

My eyes lock on Ferol’s as I try to move. I feel my fingers twitch and toes wiggling as I clamp my mouth shut. Ferol’s hands bleed as she smashes herself into the glass, trying to get to me as the collector yanks on my jaw, forcing me to look at her, then she presses her lips to mine.

Cold. Slimy.

Wrong. Wrong. So wrong.

Sickness rolls through me, my body and soul rebelling at her touch, and when she pulls away, smiling happily at Ferol, that feeling of wrongness is what breaks through that drug. Strength returns to my body, and the collector must feel it. Her eyes swing to me as my skin starts to harden to stone. Standing, she carefully walks backwards, her eyes on me.

Unlike before, I fight the drug off faster, and when I reach for her with a snarl, she jerks back out of the tube, and it slams shut just as I hit it, but I see the look in her eyes. She’s shaken.

Bang!

The noise has her jerking around, her eyes wide and confused.

“Perimeter breached. Unknown specimen in the collecting room,” the robotic voice announces as an alarm blares.

“Locate specimen!” she roars.

“Locating, locating, locating,” the computer says. “Specimen located. Row nineteen, tank 45—46—47—” I look up, spying the number on our tanks saying 50 upwards. She must realise it at the same time because she turns as a familiar, horror-filled noise reaches our ears.

“Oriana,” it hisses just before a blur tackles the collector to the ground. She yells, transforming. Scales cover her skin as she kicks him off, and they face each other. Ferol’s ex looks at her then the collector and roars, throwing himself at her again.

Suddenly, the mechanical arm comes down, capturing him as he roars and fights it. “Testing specimen. Result found in database,” the bored computer voice states. “Blood type, god. Level three.”

“A god? I already have one of those. I don’t need you.” The collector stops in front of his roaring face and drives her nails into his chest, ripping it open and tugging out his heart, eating it as we watch in disgust. When she’s done, there’s blood on her lips, and she looks at Ferol. “A collector, you see?”

As we watch, she seems to swell with his soul and magic as the arm discards his body by flinging it away, out of sight. The collector's face contorts, crackling with power before it fades into her skin, only seeming to enhance the feelings she had—envy, jealousy, possessiveness. It rolls off her in waves and it's centred on Ferol, just like he was.

With blood trickling down her face, the collector looks at Ferol. "I told you they were mine. Mine!"

She turns to me again, and I know there will be no escaping her this time.

"Hey, reptile bitch," Ferol hisses, and the collector freezes, turning to her. "Didn't you want to know what I am? Take a good look."

"No!" I protest, but it's too late.

She transforms, the giant bird flapping its wings inside the tube, her talons scoring the glass and floor as she hisses at the collector, who is frozen.

"A phoenix," the collector whispers in awe. "I don't have one of those."

"And you never will," she squawks as the glass tube seems to swell with heat, and then Ferol blows fire right at it. The glass blackens then cracks before bursting under the fire, freeing Ferol.

"Capture the specimen!" the collector yells, and the arm returns, aiming for her, but this time, Ferol is stronger. I watch as she struggles in its unyielding grip, her fire burning the metal.

"Arm malfunction. Heat sensors overwhelmed," the bored voice calls just before the hand opens, releasing Ferol in all her fiery glory.

With an ear-piercing screech, she dives at the collector and slams her into the metal, her head making a satisfying bang. I expect Ferol to tear her apart, but surprisingly, she only knocks her out and turns to us.

"Stone," she hisses.

Unsure what she wants, I turn to stone, stepping back just as fire hits my tube. It swells, blackening then bursting, freeing me as she steps back. Ferol transforms back to human form, swaying slightly.

Hurrying out, I check her over before grabbing the collector's device in her pocket and hitting the buttons. It's how I got free before, and the fool never changed it. Our cages open, my brothers swarming us and her, checking her over just as the collector groans.

When her eyes open and focus on us, fear contorts her features as she scrambles backwards with a whine. "I saved you. I looked after you," she

shouts.

“She’s your enemy, your nightmare, not mine. It’s up to you how you finish her,” Ferol says.

“Go ahead.” I give the order out loud, but I didn’t need to because they hear and see my thoughts. As one, they converge on her, beating her like she beat them so many times before. Her cries fill the air, as does the scent of her blood.

I let them enact their revenge, painting their pain across her body as she screams and tries to crawl away. When they step back, I loom above her.

My turn.

Standing above her heaving chest, I peer down at her terrified face and grin in glee. “Who’s the master now?” I spit right before I drive my fist into her face, stone meeting bone, staunching her cries before they can escape. She isn’t dead. I know it. She’s very hard to kill. I learned that after our last escape, but this isn’t just my revenge. Despite how I feel, others have been here longer, and what better way for her to suffer? Pressing the remote, I hit all the buttons at once.

“Warning, specimen override. Warning, specimens lose,” the computer calls in that same monotone voice.

“Let them have her. There is nothing more fitting,” I sneer as the others slowly emerge from their tubes and focus on her as she tries to drag herself away. I look at Ferol. “Let’s get out of here.”

“If you’re sure,” she says, sparing the collector one more look.

“I’m sure. I don’t need revenge.”

“Neither do we,” Bram adds. “Whatever they will do to her will be much worse, trust us.”

There’s a scream, and we turn as a snake wraps around the collector, squeezing the life out of her as others fight to get at her.

“That it will.” Taking Ferol’s hand, I turn and head towards the stairs, ready to leave this place for a second and final time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



I take my first breath of fresh air since I woke up here. The collector's storage facility is huge, and when I glance back at it, I see it sprawling for miles, surrounded on either side by mountains. It's then my eyes catch on the hole in the metal wall, bursting outwards and peeled away as if something were tossed out of it. I find him, his body, sprawled on asphalt not far away, broken, bleeding, and unmoving.

Jax.

The man I once loved, the man who would have been the father of my child, always seemed so invincible. Now, he lies broken and empty on the ground. It's hard to fathom.

Swallowing, I wait for him to get back up, but he doesn't.

"He's dead. Not even a god can survive the loss of their soul," Emrys murmurs darkly. "I feel the death on his skin. There is no coming back. I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? She hated him," Raiden scoffs.

"But she loved him once," Bram whispers.

"Emotions are complicated," Torrin murmurs.

Despite the bond, it's still easier to talk out loud. Their thoughts can be overwhelming, and I feel them trying to put distance between us. We all know what is coming, after all. Still, I feel their pity and hate it.

Tuning them out, I carefully pick my way over to him. Emrys is right. I knew he was dead, but seeing it is a whole other thing. My knees give way, and I catch myself before falling on him. I hated him for what he did to me and what I lost because of it, but I once loved him more than life itself. It's

a tricky emotion, and grief cripples me. I wanted him dead. I tried to kill him myself, but seeing it is another thing entirely.

“Would you like to bury him?” Kitt’s voice is soft.

Nodding jerkily, I reach for Jax, lifting his limp frame into my arms and heading to the trees. I feel them follow me before Emrys and Raiden break off. They start to dig under a tree with their hands, creating a grave. I carefully lay Jax in it and brush his hair back.

“Thank you for trying to save me, and thank you for being my companion in the dark. I hope wherever you are now, you find peace, even if it’s haunted by what you lost.” I step back and nod, and they cover his body for me.

Taking a deep breath, I look at Kitt. “What now? How do we get out of here?”

“I have an idea,” Raiden says, and I arch an eyebrow at his glee.

“This is your idea?” I cross my arms and stare at the giant truck. It looks very similar to the one we were in before, but this one has spikes all over the outside and the word “collector” spray-painted across it. Oh, not to mention the cage on top.

“It’s not theft if she’s dead, baby.” He winks, rubbing his hands together. “Who’s riding in the cage?”

“Inside the truck.” Kitt sighs, rubbing his head before looking at me. “It’s armoured and moves fast. We should get out of here before the others lose interest in her and come after us. There is loyalty amongst species here, and half are insane. We don’t have time to fight them all off.”

“Should we be concerned that we released them?” I ask.

“Nobody should be kept prisoner,” Torrin declares, and my gaze swings to him as he nods at me. “Nobody.”

Well, I guess that settles that.

We pile into the truck and take off, watching as monstrous nightmares slip into the forest from her compound. Hopefully someone else can deal with the fallout, but honestly, Torrin is right. Nobody should be a prisoner, not even monsters. Everyone should be given a chance.

I settle in for the drive, knowing there is nothing but road between here and Vigil, my mother's land. We are in the middle of nowhere, about a hundred miles from my old home.

One hundred miles until I see my mother again and come face-to-face with the man responsible for all this.

One hundred miles until either they or I die to break the bond.

I don't know if they hear that thought or are thinking the same thing, but the mood is subdued, so I close my eyes and pretend to rest. It's time to rebuild my walls and keep them out. I have my vengeance to gain, and they have their job to complete.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



I've been gritting my teeth for hours, trying to ignore the hunger gnawing at my stomach. It's one I am never without, but it's stronger now. It shouldn't be, since I ate recently. I can go a month without feasting if need be. My guess is whatever drugs the collector pumped us full of to get us back to her compound burnt through my reserves. My mind is quite literally eating itself, and soon, it will eat away my sanity. If I go feral, there is no coming back. Nobody ever does. A feral ghoul is a dead ghoul.

I try to fight it. My eyes are closed, and my hands grip the door as I press my face to the cool glass. The rumble of the engine does nothing to slow my heart. My hands are twitching now, and then I smell live flesh and blood.

Without meaning to, my head turns, seeking out prey, my nostrils flaring. When I open my eyes, I know they are red and soulless as I stare at Ferol where she sits between Bram and me.

They probably hear it because the truck screeches to a stop, every eye going to me. I feel my instincts lunging towards her, so instead, I throw myself backward. Smashing open the door, I throw myself into the forest beside the road, racing away from her and temptation.

My body moves of its own accord, need and sanity warring as I stumble and try to escape to keep them safe from me.

I don't make it far before I crumple, hunger consuming me as my nails slash at the ground, my back bowing as a roar leaves my lips. My head jerks from side to side as I fight the red haze wanting to descend upon me.

If I give in, I'll never go back.

I'll be lost, but it's getting stronger.

"Emrys?" The voice is gentle, strong, and sure, like a beacon in the dark. I lift my head, trying to follow that voice, but I can't see anymore. I can only smell blood that is fresh, strong, and so close.

Throwing up my hand, I crawl away with a whine. "Stay back." My words are a growl as foam dribbles from my mouth. "I can taste you."

"Shh, I've got you," she promises, but she's too close. I scramble away. My vision is blurry, but I see her crouched nearby. "You need to eat."

"No live prey," I hiss. "I can taste it. These woods are dead."

"Shit," she mutters, and I bark out a laugh before digging my nails into the ground to stop myself from attacking her. I can hear the pulse in her veins, and I ache to bury my teeth into her neck and feast on her blood and flesh.

"I should never have come back. Let me die," I beg.

"No," Kitt snaps, and it's only then I realise they are all here. "We will figure something out. We can try to sedate you—"

"He's too far gone. Can't you feel it?" Torrin murmurs. "He's on the verge. I don't know how he's fighting it off, but he's going feral."

"No, if he dies—" Kitt begins before his voice chokes off.

Their thoughts are in my head but distant, a low buzz. It's as far away from them as I've ever been. I don't like it, but not even they can pierce this haze now.

They are right, I'm fighting, but it's a losing battle.

"Kill me!" I roar. "Do not let me hurt anyone."

"We are not killing him!" Ferol yells, silencing them.

Pressing my face to the dirt, I try to disguise her smell with it. "Please, please, please, kill me, kill me, please. I don't want to hurt you."

I can hear them arguing, but I lose time.

It's bad.

Reaching down with shaking hands, I grab my gun and press it to my head before it's snatched away, leaving me with no way out.

"You don't get to just leave. There's a way." Her voice makes me lift my head, and she looks down at her body before offering her right arm to Kitt. "Break it off. You're strong enough. Break off my arm and let him eat. It will give us time to get him somewhere else."

"Shit, firebird, I can't do that." Kitt looks disgusted and terrified, and even Torrin hesitates.

“Fuck, fine, I’ll do it myself!” she shouts, and before any of them can protest, she slams her arms down between two rocks. The scent of fresh blood has me hissing, but I scurry backwards to stop myself. Her arm doesn’t come clean off, though, so she saws at it with the rock before slamming it down and breaking it off. Stumbling back, bleeding, she looks at me. “Eat. We won’t lose you today. Eat.”

I wish I could stop. Disgust, shame, and horror fill me, but the ghoul has no qualms or reservations. It throws me forward until I lick the stone. The taste of her blood explodes across my tongue until that voracious hunger takes off. The next time I blink, I have her arm in my grasp and I’m chewing on her flesh before tearing more away.

She tastes amazing and fresh, and I feel her life soaking into me as I eat.

Gnawing on the bone, I hiss when Bram gets too close, and he jerks away. I turn, offering them my back as I eat. I devour it all, not leaving anything left but the bone, which I hold tight as I collapse to the earth. The post feeding haze and fullness lull me into an almost dreamlike state.

When I come to, my vision is still a little distorted, and I feel giddy and full, but my first thought is of her.

Lifting my head, I spot Ferol leaning back into Torrin’s chest, the others around her. Her face is pale and beaded with sweat, and her eyes are tight with pain, but she’s smiling. “And he’s back with us.”

My eyes drop to her missing arm, and shame engulfs me. I want to sink into the ground and never be seen again.

“How do you feel?” she asks, and I almost laugh.

How do I feel? Me?

Crawling towards her, still gripping the bone, I stop inches away, refusing to let myself get too close.

I press my face to the dirt and whine. “I’m so sorry.”

“For what?” she scoffs. “It was my choice. I’ll heal, I always do, but losing you would kill us. It was a no-brainer. A little pain or your death? I’ll take the pain.”

“I’m so sorry.” It’s all I can say. The horror and shame are too much to carry. I reach for my other gun to end it, but her hand blocks it, and I finally look at her again.

“Do not dishonour my sacrifice,” she snaps, and that has me looking at her. “I suffered for you to come back to us, and now you would end it? Don’t be so selfish.”

She's right. She gave her limb for me. How could I deny her that?

"Let's get back to the truck," Kitt orders, and Bram scoops her up in his arms. I watch them go, unsure if I should follow, when Kitt looks back at me.

"Come on, brother." Three simple words, but relief floods me as I climb to my feet and follow. I know they feel what it's like for me, but sometimes I worry it will be too much and I'll be left behind.

At the truck, I climb up onto the roof and into the cage without a word. I hear their questions, but I ignore them and settle down to sleep, clutching her bone. I keep my eyes on her through the bars, checking on her, but she's resting.

Kitt drives a lot more slowly this time, almost crawling so he doesn't jar her or cause her any pain, but before long, she's wincing and uncomfortable, so he checks the maps and pulls over. I don't ask questions, just follow them as Torrin carries her from the truck and down a small path.

It's clear he's not sure where he's going, but Kitt leads us deeper into the mountainous nothingness before turning sharply on his heel. We clamber up some rocks before he grins. There's a door built into the side of a mountain. He tests it before breaking the lock, and he and Raiden scan the inside before coming out.

I go in last as they mill about. Torrin gets Ferol settled on the wide bed built into the wall of the cave. There's a fire pit in the middle, which Bram and Torrin easily get sorted, while Kitt checks out the supplies.

It smells stale in here, like it hasn't been opened up in a while.

It's obviously some sort of nest for humans or a monster. I'm not sure, but it's empty right now, and we take advantage of that.

I, however, linger at the back, unsure what to do or say until she opens her eyes and offers her good hand to me. I can't resist. I scurry over and take it. She tugs me to her side and leans her head on my shoulder with a sigh.

"Should we do something about the bleeding?" I mutter, hating the stained edge of her shirt.

"No, it already stopped, and it's starting to heal."

"You can regrow limbs? Cool," Raiden says, breaking the tension. "You can be an all-you-can-eat buffet for Emrys!" He yelps when Kitt kicks him, sending him flying through the air as I wince, but Ferol laughs.

“Kinky. It gives ‘eat me’ a whole new meaning.” She snuggles closer, and I force myself to relax. I won’t move from this spot for as long as she needs me, despite my own feelings. The others quieten down as she falls to sleep. They make the inside warm and cosy before Torrin starts on watch, and the others spread out to rest.

We only have forty miles or so left, Kitt says.

We’ll be there tomorrow, Bram concludes. Are we really going to hand her over to them to kill?

Or we’ll kill her, Raiden adds. It’s the job.

Remember, we need to break the bond first, Kitt responds, but he seems tired, and his response is automatic rather than angry.

You think she will be okay? My voice is quiet, even in their heads, and they all look at me.

She’ll be fine. Ferol is one thing and one thing only—a badass survivor. Raiden chuckles. Besides, she didn’t seem to mind your little feast show. I don’t know if that’s the mate bond or what, but I’d make the most of it.

Idiots, I grumble, but a smile graces my lips.

She groans and flops down, crawling across me and curling into the bed, her feet on my lap. “You all think too loudly,” she grouses.

Kitt shakes his head, but we fall silent, trying our hardest not to think and disturb her. I move slightly to give her more room, and the bone, her bone, pokes me in the side. Carefully extracting it from the bed, I hold it up, debating what to do with it. I can’t discard it. It’s her sacrifice to me. That’s when an idea comes to mind. Sliding a knife from my boot, I carefully begin to carve it.

Hours later, when I’m done, I flip a bone knife effortlessly in my hand.

I’ll never forget her sacrifice or her loyalty.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



When my body heals, it goes into a deep sleep, especially with a major wound. I forgot to tell them about it. Usually, I can rouse myself enough to check on my surroundings, especially in Gehenna, but the mate bond must be fooling my senses because I don't wake up for an entire two days.

They don't try to wake me either. I'm not sure why, since they plan to kill me anyway, but I'm not complaining. I groan and flip over, reaching to rub my eyes. I freeze and wiggle the fingers of my right arm. It's still a bit sensitive and raw, but it's there. "Hello, old friend."

"It was super weird watching that grow back." Raiden's voice makes me turn my head to see him leaning near the fire, watching me. "Handy though. Get it?"

"Punny." I groan as I sit up. "Where is everyone?"

"Torrin is in the bathroom. Bram, Kitt, and Emrys went hunting for meat . . . animal meat," he corrects with a shy grin. "Figured you'd be hungry."

"Starving." I get to my feet and stretch. Every part of me aches from lying down too long, so I run through some basic stretches, trying to wake my body. My right arm protests a little, but I push through it.

"How many times have you done that?"

Getting up from my push-ups, I brush my hair back. It's getting too long and needs to be cut again. "I've regrown a few limbs or holes." I shrug. "I've lost count."

The others return, and none of them are surprised to see me awake, but I guess they saw me through Raiden's head.

"We'll start cooking," Emrys says, shooting me a relieved smile. Kitt just nods while Bram winks at me. I leave them to cook, the smell making my stomach grumble as I keep pushing my body until I break a sweat.

"Time to eat," Kitt calls, tugging me up and plunking me down between Emrys and Raiden. Huffing, I accept a plate. I have no idea what kind of meat it is, but I dig in. It takes a lot of energy to regrow limbs, and I end up eating mine, Kitt's, and Raiden's food before leaning back, satisfied.

My body still feels slow and sluggish, so once my food has digested, I start to do my workouts again. The space is small, but I'm used to that, so I adapt. They watch me curiously before Raiden stands up, dusting off his hands.

"You want a hand?"

"With what? I ask, releasing the ledge on the ceiling I was using.

"Clearly you want to push your body—"

"It's important for healing or you'll get slow and lose muscle mass." I shrug.

"Well, okay. I can think of other ways to help." He wiggles his eyebrows, and Kitt kicks him.

"We had a deal, remember?" he warns, but his eyes are on me, filled with hope.

We shouldn't cross this line again. By tomorrow, we will be at my home, the bond will be broken, and we'll be enemies again, but as I look to them, I find myself giving into my desires and ignoring the logic that has kept me alive. "Just one hand? What about five?"

We shouldn't, we all know that, yet I'm the one who throws myself into their arms, losing myself in the pleasure and happiness the mate bond provides.

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“There is no point in waiting around. Come on, let’s get me home,” I declare early the next morning. I lingered in their arms all night before hiding in the bathroom to rebuild my strength. Today, we’ll face my mother and my past, and we will also break the bond. Every time I look at them or feel them, that notion gets harder and harder. I know my tone is cruel, but I leave them no choice as I walk to the truck and wait while they load up. It’s still mainly dark, but we set off once more on the last leg of our journey. The ride is silent, like a tomb, all of us aware of the impending conclusion. I watch the miles tick down as the temperature gets colder and colder, the scenery around us slowly transforming into a snowy landscape.

“You see those two trees ahead?” I murmur, swallowing hard as memories assault me. I feel the need to fill the silence and distract them from my spiralling thoughts. “That is the border of Draven territory, of Vigil. If we pass through, she will be alerted by her wards.”

Kitt slows, glancing at the others then me before slowly driving through. The magic washes over me, feeling my intentions and welcoming me home like a lost lover, sending a trickle of ice through my veins. The guys, however, wince. I remember the first few times I passed through it. It caused me pain too, but now I’m used to it.

As soon as we are out the other side, the landscape turns white. Snow stretches as far as the eye can see, and icicles hang down from trees. We keep driving, the slippery, windy road leading to one place—Draven Castle. It’s the heart of Vigil. Humans would have been turned away at the border, their minds told by magic that they were lost. It is not even on their maps, but we all know it’s here. We pass over the causeway between this land and our island, arriving on the outskirts of Vigil as the sun begins to rise, the light almost blinding as it reflects off the snow.

“Pull over,” I murmur.

Kitt does it without question, and I slip from the truck, shivering as the cold hits me. My mother would say I am weak. Ignoring her familiar voice and the chill in my bones, I trudge through the knee-deep snow to the lake. Standing in the distance, above the lake on the peak of Vigil Mountain, is Castle Draven. It’s covered in ice, making the black brick an icy blue. Even

the peaks of the towers are shrouded in mist and ice. The imposing structure has one big tower in the middle and five little ones on either side, spreading across the mountaintop. It's big enough to house the entire coven.

I feel them behind me as I stare at my home. "Soulless Lake," I explain. "I would spend most of my days here. It never unfreezes; none of this land does. My mother likes it that way. When I was a child, I never understood why the others feared it and hid, avoiding this place with such fervour."

"Why do they?" Bram asks.

Stepping confidently onto the lake, I lean down and wipe away the snow, revealing the glass-like surface so they can see below, to the frozen face, forever displaying terror, staring up at the ice and their freedom.

"Mother uses magic to open the ice then sinks people to the bottom—anyone who defies her or needs to be punished. Sometimes, she brings them back, and other times, they are here forever, frozen in time. It serves as a reminder to her people. It's soulless, like her, hence the name. I spent years as a child exploring the bodies down here. I never did reach the end," I admit as I look out. "She said this was too good for my punishment. I suppose that's a blessing."

"Your mom has issues," Raiden whispers. "Really big issues."

"You need to be strong to lead, and being strong is to be devoid of weakness. Emotions are weakness. Pity, love, and forgiveness do not exist to her." I repeat the words I have heard a hundred times. "She grows stronger every day, and she's one of the strongest mages in the world, but also the most feared." Looking back, I smile. "I hope you are ready for that."

Walking away from my past, I slip back into the truck and wait for them. Delaying won't make a difference—she knows we are here.

She will be waiting.

They all will.

Including him.

I cannot afford to be weak. I have been waiting for this for years, so I build a wall between them and me, hiding the bond as deeply as possible. It's hard, but I've done hard things before, like turning on the man I loved, losing my child, and sacrificing my life.

They are silent, no doubt reading my turbulent emotions as we drive up the mountain pass and through the castle gates. The car stops in the circular driveway where an ice statue stands tall and proud in the middle. The ice-

covered castle is a relic from another world and life, but my eyes drop to the statue in the centre of the frozen fountain. It's a figure of my mother, her hand up as if performing a spell, and there are humans crushed under her feet.

"Tasteful," Kitt mutters.

Nodding, I climb out of the truck and take a deep breath. Ice-cold air freezes my lungs, but it wakes me up. Ignoring the guys as best as I can, I saunter up the steps with as much confidence as I can muster and push the giant doors open. They creak, and like I expected, two lines of coven members await me in the reception area. All their eyes are wide, yet when their mouths open, it's my mother's voice that leaves their lips.

"Welcome home, Oriana Draven, lost one." The deep voice resonates through my bones.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Not wanting to be left behind outside the creepy ice castle Ferol called home, we follow her up the steps, only to find a crowd gathered inside the entrance. We reach for our weapons, but Ferol is unfazed. She tilts her chin up and walks down the path, striding deeper into the spine-chilling castle, passing under four ice staircases that seem to ascend forever. The inside is decorated in blues and whites, and it's covered in a thin layer of ice. How did our fiery mate live here?

The mob from the entryway gathers behind us as we walk, their steps perfectly in unison and creepy as shit, right up until we reach an open doorway and step inside. Ferol doesn't seem surprised as she physically and emotionally distances herself from us, standing alone to the left as we file in to the right and look around. It's like something out of a storybook.

The walls are not walls here, but sparkling, clean glass with intricate metalwork on each panel. Filigree patterns frame each pane, making it appear like we are outside. We can see the entire lake and beyond the borders from here, the sun sparkling across the ice. The ceiling curves upwards to create a dome, where a giant ice chandelier hangs down, dripping with black and blue jewels, and doors to the left lead out to a circular balcony. In the middle of it all, however, is a blue and white throne made of ice. Water melted and dripped from it and reformed to create decor across the arms and legs. It sits atop a circular platform, and casually perched on it is who I am assuming is Ferol's mother. Her lips are stained black, as if the rot in her soul is escaping her, and the rest of her is so pale, she is almost blue. Her icy white hair is held back with a gothic ice crown.

She's beautiful and looks no older than thirty. Her eyes are a shocking blue that pierce us where we stand, and no expression at all sits on her face. Her dress has a cape that is held under her throat by a giant blue jewel. She looks like a being formed from the wilds outside, but the cruel tilt to her lips gives her away.

"Hel Draven," Ferol greets. Her voice hints at nothing, but her emotions upon seeing her mother are anger, sadness, and disdain.

"Daughter." She stands dramatically, sweeping her hands out with her dress. "Welcome home."

That's her fucking mother? By the gods, talk about polar opposites—literally.

"I would have been back sooner, but Gehenna wasn't easy to escape from," Ferol sneers, some of her fire finally melting through the numbness in her tone. "Though, I bet you hoped I wouldn't."

Her mother throws her head back and laughs, and the crowd joins in until she drops her chin and meets her daughter's gaze, and it all cuts off quickly. "And why are you back, daughter? If you escaped from Gehenna, it cannot be just to return to my side. You are not that foolish."

"No, I'm not." Ferol's grin is downright cruel. "I'm here for the exact reason you think."

"Revenge is such a petty, childish notion." Her mother waves it away.

"Well, that's where you're wrong. I am not a child anymore." Her mother's eyes narrow slightly before the cool mask slips back into place. "And petty or not, I will have it. I lost years of my life and suffered for the sins of another."

"It made you stronger. I can see that." Her mother wanders past her, focusing on us. "And you brought friends. How quaint."

When she draws closer, I realise there is ice on her eyelashes, as if she is frozen herself.

Are we sure about this? I ask internally.

We have a job to do, Kitt responds, though he doesn't give away the other thing we have been silently discussing.

"Not friends," Ferol mutters, but she doesn't elaborate, and her mother runs her eyes over us before dismissing us and refocusing on her daughter. When she stops in front of Ferol, the crowd tightens. Mother and daughter stare each other down, saying both a thousand words and none at the same time. It's obvious this won't end anytime soon because the hostility between

them is evident. How does a mother-daughter relationship get so broken? I suppose it's not our problem.

"We need to break a mate bond, and we were told you were the only one who could," Kitt declares, interrupting their staring contest. Their eyes swing to us, seeing too much.

"Not even good enough to keep your mates?" She peers at her daughter, brushing her hair back. "Mates means weakness, but if you are intended to have one, you break them into submission. Have I taught you nothing?" she roars in Ferol's face before turning, sweeping her dress across her, and taking her throne once again.

"Like you control your mate?"

Her mother glowers at her. "Watch your tongue, child, or I will remove it." Sinking into her throne, she tilts her head back as snow begins to float down around her. "We will celebrate my daughter's return tonight. Tomorrow, we will conduct business."

"Mother—" Ferol begins.

"Enough!" Her nails click on the chair, scratching through the ice and making a horrible noise that makes my ears feel like they are bleeding. "Escort my daughter and her *mates*"—she hisses the word—"to her quarters, and ensure she is properly dressed."

"We are not going anywhere," I warn. "Will you break the bond or not?"

Her eyes narrow in anger as she turns to the shadows behind her chair and a man appears. He's nothing special, with dark hair and unforgettable eyes and features. He is nothing compared to her beauty, yet he kneels at her side and stares up at her for a moment before glancing at us. "My love?" he murmurs, and his voice has us stiffening. He was the one who hired us. Bodhi. I would know his voice anywhere. Ferol was right.

"Leash your dogs," her mother commands, telling us she knows too.

Ferol remains silent, but I stare at her back, feeling the others' thoughts. All this time, I have been fighting the mate bond for duty, my brothers, and our job. The collector is gone, and so is the need to finish this.

We might not need to break the bond.

Maybe we could keep it and her.

Dogs? The word repeats in our heads. We are nothing more to them than beasts, just like the collector, and it's the last straw we needed to break

our dedication to completing this. It was worn down on the journey, thanks to her, but he finally shattered it.

One sentence and we decide to switch sides. We are nobody's dogs, and nobody will leash us again.

Still, we have no choice as some of the crowd parts and surrounds us. Ferol doesn't flinch at being surrounded, but she meets her mother's gaze boldly, oblivious to our changing loyalties and dedication. She's ours now, and we are hers, and we have been for a long time. No matter what I thought, we were never going to break this between us.

I was a fool.

"You will not silence me this time. I am not afraid of you, Mother, but you should be afraid of me and the monster you created." She turns on her heel and storms from the room.

We follow. What else is there to do?

She is our mate, our future.

She is one of us, and we are not fighting it anymore.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Everything and nothing has changed. My rooms are still the same, which surprises me. I thought she would have them redecorated and put to use, but I'm aware she didn't leave them out of any residual maternal instincts. She did it to remind people. That's what I am—a reminder. I stand in my chambers, and they seem completely foreign. This was once my haven, my escape from her and her reach, but now it's just a suite of rooms. All those things I considered important back then—the latest clothes, technology, magic, and the custom four-poster bed I demanded—mean nothing.

"Well, your mother is nice," Raiden deadpans, and I startle at his voice. Part of me forgot they were here, lost down memory lane. Blinking, I run my eyes across them and the room they are exploring, trying to see what they see.

My rooms are in the spiral of the northwest tower, at the very top. I always thought that was so cool and different from everyone else until I was old enough to realise it was simply a show. I wasn't her daughter to protect and raise. I was an object to flaunt. This was simply where something like me belonged and a reminder I was above everyone. It kept everyone at arm's length, leaving me lonely and fed up. Still, the view from the wrap-around balcony is beautiful. The rest of the rooms are open planned and all done in the same deep blue. The bed is against the back wall with covered lamps on either side, and it's draped in the finest bedding. The chandelier has blue diamonds, and the windows are partially covered by the same

colour lace. It's all monotone, even the sofas in the next room and the towels in the huge en-suite.

It drips with elegance and the latest trends. Simple, yet gothic—my mother's style.

"You think I'm spoiled now," I admit softly as I look around at what was once my home. I remember thinking these rooms were small, but I was a fool.

"I think it must have been hard to go from a life like this to Gehenna," Kitt murmurs, shocking me.

"Don't let it fool you. I was more trapped here than I ever was in hell. Things are just that, things, material objects. I would have traded it all for happiness and safety. I was in Gehenna a long time before I was ever placed there. I've been surviving since the day I was born."

"Why don't we just grab your mother—" Torrin begins.

"Shh." I look around. "There are eyes and ears everywhere here."

"Even in your rooms?" Emrys asks, analysing every inch of wall space, looking for devices. Usually, magic and technology don't mix, but my mother made it happen. Nothing can escape the great Draven.

"Especially in rooms. That's where the best secrets are spilled." Sighing, I sit heavily on the edge of my bed, looking out at the view through the window.

I don't know what I expected, but I knew she wouldn't kill me on sight. How could she? That would bring questions, and my mother is all about her image. Now she'll bide her time to make a big show out of it. Luckily, I learned from the best. Still, being back here isn't as easy as I thought. I guess once you're a scared child, you're always a scared child.

The guys avoid me and search my rooms, no doubt sensing my need for space, but Torrin shocks me when he sits heavily at my side. The bed rolls until I practically fall into him, but he catches me, props me up, and doesn't let me move away. "I wish we didn't have to break the bond." I'm shocked to my core, and I lift my head to meet his eyes. "Being your mate isn't as bad as expected," he adds gruffly.

"Charming and so romantic," I taunt, and he huffs, heat leaving his nostrils.

"You are one of us, Ferol," he murmurs, shooting Kitt a look. "He feels it too. He's torn apart by this, but without completing this job, we will be

nothing. You freed us from the collector, but without our reputation, there will simply be another to take her place. There always is.”

“I know this. You don’t have to—”

“I need you to understand.” He takes my hand, shocking me into silence as he kisses the back of it. “If we could, we would choose you. Maybe we still will. I’m not sure. All I know is our paths were meant to cross, and I’m glad they did.”

“Me too,” I reply, my throat closing.

I don’t need anyone. I don’t want anyone. It’s my mantra. My heart remained broken and cold after my ex’s betrayal, but damn these lost boys because they’ve started to put it back together again. I wish this were different.

“We have no choice in this, Torrin. I know that. If I could, I’d give this a go too. I’d still probably end up killing you, but it would be fun while it lasted.” He grins, and the look in his eyes is too much to bear, so I stand, clearing my throat and heading outside. I leave the door open behind me as I grip the icy bannister until my hands go numb.

I can’t forget why I’m here, not even for them. Our ending has been clear since the beginning, yet I wouldn’t go back and change a thing. Staring down at the lake, I remember all the times I would escape down there. This was never my home, just a place to lay my head. The bitter truth is, I don’t think I’ve ever truly had a home or felt a sense of security . . . apart from maybe that one night on their boat with them. I wonder if I ever will again, or if I’ll always be doomed to be like this, alone and lost.

That’s the horrible truth, isn’t it? They could be my home if I let them, but instead, I’ll have to kill them and spend the rest of my life mourning what we could have been.

“Ferol, why were you thrown into Gehenna?” I glance back at Bram. “You’ve hinted at it but never told us.”

I guess there is no point in keeping secrets, and even if my mother is listening, she won’t care. It’s something I’ve kept inside for so long, but it’s not my secret to keep. The world needs to know. The more people who do, the more chance we stand. Taking a deep breath, I look out at the lake.

“I was a curious kid, and my mother’s mate, Bodhi, and I never got on. I would spend my time thinking of petty, immature ways to make his life miserable the same way he did mine. My father was never in the picture. I don’t even know who he was, and I don’t think she does either, but anyway

. . .” I laugh bitterly, sparing them a glance before hardening myself. “One day, I was hiding in a room he liked to visit to get away. I was going to jump out and scare him with a spell to turn him green when I heard it. He came there to do business, and his business was pure evil.” Even now, I remember the conversation, the bits and pieces I put together until I was frozen in horror. “He was trafficking young mages and every race of girl. They were so young, as young as I was. With the help of some other rogue mages, he was infusing them with monstrous qualities and black magic, damming their souls and changing them. He would then sell them as pets without anyone knowing, even my mother. He played the good mate, good support system, and acted weak. Everyone believed it, but the truth is, he is a monster, and who knows how many girls were hurt while I was gone? I tried to expose him. I knew I needed to. I went to my mother. She didn’t believe me, accused me of treason, and told him. He knew he couldn’t kill me, not with how powerful my mother was, so he framed me for a heinous crime, and she had no choice but to sentence me and throw me into Gehenna, so I couldn’t poison her court and she would seem impartial.”

“You are such a good storyteller.” My mother’s voice makes me stiffen. I didn’t hear her enter, but it doesn’t matter. She stops beside me, and I cut her a look.

“It’s the truth, not a story, Mother, even if you never believed me.”

“Truth is whatever I deem it to be.” She shrugs. “I taught you to be strong, to understand that—”

I laugh bitterly, and her chin tilts back as she looks down at me with the same, haughty expression she would give me as a child when I disappointed her, which was always.

“A mother is supposed to teach their daughter what true love is so they never accept anything less in their lives. You only taught me how much pain I could endure,” I hiss before smacking my heart, and embarrassingly, my eyes are wet. “A mother should have chosen me, protected me, but it’s too late now. That little girl deserves for you to hear her out and believe her. Everything I said was true. What he did to those girls, what he’s probably still doing, I heard it all. It was horrible —”

“I know.” Her hand reaches out, tilting my chin up, and a cruel smile curves her perfectly painted lips. Her words sink in, and my world crumples around me. All this time, I figured she didn’t believe me, that she did what she did for what she believed was justice, but two words and I know I was

wrong. She knew. She knew all along. “It was either you or my people. I chose to keep my people together and the truth buried. It would have destroyed us. One person for the sake of all—”

“Your daughter!” I roar, ripping my chin away. “Get it right. You sacrificed your daughter and hid the truth,” I correct her. I guess part of me should have known. She never loved me. I knew that, but I never thought she would have done this.

I truly am the fool she called me.

Her eyebrow arches as she brushes her hand on her shirt and looks out. “To save my people, yes, and I would do it again. Stop throwing a tantrum. It is childish. You didn’t die.”

“There were days I wished I did,” I hiss before throwing my hands up. “I don’t know why I expected shame or guilt from you, but I guess some hidden part of me did. I understand now we never truly outgrow wanting our parents’ love, even if we know we’ll never get it.”

Swallowing the pain in my chest, I stare out at the land too. Everything I suffered, I did so in the hopes I could expose him one day, but knowing what I do now, she’ll never let me.

“You’re old enough to understand that sacrifice,” she murmurs, looking at me. “Stay and lead these people with me, our people—”

“Keep your people. I have my own.” I turn away and head back inside, her voice calling out after me.

“The truth will stay buried, daughter, do not doubt that. You fight in vain. I will see you this evening.”

By the time I look back, she is gone, and I am unravelled.

I have put myself back together many times before, though, and I will again.

Strength is not surviving hitting rock bottom. It is when you pick yourself up time and time again despite hitting it.

I am strong, and she will see that.

They all will.

I leave them in the room and hide in the bathroom. I need some space. I can feel the bond tugging me closer, trying to yank us together, and if I

concentrate hard enough, I can hear the whisper of their thoughts, so I ignore them as best as I can and I plan.

When I know what I'm going to do, I get ready. All my old stuff is here—makeup, hair, clothes—everything I perfected my look with to garner my mother's approval. This time, I don't want her approval. I want every eye on me so they cannot look away or unhear what I'm saying.

I don't want to blend in. I want to stand out.

I style my hair as best as I can, in short waves so it flows away from my face with a few strands floating across my forehead, and my makeup is dark. Gone is her perfect princess. My eyes are lined black, with sharp spikes leading down from the inner corner in a wing. I paint the rest of my lids in a deep blood-red, and I make my eyebrows sharp. For my lips, I sweep a black, glossy lipstick across the plush flesh and add red in the middle so it looks like I am sucking on blood. My mother would find it distasteful.

She wants to be the ice queen, which is fine because I'll be the fire queen and show her just how easily ice melts.

I'm grateful when I find a few hidden spells in my spot under the vanity. I made a few outfits my mother wouldn't have approved of when I was sneaking out to party. Now, they come in extremely handy. I refuse to wear her frilly, pale gowns. I am not her puppet anymore.

Uncorking the grey vial, I dab it on my forehead then above my chest and close my eyes, speaking the spell. Soon, I feel the warmth covering my skin as it works.

It's not particularly powerful, but it's one I mastered when I was younger, much to my mother's chagrin. I didn't have much talent for other magic, and as the mage's daughter, that was a sin.

When I reopen my eyes, I can't help but grin at the dress it created. Gone are the icy whites and blues, and in their place are reds, oranges, and blacks, highlighting my muscles and showing off my scars—things my mother would deem imperfections.

The bodice is strapless, with two sharp points pushing my breasts up. It fits tightly against my skin and cups my waist, with a hole on the right side. A bright red jewel and gold chains drape from there across the rest of the dress. The fabric is tight over my hips, then the left side flows down my leg to the floor and out, looking like flames as I move and turn. My entire right leg is exposed, draped in more gold chains.

Chains also cover my chest, connecting spikes of flames on each shoulder, their points black, while the colours closest to my skin are bright orange and red, looking so real I can almost smell the ash. Hanging from those spikes is a cape of flames, flowing out in partitions like butterfly wings, but when they move, they ripple like fire.

I look like an inferno, just like I wanted.

I hate that my mother was right. I can hear her voice. Dressing to impress can make you feel powerful because I do right now. When I open the door and step out, every single one of the guys freezes, their wide eyes locked on me.

“Well, we feel underdressed,” Raiden remarks in amusement, but his voice is choked and low.

“You look beautiful, little beastie,” Bram whispers.

“Powerful,” Kitt corrects, and I swallow.

“Like a queen,” Torrin says.

“She looks good in everything,” Emrys adds. “Do we need to change?” He glances down at his tattered clothes and winces.

“Here.” I toss the remaining vials to them. “I’ll show you how to use them.”

I start with Raiden, since he’s the closest. His eyes continually rove over me before I snap my fingers, making him grin. “Uncork the bottle,” I instruct, which he does, wincing at the smell of magic. “Dab it on yourself, here and here.” I gesture. “Then close your eyes and imagine what you wish to wear.”

“Anything?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Anything your mind can create, but remember we are going into battle. Before the night is through, we will probably be dead.”

“Right, so we have to look good.” He nods before doing as instructed. When I step back, I watch the magic slowly move across his body. It’s strange to watch it in action. It gathers material from the air and fashions it across his skin.

When it’s done, I can barely breathe. I’m used to seeing him rough and worn, not like this. His face glows from within, brighter than ever.

I have seen Raiden’s mask once or twice, but it only adds to his outfit now. It covers his left eye and cheek, done in grey and blue that reflects the light and glows against his skin with filigree swirls. His hair falls around

him, mixing with a crown perched atop his head, with blue lightning-stricken jewels inlaid in the silver.

The collar of his jacket is sharp, spiked, and tipped with glowing blue, like flower petals surrounding his neck. It cuts down across his chest in the same light grey blue with lightning filigree, showcasing his expansive and beautiful chest. The sleeves are covered with fur hanging from the shoulders, the same colour as his fox, and when he twirls to show me, I see his double fox tail proudly displayed behind him. At his side, however, is a sword made of lightning and ice, glowing from within.

He looks like a prince.

Beautiful.

“I figured why not outdo her?” He smirks. “Do you like it?” He advances on me, but I turn to Bram next and help him do the same, watching as he transforms just like Raiden did.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but it definitely isn’t what he chooses. The outfit is skintight and black. It looks more like armour than clothes, stiff and hard. The chest plate is decorated with twisted bones to create a rib cage. The gold bone frame matches the gold draped across me, and I know he did it on purpose. Bram is nothing if not a gentle giant. There are black spikes tipped with gold running along his hips and down his legs. His arms are concealed in a mesh-like fabric, with shoulder plates and spikes. The snug fit makes him look huge and daunting. It’s his face, though, I can’t look away from. His soft, almost friendly appearance is completely transformed. His eyes look brighter and deadly, and his skin shines under the mask he’s donned. It almost meets in the middle of his face, but there’s a gap between his eyes and nose. Each side flares out in deadly, gold-tipped spikes. The rest looks like armour, his jaw and cheek bones sharp underneath it.

I can’t look away.

“I am not dressing up like that,” Emrys grumbles, and I hand him the vial. He rolls his eyes but gets to work.

Unlike the others, he sticks with his usual—leather trousers and gold guns—but his hat transforms to a deep black that bleeds to red, with a phoenix feather sticking out of it. His vest is leather and buttoned but sleeveless.

The outfit exposes the scars across his skin, ones he used to hide, and it steals the air from my lungs.

He looks like my Emrys, but better than ever, and when he lifts his head, showing me those glowing eyes, I almost fall into them. His lips quirk like he sees my reaction and enjoys it.

A throat clears, and when I turn, I find Kitt and Torrin side by side, having already completed the spells. "I hate dressing up," Torrin mutters, but I can't speak, not with them together like that.

He might hate dressing up, but Torrin looks incredible. He went the armour route like Bram, no doubt expecting trouble. The chest plate covers his pecs but leaves his wide abs on display, and gold glitters across his skin like jewels trapped within. The armour itself is black with gold accents and reaches the top of his arms. The same is slung around his waist in a giant buckle with gold decoration, which covers his legs to golden boots, concealing most of them, and black leather material drapes down almost like a skirt.

His horns have gold plates and chains draped between them like my dress. There is more gold in his ears and nose. He looks like a king and every bit a monster.

Finally, my eyes find Kitt and widen, unable to blink.

I didn't expect him to dress up, but he seems to have gone all in. The top of his outfit is black, and a spiked collar surrounds his thick neck, his shoulders accentuated by gold points before the sleeves run down his arms, his forearms covered in golden, ornate metal. The back of the coat floats down behind him, the underside the same red as my dress. What surprises me most is that his entire chest is on display. A gold dagger lies flat against his skin, holding the two edges of the coat together and pointing down to his sharp abs. His trousers are low slung, with a deep V almost exposing all of him, done in the same black, but the bottom changes to a red flame that ripples as he walks. On his hips, draped across his crotch, is a cross with a red jewel burning in the middle.

"Do we look good enough?" he asks, but his eyes sparkle as I lick my lips and run my eyes over them again as they stand side by side.

"You'll do. We'll get their attention, that's for sure." I cough, trying to clear my throat, but the voices that float up to us from outside are a reminder of what is going to happen, so I step back, all desire and joy fleeing.

I'm going to lose them tonight and maybe myself. I have to focus.

They step forward in sync, and my eyes widen as they reach for me. I don't know if they sense my swirling thoughts or my strong emotions, but they don't think. They act.

"I need to be strong, and I can't—you make me weak," I whisper, warding them off. "So not now, not even if it's our last time. I won't kiss you goodbye." Taking a deep breath, I tip my chin back. "It's the end of the road. Are you ready? Let's finish what we started in Gehenna."

Raiden looks away, Bram looks sad, and Torrin simply nods, while Emrys's jaw clenches, but Kitt watches me with a searching expression, so I turn away and head for the door as their voices stop me, speaking as one.

"If it were death or you, we'd choose you. I wish this would end differently."

"Me too," I whisper before fleeing.

What is love without loss?

What is my life without revenge?

They cannot give up, and neither can I.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



I don't want to be late to my own party. All eyes will be on me, but I have other plans, and I've waited long enough to put them into action. When I reach the ballroom's frozen archway, however, I stop for a moment, mentally preparing myself for what is to come.

"Remember, you are not alone now," Kitt whispers. "No matter what we will do to each other, you're not alone. She's wrong about you. You're stronger than anyone in the world."

His encouragement shouldn't mean so much, but it does. Being seen and understood when the entire world turned their back on me means something, and my heart once again softens for them.

Nodding, I push the doors open and step into the ballroom, where everyone waits. The music stops, the band in the back right corner floating upon the ice stage nodding at me. The crowd of people, a sea of grey and blue, parts, and I stride through their masses to my mother's throne. Sitting to her right is her mate, Bodhi.

He pales when he sees me, as if he didn't quite believe I'd come. I aim a cocky smirk at him before focusing on my mother and inclining my head slightly as she stands. It's a show of respect, but also a fake display that actually implies the opposite if you know what to look for, and it's clear the court does as they gasp and whisper amongst themselves. My mother stands, tilting her chin back and ignoring that small act of defiance.

"Now that our guest of honour is here, we may begin," she calls, clapping to end their chattering. "Tonight, we celebrate my daughter's return. As many of you know, she was sentenced to Gehenna for her crimes,

but here we praise strength, and after serving part of her sentence and doing what no other could—escaping—I am glad to forgive her and welcome her back to the family. Together, we will lead our people to a new dawn!” She offers me her hand, so I take it, then she tugs me to the space below her chair, but I step up to her side, tightening my hand on hers, letting some of my heat escape. She hisses and looks at me before forcing a smile, knowing she cannot move me without a fight. It’s another petty defiance, but I spent my entire childhood terrified of breaking her rules, and now, I don’t give a fuck. “Enough politics. Let us celebrate.”

The music booms back to life as the crowd continues their revelry, drinking, dancing, and talking. Their eyes, however, return to us continually to see what will happen next. Releasing my hand quickly, my mother sits, and I step in front of the thrones and turn my gaze to Bodhi.

“It’s good to see you again, Oriana,” he says politely. “I almost didn’t believe your triumphant return.”

“I bet. I wouldn’t want to either if I were you. Don’t worry, you’ll be seeing a whole lot of me.” I turn and stride through the room, heading straight for my men, who linger in the back. They have drawn the most eyes, but they ignore everyone until I arrive.

“Does anyone want to dance?” I ask.

“I am too big,” Torrin mutters. “I also don’t know how to.”

“I’d like to, but I don’t know how either.” Bram looks sad, so I grab his hand and turn, dragging him with me.

“That’s fine. I do. I’ll lead.” I place one of his hands on my back and hold the other in mine, then I start to move, leading him across the room in a slow dance. At first, he’s locked up and unsure, his eyebrows furrowed, but then he starts to get the hang of it, and his smile is bright as he watches me.

“This is fun!”

“I never would have used that word. I was forced into lessons my entire childhood. One misstep and I would be punished. No daughter of the great Draven will be unable to master skills,” I tease as I twirl him, making him laugh. “But you’re right. It’s fun with you. I guess it takes the right partner.” I spin him out again, and his hand slips from mine. Torrin catches him, and Emrys bows before me, taking my hand. He knows how to dance, although he’s hesitant and not using the steps I know, but we make it work.

Before long, Torrin taps his shoulder, and Emrys kisses my hand and departs. Torrin is too big to dance normally, and his cheeks heat in embarrassment. I can tell he's going to leave, so I climb up onto his feet. "Just move and we'll dance like this."

I hold onto his arms as he starts to move, jerkily and slowly, sliding one hand down my back to hold me tighter, and then we move faster and faster until laughter erupts from my throat as the room blurs. He lifts me up into the air so I hang above him, grinning before he spins me out and down.

I am twirled into Raiden's waiting arms. Surprising me, he moves me around the cleared space with ease, twirling and dipping me with a grin until I laugh. My dress flares out, like flames eating the air, and people have no choice but to step back, gasping in shock.

"Having a mate isn't so bad if you can cause mischief together," he admits, making me grin before arms slide around my waist and turn me. Kitt's eyes are hard, but he starts to move, cautiously and overcomplicated. He's definitely overthinking it, but I don't care. I lean into his strength as we move until we slow down.

My hand rests on his chest as we rock in a gentle sway. "Are you okay?" he whispers.

"Just having one last moment of peace before what is to come."

"And what is to come?" he murmurs, and I lift my head. He's trying to read it through the mate bond, but I throw up walls, blocking him.

"The ugly truth." Leaning up, I lay a gentle kiss on his lips to soften the blow. He reaches for me and deepens the kiss until I'm left gasping and pulling away.

"We are with you," he promises, no doubt realising I'm about to do something.

"This is something I need to do alone. Just be ready."

I turn away, letting go of all those soft, happy feelings and embracing the fire that consumes me—the anger that has been burning since I was a teenager, when I realised the true depths of darkness within a person.

I meet my mother's mate's gaze across the room, where he has been watching me the entire time, and blow him a kiss before turning away. I'm building his anticipation, making him stupid and scared.

Men make mistakes when they are scared.

Weak men will sign their own death warrant when scared.

When enough time has passed so as not to seem suspicious, I duck behind the entrance next to the throne, which leads to the small alcove my mother uses to conduct business away from prying eyes. I lean back into the wall like I'm taking a moment to catch my breath, and then Bodhi appears, his eyes hard.

All traces of weakness and kindness are gone. He plays the fool well for the coven and my mother, but this is the true Bodhi. He waves his hand behind him, and the curtain turns to ice, sealing us in and blocking sight and sound, but I expected it.

"You are a fool for coming back here," he hisses. "You should have stayed there and died. Do you know how many times I had to hire people? How much money I wasted on you?" He advances on me, his hand connecting with my face in a brutal slap as he grabs my throat and tosses me deeper into the alcove.

I let him push me into the curtain and press my fingers to it. Some of my phoenix rises to the surface, and my dress lifts and flutters with flames, but I feel it heat the ice. I move forward, backing him up and around so his back is to the now melting ice screen and the ball beyond.

What better way to expose the truth than to quite literally show them?

My mother can deny me in private, but forced in public, she will have no choice.

"Clearly the ones you hired weren't good enough," I taunt.

"No, clearly not. *Mates*, your fucking mates? I'll kill them next for failing their contract, but first, I'm going to deal with you." The band stops playing as I twitch my fingers, the last of my magic filling me as I cast a spell my mother always tried to make me master.

I project the volume of this room like she projects her voice when she speaks. I might be a phoenix, but I am the daughter of a dark mage, and he should have remembered that.

I see every single person turn to watch as he slams me into the wall. "You foolish, nosey little bitch. Did you really think coming back here would help? Your mother didn't believe you back then, and she won't now. I am important here. All those fools are blinded by me. You're nothing, just the daughter she didn't want that's too stupid to even die."

"Why?" I ask, my voice tight from the pressure of his hand, but honestly, I've had rougher sex than his attack, though I pretend to be weak. "How did you hide it all along? How did you cover up your crimes? You

owe me that at least.” I feed into his ego, stroking his power that my mother tries to crush, knowing it will work. He’s so predictable and weak.

His lips twitch as he runs his eyes over me, and disgustingly, some appreciation heats his gaze, warring with his anger. I have to force myself not to rip him to pieces here and now.

“When everyone overlooks you, it’s easy. We have so many weak, forgettable, young female mages coming here to train under your mother. When they are forgotten or tossed aside, I lure them away, and then my colleagues and I splice them with black magic. Yes, that’s right, little fool. I have magic as well, and it’s stronger than even that stupid mate of mine knows. We splice some with monsters, whatever the highest bidder wants. Do you know how many girls we stole during your time in Gehenna? Hundreds. You stopped nothing, and you won’t stop anything now. I should have killed you back then, but I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

I let his words sink into the people beyond as I stare at him with dead, unfeeling eyes. “You think killing me will stop anyone from finding out?”

“I don’t need to stop them. Your mother knows. She’s just too blinded to notice I am still doing it, too full of herself to let it hurt her precious reputation. Your death is just a bonus. Nobody would believe you. You’re nothing but a criminal to them. I made sure of it,” he hisses, his face twisted and rotting with greed and hatred—the face of evil, even more evil than those I shared hell with. “You came back for nothing, Oriana Draven.”

I knew death was inevitable, a small price to pay for my revenge. I see the moment he decides how to do it. I don’t even fight, but it’s hard.

I promised myself the tenth time I died and lost everything that I would never die again, but here I am, voluntarily letting myself be killed to prove a point. The truth is worth it.

His hand tightens on my neck, and then he slams his other palm into my forehead. His black magic pierces my brain like a dagger. It burns, and I feel it sliding across my skin like rot. It peels me back piece by piece, stealing all warmth and crushing my soul. I glance to the room beyond, seeing the horror on our audience’s faces, but I find my broken, lost boys, their eyes wide and horrified.

As I die, I know they are released from their blood oath that bound them to the job. The last thing I see is their fury exploding in the room, and I smile.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



I never know how much time passes when I die, but when my eyelids flutter open and my heart restarts, it's clear it has. I hear monsters roaring, followed by screams from the other room. Blinking up at the ceiling, I breathe through the pain that always accompanies rebirth. When it finally ends, I roll over to my front, breathing heavily. I hang my head as my strength returns, my limbs shaking from the cost.

Being reborn sucks. I'm always stronger each time, but that doesn't mean it feels good.

The panicked sounds only grow louder, so I sit back on my heels before struggling to my feet. My strength quickly returns, and by the time I'm at the alcove door, I am stronger than ever. My muscles flood with adrenaline and power, and flames burn away the cold touch of death as my vision sharpens and I scan the scene before me.

Bodhi stands in the middle of the room, bleeding from cuts on his face, and my mother is before him, her hand stretched out protectively.

Her people are pushed back to the rear of the room, cowering and scared. Some are even screaming, but I ignore them because they mean nothing to me. I glance around until I finally see my mates, and my frantic heartbeat begins to slow.

One look and I know my death didn't end them like we thought it would. Maybe the bond understood rebirth, or maybe it wasn't as strong as we assumed. My death has, however, seemed to infuriate them in a way I didn't expect. Kitt is now a full golem and bigger than I have ever seen him. His skin is a mix of browns and greys, and his thick lips open in a mighty

roar that seems to shake the room as he grabs a chair and hauls it into the air like it weighs nothing. He launches it at my mother, who bats it away with her magic, but I can tell it cost her as she staggers. My eyes return to Kitt as he beats his chest, then I look at the figure beside him, my breath caught in my lungs at the beautiful, glowing man. Raiden lingers at Kitt's side, but the joking man I knew is gone. No, this is a monster. His eyes glow so brightly, it's like staring at the sun, and his once jovial face is contorted with a ferocity that even stops me. The mask on his eyes shines with his power, but it's the sword at his side that has my eyebrows lifting. It's formed of ice and silver, yet it glows with the same blue light as he does. Lightning arcs from him and into the sword as something swishes behind him. His tail has merged, doubling in size, and it twitches and lashes the air, showing his frenzy.

The floor shakes, drawing my attention to Torrin, or what was once Torrin, who is now a minotaur. His bull form is beautiful and terrifying.

He towers over everyone in the room, both in stature and height. His once golden skin is covered in a layer of thick, deep brown fur, and his legs are bent, hooved limbs that dig at the floor as his arms spread. His eyes are the same, but they are filled with manic anger as smoke curls from his snout.

"Stop this!" my mother shouts as she waves her hand, and ice floods the room, snowflakes drifting down as she exposes her powers to get them to back down. I follow her gaze to Bram, who is standing quietly near the others. He might be silent and still, but his eyes swirl with a glowing gold colour I have never seen before, and even from here, I can see writing passing through those orbs in a language I have never seen before. A hazy tail, spiked like that of a scorpion, appears behind him as his head slowly turns, his eyes finding mine, and a faint, foreign smile tilts up his lips as if he can truly see me, even as his eyes flow with that language.

A growl tugs my gaze from him to Emrys.

I thought the others were bad, but they have nothing on my scarred boy. His head is tilted and he's crouched low to the floor. His guns lie forgotten at his side, and his hat is tilted down, but even from the shadows, I can see his eyes are pure red and there is blood on his hands and face as he grins, exposing rows of sharp teeth tinted with the same blood.

He's feral.

My death has freed them of the bond, but they don't seem happy about it. I worried about what it would mean, but I was selfish and chose my revenge over them. Here they stand, though, faced with my death and furious. For a moment, I stagger as something slams into my chest. It stops my heart as it seems to sink into my soul. My gaze clashes with Bram's golden eyes, which are locked on me as I reach for my heat to protect myself, only to gasp.

I feel them there, all of them, just like before.

The mate bond snaps back into place, locking us tighter together than before, wrapping around me protectively like a shield as Bram smiles brightly at me.

How?

You cannot fight a time walker. Bram's voice is soft in my head. *We never planned to let you go. Get your revenge and use us however you wish. It was our plan since the moment we stepped in here. Do not worry about anything else.*

His words make no sense, but the comfort they bring has me shuddering as all their eyes find me, following the connection. I feel whole again, unlike when I woke up. I have no idea how it is possible, but I lose myself in their eyes, even as I feel the rest of the room turn to see me.

Everything else is forgotten. Only they exist.

Their determination, strength, and love floods down the bond. All this time, they knew what I planned and they had their own strategy. I thought they were going to let me go when we came here, but I was wrong.

When did things change for them?

Does it matter?

I'm brought back to the present when I hear a shocked gasp. My focus is drawn to my mother as her hand drops, and shock contorts her face. Now is not the time for weakness. Now is the time to finish what I started.

My death will not be in vain.

I will make them feel the pain I endured all these years and the agony of my eleven deaths, all because of them.

Tilting my head back, I smirk as I step into the room and wink at Bodhi, who stumbles back in horror. Lifting my hands, I yell, "Boo." He actually falls over as I chuckle. "Did you miss me?"

"Impossible," my mother croaks. "I saw you die."

“I’ve died many times.” I shrug as I prowl closer and stand in front of my mates, facing my enemies. My powers fill me, and my phoenix responds with glee as I saunter towards my mother and her huddled mate.

The icy floor melts under my feet as I walk, flames licking at my skin as I stop before them. My mother backs away, and I smile at Bodhi. “Now, where were we? Oh yes, you thought I was weak.” Reaching down to where he fell, I pick him up by the throat and toss him across the room like he threw me. I laugh as flames flow across my skin, my dress billowing out as I saunter over to him and lift him once more. I squeeze his throat as he struggles, trying to use his pathetic muscles to slap me away. I want him to feel everything I did all those years ago.

I want him to understand how he hurt all those girls as he stares into my eyes and knows it will end with me.

He hoarded power and money made by making females suffer, and now he shall die at the hands of one.

“Stop!” My mother reaches for me with her power, the black magic hurtling towards me in defence of her mate. I simply let it hit my chest, absorb it, then stare at her with glowing eyes as arms wrap around her. Before she can fight, she is hauled back to her throne and pinned, unable to move or use her magic as my mates hold her for me.

Despite all her talk and power, she’s still weak when it comes to her mate.

Dropping the pathetic excuse for a man, I watch him stagger on his feet, his face red and purple as he gasps for air. He lifts his head and opens his mouth to speak, so I simply backhand him. His head whips around from the force, and when he looks at me, I do it again. I slap him over and over until he’s crying and cowering on the floor—pathetic, weak, and unworthy of all the suffering he has caused.

“Oriana!” my mother yells, her voice filling the room as ice continues to flow from the sky, but it simply melts, my fire overwhelming it. I once thought she was invincible, but the truth is, not even all the black magic in the world can defeat a phoenix like me. I was born from the ashes of suffering and pain, betrayed, lost, left behind, and crushed under that weight until a glittering diamond appeared. She made me into this, and now she will have to live with that. Death is too quick for her. I want her to suffer for years like I did.

For someone who put power before everyone else, she will finally learn what true power is.

“Oriana, stop!” she bellows, as if she truly believes she has any standing over me.

“Didn’t I tell you? Oriana is dead. She burned in the flames and turned to ash, and that ash created me.” I chuckle as I stroll towards Bodhi as he scrambles backwards, crawling along the floor to escape me.

Giant shards of ice protrude all around me, separating me from Bodhi, and I spare my mother an eye roll. Throwing out my arms, I let my phoenix flames engulf me, watching happily as they melt all the ice she can curate in seconds. I step through puddles and arch an eyebrow at her. “Weak,” I call before turning to Bodhi once more.

Lifting him back to his feet, I stare into his mottled face. “You should have tried harder to kill me. Leave me alive and well . . .” I grin as I thrust my hand into his chest, punching through bone and sinew and gripping his heart. He gasps and struggles as I tighten my hold on it, stopping it from beating. “Tell me everything—the locations and the people who are part of this horrendous trade of women. Now.” I tighten my grip until he is pale. “Or you’ll feel your heart burn in your chest. It’s a horrible way to go. I’ll make sure of it.”

He values his life above all else, so when it comes down to it, self-preservation will win over his hatred of me. He clung to my mother, his mate, all these years as a shield, but now he has nothing left to trade but knowledge. I squeeze harder as blood drips down my arm, hissing in the flames aching to burn him alive.

“On the outskirts of Vigil,” he rasps, watching the crawling flames with terror. “There’s an outpost. I only transport them there. The men I hired are the ones who sell them. They will know the rest. I swear, that’s all, please. I’m telling the truth.”

“I know you are. I can feel it,” I whisper seductively, pulling my hand from his chest. I smile, and he crumples, shaking and defeated. He’s weak, so fucking weak. Blood soaks his chest as he covers the wound, struggling to stay alive, but he’s not dead yet. A quick death is too good for him.

Turning to my mother, I meet her distressed eyes as she shakes her head, imploring me not to do this. When I step away from him, I see her relief as she sags, and I allow her a moment of hope before I leap into the air, changing as I do. A flaming legend squawks above them, a phoenix, and

I dive at the crowd before circling above him. Bodhi tries to run, slipping in his blood, but I stalk him, and as he nears the door, I flap my wings, sending a tidal wave of flame at him.

It engulfs him as he screams a horrible, high-pitched sound as he staggers and turns, burning alive, whipping around in hysteria. My mother tries to cover him in ice, but I land in the path of her magic and block him with my wings. His scream turns to an animalistic sound as he falls to his knees and then to his back. The scent only makes me gleeful as I turn to her, knowing he is done. Her ice hits me countless times as she screams, but it thaws as I move closer to her. Each step melts the ice in the room, and when I'm in front of her, her magic is spent and she's dripping wet and powerless. I watch my mother clutch her chest as her mate's dying cries fill the room, then I stand before her as her daughter, the one she betrayed.

Grabbing her away from my men and her throne, I toss her into the pools of water and stand above her as she remains there, broken and weak, staring up at the monster she made.

Bodhi's cries are quiet now, the stench of burning human flesh making others gag. Not me, I revel in it.

If she had loved me and believed me, we wouldn't be like this, but I guess destiny has plans for us all.

"Are you going to kill your own mother?" she asks as she kneels.

I look down at her and I feel nothing. No pity or love, nothing.

With what strength she has left, she shields herself from the breaking mate bond and certain death. I guess Hel Draven's power is good for something. Like mother, like daughter.

"No, that is your people's choice, not mine. This was never my home and never will be. I just came back to finish what I started." I shrug. I won't kill her, so she will have to face her court and their punishment. They might have followed her out of fear up until now, but with the truth exposed and their children taken, I believe they will turn on her as easily as they did on me.

Leaving her to her fate, I look at my mates and walk towards them, unsure what to say.

"Your blood oath is broken with my death and his. You are free," I tell them, tilting my chin back. "I didn't know the bond would snap back into place. I guess our mating transcends death."

Bram smiles this secretive smile that seems older than him. "Scorpions can alter time. I just never wanted to before. I kept hold of the bond in the past and dragged it to the future."

I blink at him, for once truly seeing the monster he could be.

"Oh, I can try to break it again," I begin, knowing they do not wish to be linked to another, like the collector forced on them.

"No," Torrin rumbles. "You won't. We asked him to try and keep it."

"I was wrong," Kitt whispers, his eyes filled with tears as he smiles at me. "You're worth it. We were just too blinded by hatred to see it, but we see clearly now. We want this bond, and we want you."

I look at Bram and Raiden, my own feelings complicated. "You all feel this way?"

"Can you not feel it? I thought you were so powerful," Raiden teases, but he winks.

"Focus and listen, little beastie," Bram instructs.

Closing my eyes, I trust them to watch my back as I focus on the bond I ignored since coming back to life, but they are right. It's right there, and when I look at it, it bursts to life in my head.

This entire time, they were trying to find a way to keep it. They chose me, even over death. They had a plan and didn't tell me.

Assholes.

The friendship, care, and love I feel has me opening my eyes. I am unable to speak, but I don't need to because when I looked into their minds, I let them in mine.

I feel them now.

There is no room for shame or secrets. We are simply one.

Is this what it is like for you all the time with each other? I don't even realise it's not spoken out loud.

Yes, and now you're part of that.

There's darkness there, and I follow it, turning to find Emrys. Where his voice should be is only a growing red haze.

"Emrys?" I say out loud, watching him worriedly. He's gripping the armrest of the throne for dear life, his head hanging down, but at my voice, it snaps up, his eyes glowing so brightly, it blinds me.

"Oh gods, he's feral," I whisper. We were so lost in what we were doing, we did not see him fall over the edge. This isn't like before. He's

completely gone. He's not just dancing around madness. He is the madness. "Emrys, look at me."

"Ferol, come here." Raiden tugs me back, but Emrys snarls so we freeze.

We are going to have to put him down. Kitt's voice is distraught. *No ghoul comes back from this.*

"We are not killing him!" I roar as I hold out my hand. "Emrys, come back to me. I need you."

I cannot lose him. I can't.

I know this has been his and their greatest fear, and here we are because of me. It's my duty to bring him back. I will not lose anyone else.

His hands shake on the throne, and I hear the arm actually break under his strength as his head jerks from side to side, his nostrils flaring. There is nothing left of him in his eyes, just a hungry animal hunting for prey, and I won't let that be anyone else because it will mean his death.

"Eyes on me!" I yell, and he swings his eyes around as I step away from Raiden. "Come on, baby, give me your worst."

With a growl worthy of the best predators, he pushes off the chair and leaps at me.

I slam back into the icy water puddled on the floor as his claws dig into my sides, tearing through flesh to my organs, but I relax through the agony, reaching up to cup his face, even as my hands shake. "I know you won't hurt me."

Do not come near us. If you hurt him, I'll hurt you back, I warn the others. I can feel their hesitation and need to protect their mate, but he's one of them, one of the hive.

"Shh, I'm right here. Come back to me." Uncaring about his snapping teeth, I lean up and kiss him. He freezes above me, a constant, low growl escaping his throat, but he's not actively tearing me apart now. "Remember me? Your mate? I need you. Come back to me."

Surely if this mate bond is good for anything, it's this.

"Emrys, come back to me," I beg against his lips as I kiss him again. When I lean back, his eyes are still red, but he's blinking. Is that a good sign?

Ferol, please, Raiden implores. *Don't let him suffer.*

I can feel their pain. It matches my own, my soul and heart aching. Despite my best efforts, these men have come to mean everything to me.

They found me at my darkest, and even though this should never work, it does. I don't want to lose Emrys.

I've already lost so much.

"Please don't let me lose someone else I care for," I beg, tightening my hold on his face. "I lost my life, my love, and my daughter. Please do not let me lose my mate. Fight. Come back to me. Fight one last time, and I promise from now on, I will fight every battle for you."

I can still feel that red haze, but I try wading through it, reaching for his mind with my own as I speak until I'm snapped back to reality when my name is screamed in my head in warning. I realise why. My mother is heading towards us.

"Daughter, let me end this one's suffering." My mother's hand lifts as I throw Emrys behind me and get to my knees, blocking her path to him. I can come back from the dead, but he can't.

Throwing my hand out protectively in front of him, I narrow my eyes on my mother. "If you try to kill him, I will kill you, understand?"

"Look at him. He is gone. He will kill us all! Whatever happens next, this cannot be avoided. Right now, we are on the same side. This court will die if that creature lives." She makes it seem like she's helping me, but the truth is, she wants me to suffer like she is and to show her people they still need her.

The fool. She wasn't strong enough to protect her mate, but I am.

I lift my hand and blast her with fire, throwing her through the air with the force. She hits the ashen body of her mate, and it crumples to dust and blackness below her twisting form.

"He is mine! They are mine!" I roar at her before turning and gripping Emrys's cheeks, digging my nails in until that slow, sluggish black goo leaves him. "Come back to me now!"

I blast that same fire, same power, into his mind. I don't try to part the haze, instead burning it to a crisp. I take his hunger into me and share it between us. I make the pain, death, and starvation he has lived with since being brought back against his will my own. What is more pain for me? Nothing. I'll gladly take it if it means he stays.

I drain it from him into me, shuddering and struggling under the weight, but then the others help, sharing the neuro load and taking it into themselves. The burden lessens, and when I open my eyes, the red in Emrys's slowly retreats as he blinks.

“Ferol?” he croaks.

“It’s me. I’m here.” Relief floods me as I throw my arms around him, unable to resist. His hand strokes up and down my back as he buries his head in my shoulder. I feel the others draw closer, protecting us and adding in their presence and warmth as he lifts his head.

“There’s a scar.” He rubs my chest, and I glance down at it. “How?”

“I guess it’s from when I took your pain into me.” I shrug, uncaring.

“I’m sorry,” he says, but I cover his lips.

“It is a privilege to wear the proof of your life on my skin.” Pressing my forehead to his, I breathe.

Not to break up the love fest, but we are surrounded, Raiden says.

We should get moving, Torrin cautions.

Nodding, I take Emrys’s hand and stand, looking at my mother as she gets to her feet, the ashes of her fallen lover covering her. The blue ice that once protected her is now little more than water sliding across her skin. “Be a better leader or not. I guess that’s for your court to decide.”

What they choose to do is their decision. Death at my hand would be too easy for her. It’s better for her to live and suffer with the knowledge of her defeat while those she believed were lesser control her fate.

It is a life worse than death for her, trapped in a place struggling to survive, just like I did.

She is no longer a queen. She is simply another monster.

She frowns, and without another word, we head towards the door. At the open exit, I turn back to my mother in front of her court.

“Oh, and Mother, you can come after me for revenge, but you will lose. I am stronger than you and more powerful. You know that now, and so does the world. You are not the great Draven anymore. I am.”

With that final statement, I hold my head high and leave her and this cold place behind.

It was never my home, but I am beginning to realise I will never be alone again. My mates and I are the monsters this world fears.

And fear us it should.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



We follow our mate like we have been since before we even knew what it meant. She wastes no time leaving Vigil behind, climbing into the middle seat of the truck, so we pile in next to her. Her thoughts are loud, something we will need to teach her to quieten, so Kitt speaks out loud until she can get the hang of it. The mate bond is different this time. Somehow, we have completely connected her to our hive mind. Now we will never be apart. “Where to?”

Her eyes linger on the castle, so I reach out to take her hand. “Little beastie?”

“He said there was a place on the outskirts of Vigil where those girls were housed. There is only one place I can think of. It’s an old port my mother closed up a long time ago. Nobody goes there since we don’t leave. If there are any girls there, then we need to help them and stop the trading and defilement.”

“Which way, beautiful?” Kitt asks, gripping the wheel.

“Past the lake, then turn right down a hidden path. I’ll direct you.” She’s still clutching Emrys’s hand like she’s worried he’s going to disappear again. In fact, that’s her exact thought, loud and clearly screamed. I see his lips twitch as he reads them before she leans her head into me.

He’s so muscular and big. I can’t even reach his shoulder—

I shuffle down in my seat so her head can rest on my shoulder, and she narrows her eyes on me. “I don’t like this new mind sharing thing.”

It’s definitely new. Previously, we only caught snippets of her thoughts, and that’s only when we really tried. Now, her mind is completely

interlocked with ours.

“You’ll learn to block us as much as you can,” I promise, kissing her head. “But for now, it’s cute. You’re like a cactus, all spikey and hard outside and soft inside. I like it.”

“Don’t get smart. I will still kill you,” she mutters but cuddles back into my shoulder.

“Sure you will,” I say as I look out the window.

We’re quiet out loud, but her thoughts tumble through our heads, clunky and without organisation. We do our best to block it until she can learn as we pass the lake, and she points to a turn we missed coming in before. The road is more like a path, and it’s bumpy as hell. I brace one hand on the roof and the other around her to keep her stable, and after what feels like hours of driving, the trees open to reveal frozen water in front of us. On the left, there is a light blue, one-storey building with the word “port” in chipped paint on the side. After we kill the engine out of sight, I look at Ferol with a question. She must hear it in my head, which means she’s getting better, but she answers out loud.

“When my mother first came, the land didn’t used to be frozen. This connected to the ocean, but she made it this way, so the port was abandoned. I came here once on a dare, but it was super creepy. It has a basement that’s below sea level, and I always freaked it was going to flood. I guess it’s frozen over now, but if they are keeping people hostage, I’m assuming that’s the place.”

“Alright then, let’s get to it.” Torrin clambers from the truck and starts towards the port, leaving us blinking after him.

“I guess we just . . . go?” she asks in confusion.

Kitt sighs, and we hurry after Torrin, who’s already at the old door to the dilapidated building, kicking it open. With his strength, it comes off its hinges and flies inside like a weapon.

“Dude.” Raiden sighs.

“What? I knocked,” he replies.

Ferol slides past him, sneaking inside to be first, but then she flies backwards seconds later, sailing through the door. I gape as she flips mid-air, landing on her feet. Snarling, she dusts off her hands and glares into the building. Flames burst to life on her skin, the ice around her melting instantly as I look inside the dark interior, trying to see what or who attacked her.

“Those fuckers, I’m going to burn their cocks off,” she hisses before stomping towards the door, but we beat her to it, surging inside to defend out mate’s honour.

“Nobody kills her but us,” Kitt roars as he meets the first attacker lingering in the dark.

They must have heard us coming because they are prepared. There are at least thirty mages in here, their black magic swirling in the air.

“It’s been too long since I had a good fight,” Torrin says, transforming in an instant and dropping his hooves before charging. I blink, watching as the others do the same. Kitt knocks down half the entryway with his size as magic hits him and throws him outside. Raiden dives at them with his sword, grinning as Emrys shoots both of his guns, moving back to a defensible position. Ferol stomps past me and throws fire at a mage, their scream filling the air as they are set alight. I’m debating who to attack when I see him.

Not all of them are mages, I think as I look at the ogre staring my way, swinging a club. I have no idea how I missed him before, but his giant mouth opens as he yells and swings that huge weapon down. Ducking under his wild swipes, I weave and dance backwards to avoid him as Raiden throws his sword into the air behind him and leaps up. Changing mid jump, Raiden lands on four paws in the giant version of his fox, which is as big as the ogre, then catches the ice sword in his mouth and leaps at him. Lightning flashes across his skin and down the sword as he stabs it into the ogre’s back and hits him with lightning, using the metal as a conduit. The giant monster screams and rocks to his knees, then to his face.

Raiden grins atop the fallen corpse, leaving his sword behind as he zips out of the door after some of the others, lightning trailing behind him as I hear screams from the escaping mages.

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Turning, I leave him to his fun as I face down four mages gathered together, their magic focused entirely on Ferol.

My little beastie! My mate!

I feel the transformation come over me, drawn by my possessive anger, my eyes blinded by time. I see the past, present, and future all folded into one, and I simply select what I need. I don't often play with it, but the first time I ever accidentally tried it, I got myself captured by the collector and swore to never touch it again. When it comes to my mate, however, I would risk changing every past and future to keep her safe.

When I blink, the scorpions I gathered from all over the world, small and large, swarm from my arms and towards the mages, crawling up their bodies. They scream and try to tear and swat them away, but there are too many. Smirking, I glance at Ferol, who blinks, looking from the scorpions to me.

"So you just, like, carry them everywhere? Like, where do you store them? Do you have a scorpion bag or something?"

"I pulled them from the past." I shrug.

"Of course, why didn't I think of that?" She looks at Raiden, who has reappeared, panting and grinning.

Sarcasm, I realise.

Yelping, Ferol ducks under a swarm of magic and throws herself at the aggressive mage as I look through the rest of my friends' eyes, checking on them.

Kitt is outside, roaring as I slide into his head. He's huge, in the biggest of his forms. He hammers his boulder-sized fists into a mage, exploding him into tiny pieces. We turn and find three more there. They try to run, but we chase them towards the trees, plucking one from the ground like she weighs nothing and heaving her into the air. Her body pierces through all three fleeing enemies like a sword, and he turns around as I slip from his head and into Torrin.

He hammers two mages into a wall before he drops them, their heads bursting open like grapes. Torrin lowers his head and rams another coming our way, his horns impaling him as he screams. Black magic hits us, but Torrin just shakes his snout and the mage is flung through the air, right into Ferol's fire.

Lastly, I slip into Emrys's head. He's grinning widely, tinged by the madness of a feral ghoul, but not enough to swallow him. "Come on, you

bastards!” he roars, continuing to shoot until he’s empty. Instead of reloading, he uses his hands. One hand turns into claws, while the other grips the bone knife he carved from Ferol as he throws himself into their masses. Blood sprays across us, and magic hits us, catapulting me back into my own body. Magic blasts me in the chest, and I hit the wall with a groan. Climbing from the wreckage of broken wood, I duck under the next blow and spin behind the mage. I slam my hand into his chest, yank his heart out, and crumble it into dust, shaking off the blood as I turn to continue to help before I stagger as my powers flare.

It’s the only downside. When I use them, they start becoming second nature, like now.

For a moment, a future flashes in my head, making me gasp, and pain filters through me. This happens sometimes when those I care for are under threat or there’s a great event.

I watch, screaming and roaring, as a mage in the future slips from a hidden staircase, lifts a black spear into the air, and throws it towards Ferol. The poison takes hold instantly, even as she plucks it away, and when she falls to the ground, dead, I am frozen. I want to grab her, but I can’t move. I’m just a passerby in this future, but the others scramble to her, expecting her to wake up.

She doesn’t, and the mage laughs.

“That is how you kill a phoenix.”

Coming back to the present, I drop my hands from my head and blink, turning to the staircase. It can be seconds, minutes, days, or months, it’s hard to tell, but this has to be soon. He will not get my mate.

Crossing the room with frantic steps, I thrust my hand through the door hiding the staircase and toss it aside. The wood sails across the room as the mage turns, his hands conjuring magic over the spear. I grab him by the throat and lift him into the air. “My beastie,” I hiss before I snap his neck.

Panting, I turn back, realising everything is silent. My brothers and mate are gathered there, and Ferol grins before offering me a thumbs-up. “I kept two alive,” she says, “for questioning.”

I glance past her to see Emrys tying them up to chairs and wheeling them into the middle of the room. “Bram, stay with them for me while we look downstairs.”

“Why him?” Raiden grumbles.

“He’s the least likely to kill them if they annoy him,” she answers, kissing my cheek as she walks to the hidden staircase and down to the basement. The others follow as I grin stupidly at her praise and approach the mages.

Smiling at the man, I spin his chair around as I wait for them to return. I can see what they are doing downstairs, however, and my smile diminishes when their horror and anger flood our bond.

It’s a fucking nightmare in more than one way.

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THIRTY-NINE

T



After being kept prisoner by the collector for years, I thought I had seen the worst this world has to offer. I was wrong.

There is no dignity here, only death and darkness.

The stairs lead right into the basement, where tiny cages sit atop each other, stacked high and spanning all the walls. Most are empty, but not all. The first few figures we find are dead, and the state of their bodies makes my stomach roll. One is just skin and bones and no older than ten. The next has stumps for limbs, and her little face is frozen in terror. The last is curled away from us, but the strips of missing skin and bone down her back have me turning away.

All the adrenaline and glee from the fight flees in the wake of this horror.

“What were they doing to them?”

“Evil things,” Ferol mutters ahead, glancing back at me.

The cages are barely big enough to sit up in, never mind lie down, and from the marks on their bodies and dirt, it’s clear they’ve been here a while. The smell is so overwhelming, I know I will never be free of it. “So many are empty. Does that mean—”

They’ve probably been sold, she finishes in our heads, loud and clear for once. Wait, I see some movement.

She hurries down the line to the very end, where there are a couple of larger cages. There are at least eight girls who are alive. The one closest to me can’t be any older than three, and my stomach rolls at the idea of what

they might be selling her into. A tail snakes around her tiny body, and two giant eyes peer up at me, glassy and afraid. My heart aches as I slip down to my knees in front of her.

“Shh, it’s okay, little one,” I murmur, but she snaps at the bars before backing away, shrouded by her hair. He glares at me as her hair transforms. She seems to shrink, and when I blink, the young girl is gone, and in her place is a strange and horrifying mix of a wolf and a girl. She’s trapped between and in pain, but still clawing at the bars.

Looking up at Ferol, I feel anger contort my face. “We have to help them.”

“Setting them free here would only ensure their deaths. There’s nothing for hundreds of miles, and they wouldn’t trust us to escort them. They aren’t kids anymore. They lost their innocence, you can see it, and we need a professional who can find them homes where they can heal and learn to control whatever has been done to them.”

“I know someone,” Bram says suddenly. “Maybe that is why she was born or won the war. It’s hard to tell which came first.” He blinks, and the gold is gone from his eyes. “Tate is a hunter. I have her number.”

“Do I ask how?” Ferol questions.

“I saw it, just then, all her life. She’s important, and she’s also helping and will help a lot of people, just like these girls. That’s who we should call. More than their futures rely on it.”

“Not creepy at all,” Raiden mutters. “I hate when he does that time shit.”

“We can’t just leave them here.” That cuts through their chatter, and Ferol nods, looking around before hurrying upstairs. When she returns, she has clothes, blankets, food, and water, which must have been stored upstairs. She carefully lays it out before she jerks her head, indicating for us to follow her, so we back out of the door and huddle in the hallway. Ferol closes the door, and the metal clicks into place, then she hits a button in her hand. All the cages swing open with a buzz. The little girls are hesitant at first before they slowly venture out.

“Come on, let’s contact Tate. We can keep our eyes on them safely here.” Heading back upstairs, we follow Ferol’s advice, and she finds a mobile from one of the dead mages. She has to try a couple of times with various dismembered hands to get it unlocked, but when she does, she hands it to Bram.

He slowly types in the number and hands it back. Ferol puts it on speaker and backs away. Not long after, there is a deep, groaning voice. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Is this Tate?”

“No, obviously, who is this?” There’s a slap, and then a sharp female voice speaks next.

“This is Tate. Can I help you?”

“My name is Oriana Draven, daughter of the mage Hel Draven.” Tate inhales sharply, but other than that, she doesn’t give anything away.

“I see, and how can I help you, Oriana?”

“Ferol, please. I need your help with some young girls who were captured and are in trouble. My mate told me you could help.”

“Send me your address. We are just finishing up a job here, then will be on our way. How bad is it?” Tate asks, her voice hard.

“Bad, very bad,” Ferol whispers, hanging her head in shame. “We need all the help we can get.”

“Understood. Text this number with the address, and we will be there by first light.” She hangs up. Ferol struggles but finally figures out how to send our location.

“What do we do while we wait?” I mutter.

“Hopefully get changed,” Emrys deadpans. “You look like idiots.”

Well, fuck.

We did, in fact, get changed. There was a stockpile of spells in the back room Ferol found. She very carefully avoided some, in fact most, before finding what she needed and handing them out. Now, dressed in trousers and a shirt, I feel more comfortable. Our mate looks good enough to eat in some baggy utility trousers and black boots. Her chest is coated in a tight, short-sleeved black shirt, exposing her abs, but she seems happier to move around in that rather than the dress. With little else to do, she turns her attention to the mages we left alive.

You’re up, big guy, she instructs me in my head, sending me images of what she wants. It’s crude and choppy, but I understand her meaning. I take them by surprise when I stomp in front of them, waking them from their

naps. Their eyes snap open and widen in fear. I understand then why she picked me. My size instantly intimidates them.

"We want the list of those who have been sold and where," I demand. "Where is it?"

A mage points at a screen, and I narrow my eyes. "The list, you fool!"

"It's not like we print it and keep it. We aren't dumb or ninety. It's on the system there, idiot," he grumbles as I glare.

"Does anyone know how to use this?" Ferol asks, stepping up to the screen. "I haven't been around new technology in years."

"Maybe Tate will know." Bram shrugs.

"Tate this, Tate that," she mutters, throwing him a glare. "Is she your new favourite?" Jealousy slides through us, and he perks up with a grin.

"I like that feeling, though I don't like to make you angry." His smile fades to a frown. "Tate is happily mated, as am I, little beastie. I simply respect her, and you will too. In fact, you'll be friends."

"Damn it, Bram, spoiler alert," Raiden grumbles.

"Bram, what have we talked about when discussing the future?" Kitt sighs.

Emrys surprises us all when he nudges Ferol out of the way with a kiss on her cheek and loads up the computer. Within seconds, he has a list on the screen. "I can email it to us as well."

"Email . . . I don't even remember what mine was," Ferol admits, making him grin.

"Let's just leave it for Tate—"

There's a shift in the air, and we all turn, instantly on alert as a knock comes at the non-existent door. A pink-haired female grins at us through the doorway. "Hi there. The Tate you speak of is here."

"Baby, what have I told you about going in first?" the voice from the phone grumbles, and then a short-haired woman in leather steps into view, her eyes sweeping around before landing on us. "I guess you have been busy. I'm Tate. You must be Ferol."

"That's me." Ferol nods. "I like your hair."

"I like yours too." Tate grins, cuffing the pink-haired woman's neck and dragging her behind her. "May we come in?"

"Sure." We step back, allowing them entry, and six men slip inside. They are careful to stay near the door, but they don't seem bothered as Tate,

who is clearly their mate, wanders over, which makes us think she can handle herself.

“We heard some rumours about bad things happening with mages. I guess we were right,” Tate begins, an air of authority wrapping around her. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Ferol obviously trusts her somewhat, or Bram, because she launches into the story. It’s the condensed version, but when she’s done, Tate sighs, glances at her mates, and then returns her focus to us. “We can help. We have a network of people, and most are supes. We’ll find them good homes to be raised in. That is the list of the others who were taken and sold?”

Ferol nods, and Tate checks it out. “I can send it to you,” Emrys begins.

“No need, Addeus will grab it from the system.” We all look at the big man she indicates, who has metal protruding from his face.

“Done.”

“Okay, Ferol, we’ll take it from here. I promise we will protect them.” She eyes us. “But I’ll admit these men look very familiar.”

Emrys’s hand drifts to his gun, and Ferol steps in front of us.

“I mean no harm,” Tate says with her hands held up, a smile curling her lips as she watches us with interest. “We recently found a compound used by a person who was called the collector. It was empty and destroyed, a real mess, but we found files on all these men in their systems. Another thing you have been busy with?”

“They are mine,” Ferol snaps, “and she deserved to die.”

“From what we could see, I have no doubt she did. The only problem is that there are a lot of monsters now on the loose from that place, and we already have reports coming in of the destruction they have caused. I cannot handle both them and these girls. I have a new tracing team to help me track down the missing girls, but it will still be a lot of work. I have no right to ask this, but from what I have seen there and here, you are a good person who wants to help others. You freed those monsters. I’m not asking for you to kill them or even capture them again, but please help them find peace so this world doesn’t suffer.” She looks at us. “I’m offering you a new job. I hear you are in the market.”

“How did you know that?” Kitt asks.

“We all have our ways.” Tate grins. “Feel free to talk amongst yourselves.”

Feral meets our eyes before turning her back to them. It's a show of strength and trust as we huddle together.

Well? Ferol asks. *We kind of don't have a plan. Do we take her up on it?*

We did set them free, Emrys points out.

I wanted to relax on a beach, I grumble.

It's our responsibility. Kitt's face is closed down as he looks between us. *This job is different. It's for the good guys. I'm tired of being the bad guys, so let's be good for once and help people.*

Fine.

I'm in. Bram nods.

Ferol? We all turn to her, and she gnaws on her lip as she thinks.

I did kind of set them free. Ah, fuck it, let's become monster hunters.

Choice made, she faces Tate. "We'll track them down, but we'll decide how we deal with them."

"Interesting," Tate murmurs, looking between us, no doubt picking up on the fact that we didn't talk out loud. "Of course, it's your job. I'll give you whatever you need, so we will keep in contact."

"You'll protect these girls, won't you? You won't hurt them? It's not their fault they were made into monsters," Ferol asks, looking worried.

Tate smiles at her men then steps forward, offering her hand. One has a glove on it, and the other doesn't. It's clear my girl is hesitant, but she takes her hand and gasps, and we all feel why.

Tate staggers back, lifting her hand when her men surge forward. "She didn't attack. I wasn't aware of their shared cognitive mind is all. It was a lot of power and memories. Can I try again? I just wanted to show you the truth."

We all felt her in our heads, not rifling per se, but a heavy presence that didn't belong. Ferol still offers Tate her hand. Tate accepts it graciously with a grateful smile, and this time I see her soul, her plans, and her promise.

"You'll take care of them." Ferol relaxes, pulling her hand away. "Handy gift, pun intended."

"Not as cool as yours." Tate grins. "The last living phoenix. It will make you quite the wanted woman, but I suppose with your mates, anyone foolish enough to try would end in a very painful death. Go, Ferol, Oriana Draven, and your lost monsters and live your life. You deserve one. See the sun,

watch the moon again, and breathe fresh air. You lost a lot of years. Take them back.”

Tate departs, trooping downstairs with her entourage of mates, one of which salutes us, and we are left all alone.

Turning to us, Ferol blinks. “Where do we begin?”

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CHAPTER FORTY



It's been a busy month. It's insane to think that's all the time it's been since we first met our mate. I was so resistant at first, hating what she represented, but now I'm all in.

She is one of us, and even if I could, I wouldn't let her go.

She's insane, cruel, violent, and—

Hey!

Smirking at her outburst, I can't help but be happy despite everything.

Our job is complete, Ferol had her revenge, and now we have a new purpose, but first, we need to rest. We won't be good at hunting without it, so we take a leisurely drive back to our boat. Once there, we simply collapse in the dining room in a pile of blankets and pillows.

"We'll need to change the sleeping arrangements," I remark out loud. It's become something I'm used to, even if she can hear us in our heads now. My mind is already whirring with everything we need to do.

"So we are really sure about this mate thing, huh?" Raiden teases.

"I might still kill you," Ferol grumbles, making me sigh.

"You would?" Bram asks sadly. "Oh, wait, I see the joke now."

"So cute, but so dumb," she teases as she lifts her head. "Tate was right. I want to do more. I want to be more than a monster. I know you all do as well. I'm glad we took the job from her."

I can see her thoughts and the things she did in Gehenna to survive. Worry clouds her mind, so I cup her cheek and pull her closer.

"We are all greater than the worst things we have done, Ferol. We are monsters and carry darkness. We shoulder it in a way no human ever could.

The things we have seen and survived would break most, but not us because we keep moving and leave them in the past. You've been carrying around this weight for far too long. It's time to let it go or let it change you."

Her eyes search mine before she leans in with a smile and kisses me. "I'm glad I've let all of you change me. I was so scared of being happy again, but now I couldn't imagine being alone."

"You'll never have to be," Bram calls, and the warmth that moves through the bond settles my stone heart.

Snuggling into our embrace, she sighs happily before mischievousness winds through our heads from hers. "I'll still kill you if you annoy me, but if you're good—" No sooner are those words out of her mouth than I roll over on top of her.

Her laughter is loud and unrestrained, reforming our once boring boat into our new home.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



We waste a few days lingering on the boat, just enjoying each other and recovering. We almost lost her. I never knew I would care so much. Hell, I dreamed of how to kill her, and now the idea of anyone touching her haunts me. Fucking mate bond, although I will admit she is worth it.

After a few days, we grow restless. I know we are all worried about how much distance the escaped collector's monsters will have put between them and us, so we get moving, shoring up the boat once more and heading inland. It doesn't take us long to get to the collector's warehouse, and once there, I see what Tate meant. Most of the structure is still standing, but the inside is a mess. Nearly all the tubes are broken, and the ground is littered with glass, so much so that Torrin throws Ferol on his back, refusing to let her touch it even with her boots. I guess I'm not the only one soft on her.

There's a horrendous stench from the blood and guts spread around. I am guessing not everybody survived the escape. We find our way into the control room, the hub of the collector's setup. It's almost untouched, so I guess computers aren't really important for them.

"Computer," Ferol calls as we stare dumbly at the technology, not one of us having a clue how to use it.

"Specimen 680, welcome back. How may I assist you?"

"The collector is dead. Transfer all controls to me," she says, shrugging.

"Control denied, specimens escaped, containment protocol failed," the monotone voice responds.

"Yes, specimens escaped. Is there a way to find them?"

“All specimens are fitted with a collector’s edition tracking device in case of escape,” the computer responds. Well, shit, no wonder she kept finding us.

“Uh-oh, computer, give me access to the tracking,” Ferol says.

“Access denied.”

Fuck.

“Computer, give me access to the tracking information,” Kitt demands.

“Specimen 11, access granted.”

We all turn to him, and he shrugs. “She once brought me in here to help with a show she was putting on. She gave me control to show off her pathetic grip on me. I was hoping she hadn’t revoked it.”

There’s a beep, and we turn as a device pops up from the control panel. “All tracking information successfully uploaded to the collector’s handset.”

“Well, shit, this makes it easier.” I rub my hands together as Kitt tugs it free.

“Let’s get out of here. I hate this place,” Emrys snaps, but we all hear his thoughts and turn to Bram, who is looking around. No one hates it here more than he does, so without a word, we leave the compound, the past, and the horrors behind. Once back in our commandeered truck, Kitt shows us the list.

“I guess we just start at the top?” Ferol suggests, clicking one. It loads a map. The number is about a hundred miles from here. “Well, I guess it could be farther. Alright, boys, let’s get to work.”

“What did it say about this one again?” I ask, leaning through the seats and peering at the monster we tracked down.

“Erm, I didn’t look.” Ferol scans the file. “Ah, so yeah, this looks like an amphibious monster.” We look back at the lake we are parked in front of, surrounded by trees. It’s dark, and a full moon hangs in the sky. It’s creepy as hell looking at the still water and then the screen with the unblinking number located dead centre.

“Who’s bait?” I ask, looking around, knowing there’s no other way. We need to lure it out.

When all eyes turn to me, I groan. “Not a chance.”

“But you’re so pretty and tempting,” Ferol cajoles, making my eyes narrow.

“You’re manipulating me.”

“Is it working?” she purrs, leaning in to lick my lips.

“Yes, damn it.”

“So tasty, he’ll love you.” Smacking my ass, she kicks me out of the truck.

Within five minutes, we are set up. The others are scattered throughout the forest as I kick my shoes off and wade into the water. When I’m knee deep, I smack my hands into the surface a couple of times.

“Oh no, I’m lost and all alone. I hope nothing in this big lake comes out to eat me,” I call dramatically. After a few minutes of splashing, I look back.

Go deeper, Kitt instructs.

You asshole.

Come on, baby, or are you scared? Ferol taunts.

You bet your ass I wade in deeper until the water reaches my chest. “It’s just me, swimming in this very creepy lake at night, because what else would I do?” I start to sing a *Shrek* song. It’s one of Torrin’s favourite movies and comes to my head automatically. Suddenly, bubbles pop up a few feet away, and I narrow my eyes. They grow closer, so I start to back up.

My legs are suddenly pulled from under me, and I let out a yelp as I’m turned then dragged. Surprisingly enough, I’m yanked from the water and onto the shore, and something pins me. I manage to struggle away and flip over to see the amphibian motherfucker on top of me. The only person allowed to top me is my mate! There are gills on his neck and face. He is blue, with a round head and big eyes, but when he opens his mouth to roar, slime falls across me, making me gag.

“Dude, that’s nasty!” I yell, kicking him up and off as the others materialise. He spins, hissing at them, and dives for the water, but I grab its huge lizard tale and tug him back, throwing him towards Torrin.

It’s a struggle, but he, Bram, and Kitt manage to subdue the creature, and Ferol and Emrys uncork the medication we found at the collector’s warehouse and sedate him.

Looking down at the newly drugged amphibian man, I wipe the slime from my face. “Next time, I’m not the bait,” I grumble.

“But you play it so well,” Ferol purrs, keeping her distance with a wince as I flick off more slime.

“There better be a reward.” I point in her face, and she grins, making my cock harden at the images that flash through her head. “Okay, I’ll play bait whenever.” I swallow hard as she laughs, making my heart soar.

Damn stupid organ.

Damn beautiful mate.

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



Three weeks later . . .

We've found a rhythm over the last few weeks. We track the monsters around the globe on our boat, and when we find them, we drug them and call Tate. She sends in a local hunter team who will relocate them somewhere they can safely live. Originally, Ferol wanted to choose, but she was soon daunted by the task. I guess she never wanted anyone's life in her hands again, but she does give every monster a chance, no matter what. Like now, when news reports of the tiny town on the French coast are scattered with horror stories of locals being attacked and eaten, she is determined to save the monster from the people who would hurt it.

Just like me.

She sees the best in everyone and accepts the worst, no matter how dark. I guess when you survive in hell and darkness for so long, nothing else compares.

This new life we have created is nice. Don't get me wrong, we still argue. We are all hot-headed, and she seems to get off on making us angry. After is my favourite, though. She calls it make-up sex. It's a whole lot of fun and makes fighting worthwhile. Living in cramped quarters while in each other's heads would be some people's worst nightmare, but we are never alone now, and I like that, as well as waking up to her singing off-key in our kitchen.

I like life with her, and I love her.

It's something I realised long ago but denied. I don't know if it's the mate bond's effects or not, but to me, it doesn't matter. It's just the truth.

The others are out in town, searching for clues, but she's at my side in an old farmhouse. Her head turns to me as she reads my thoughts, and her smile is soft as she reaches for me and caresses the scar on my face. She always does that, making sure to touch them and letting me feel her reaction to them. She makes them something beautiful, something wondrous, and after seeing myself through her eyes, how could I ever hate them again?

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"It would be an honour," I admit, knowing she read my mind.

Searching my eyes and my thoughts, she smiles, and I tilt my head. How many times have I scarred and bit her? It's only fair.

Her lips gently press to the only unscarred section of my neck, a promise and an apology before she suddenly bites down, digging her teeth in and tearing my skin. Groaning, I clutch her arm, desire coursing through me as she gnaws on the flesh. Pulling away, she spits out my blood and goes back to it, widening the mark a couple more times before sitting back.

I know it will scar, everything does on my skin, and I couldn't be happier. If not, I would have simply bled myself dry until it did. Gripping her face, I lean into her, hungry for her flesh and body. Her breathing picks up as we sway together.

Just then, the door bursts open. "Stop fucking around, you two. We found the monster. It's a goddamn leprechaun."

"A leprechaun?" Ferol smirks, leaning into me. "And you couldn't handle it?"

"Vicious, very vicious," Torrin grumbles. "Come on, let's go."

Sparing each other a look, we roll our eyes and get to our feet. At the door, I wipe her lips with my thumb and kiss her, tasting myself. "Let's go save your idiot mates."

"Your idiot friends," she retorts before grinning. "I love you too."

She walks out of the door, leaving me blinking incredulously after her.

"Ferol!" I roar, giving chase, her laughter reaching me on the wind.

Yes, it's not a perfect life, but it's good, and it's all mine.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



Three months later...

I was always curious about their mind connection, and when I first started to get snippets and thoughts down the mate bond, I was terrified of what they would see. Sometimes I still am, but we all have our pasts and our nightmares. We are trying to overcome them together and not let them rule our lives. There is no getting rid of them, that's not how it works, but I also don't want it to be the sum of who I am. Besides, it has its pluses. I get to see their thoughts of me, which I worried would be bad, but they are actually very nice. I hate displays of emotion, but hearing it in their minds? I enjoy it very much.

The connection also makes hunting easier. We can coordinate and react over vast distances without making a sound, but sometimes I like to hear their voices, especially if they are moaning my name.

We've managed to find and safely capture fifteen of the collector's escaped specimens in the last three months—no easy feat, but it's been fun working with them, out on the road and getting to see the world and help people.

Freedom is what I love the most.

The sea is quiet for once, and there is no land in sight as I sprawl on the deck and stare up at the midday sun. The heat is reminiscent of Gehenna, but the fresh, salty air and space around me is a reminder that I am free.

I hear them before I see them. They plop down next to me. It can be hard to have space on a boat, but they try their best to give me room when they feel like I need it and then reappear when I'm ready, like now.

I roll my head to take them in as they sit and lie around me. I'm soaking in the sun nude, so I know it won't take long. It's why they came, and seconds later, a hand snakes up my thigh. We struggle to go long without touching—sometimes just for comfort, and other times for pleasure—but with me lying here like this? It was a test of their control, and they are done playing.

Me? I'm just getting started.

Smirking, I let my phoenix out and push off, soaring into the sky to escape them.

A hand snags my ankle when I try to flee, seeing my action before I can fully complete it, and it yanks me down to the deck as I am pinned to the wood.

Desire, hunger, love, and obsession fill our joined heads, so much so we never have to speak it out loud. Sometimes it's nice, and sometimes it makes me want to hit them, but times like now, I don't mind it at all.

Hands pin each of my arms and legs down as mouths slide across me. I relax back and close my eyes, handing myself over to the pleasure. Big hands part my thighs, and I groan as a palm cups my cunt.

"You're so wet. We've felt you getting more and more hungry for us for hours, pushing us to our limits, you tease," Kitt says out loud as fingers slip inside me—different sizes, different people. Another set, wet with something, pushes into my ass while two mouths close on my nipples. One is soft, and one is hard. My chest arches up as I groan.

"I was seeing how long you'd resist," I rasp, groaning when a mouth seals over my pussy despite the fingers, their tongue lashing my clit. "It made me needy."

"We felt it," Emrys growls. "Now we want what our mate was offering."

Their teasing hands and mouths don't stop. If anything, they get more insatiable as my thighs are pushed farther apart.

"Let me see her," Torrin growls. "I love looking at her pretty pussy."

Bending my knees, I press my heels to my ass as the mouth continues to attack my clit. The thick fingers in my pussy and ass stretch me, driving my desire higher until I shatter with a scream.

Slumping back into the deck, I shake from the force of my release as those fingers and mouths continue to attack me. "More. I need all of you," I demand, opening my eyes to see them. They move away, not needing a word to understand. Turning my head, I meet Raiden's glowing eyes as he strokes my cheek, and I open my lips, taking his cock deep into my throat as he smiles at me.

My hips are lifted, and without looking, I feel the scars against my skin just as Bram's cock spears my cunt, thrusting inside me a couple of times as I suck Raiden desperately before he abruptly pulls away, replaced by a thicker cock. Torrin impales my pussy, grinding into my clit until I moan around Raiden, and then he, too, is gone. A scarred cock drags and stimulates my walls, but then he disappears as well.

I feel Kitt's size before he invades me, claiming every inch of me. They pass me around like that, back and forth, until I lose myself in them. Emrys's scarred cock finally finds home in my ass with slow, rolling thrusts as my pussy is shared between them. My eyes are still on Raiden before they slide shut.

Ecstasy like never before rolls across me. Our hive is alive with it. We are individuals and also one, something no one else could ever understand, and as always, my pleasure only heightens with theirs.

Heat burns my skin from the sun and my change as Raiden's hips stutter then turn mean, hammering down my throat, and with a thunder-filled roar, he comes, shooting down my throat so deep, I don't even need to swallow before he pulls out. Panting, I lick my sore lips, but then another cock is offered to me. Bram taps my lips with his tip and slides inside, tasting of me and my desire as he takes Raiden's place. Hands grip and tweak my nipples, and euphoria sweeps through me as pleasure arcs from them to my clit as another mouth sucks on it.

I don't even know who is where as they drag me from one orgasm to the next, until I'm lost in golden, hazy bliss. There's a groan, and then I feel Emrys fill my ass, his thick cum spurting inside me before another cock replaces him. Every inch of me is theirs, and every time one of them finds their pleasure, I do as well, until I come so much, I pass out. When I come back, Kitt is pummeling my cunt and tweaking my clit, and when he roars, filling me with his release, I cry wordlessly, squirting my own. Blackness edges my vision again from the intense pleasure as he falls away, and Bram plunges into my cunt once more. I don't even remember him leaving my

mouth, but in a few thrusts, he pulls out of my cunt and covers my chest in his cum. Torrin is holding out, and when the others stroke and tease me for him, he lifts my entire bottom half into the air and claims my cunt.

He drives through their cum, hitting my cervix with each thrust. The pain mixes with pleasure and flows into them then back to me. When I shatter for them once more, I take them with me. Their cries blend with mine and soar into the ocean air.

My eyes are heavy, and my body is sated and exhausted. I let them flop around me. Their cum covers us, but they don't care.

Love fills the bond, so strong I want to cry. We have never said it bar that one time, and I hope we never do. Words mean nothing to me, actions mean more, but I know they feel it like I do.

We love each other.

For a while afterwards, we just lie in the sun on the deck, our limbs intertwined, soaking in the peace we all fought for. Their minds are quiet for once, nothing but happiness radiating from them.

I close my eyes and feel the heat of the blazing sun and their bodies around me. If the me from the beginning of this year could see me now, she wouldn't believe it—free of Gehenna, of the past, and the man who betrayed me. I'm happy. It's such a strange feeling, one I never felt I deserved. I have always been someone's pawn, finding my strength in hell, but now, I get to live in heaven with them.

What more could a girl want?

Maybe a bigger bed, but oh well.

EPILOGUE

The smell of live blood and the sound of fluttering hearts woke me. Even now, I can hear them drawing closer. I knew of their approach since the moment they breached the outer layer of my home. It used to belong to a very bad man, the same bad man who bought me as a child from that cold place. I don't remember life before that, who I was, or what my name was. I am just me. My gaze turns, finding the remainder of the bad man. His strings hang from the ceiling, holding up his wrists and head. His eyes are empty sockets, and I cut his mouth into a horrifying smile. He always ordered me to smile, after all. Now, he is smiling eternally.

The voices grow louder, and I slide deeper into the darkness, the rest of my friends on strings shielding me from sight. There are many now, but I want more. I don't like being alone. It's why I made them like me, and now we can be together forever. They don't play with me anymore, though, or talk, which I don't like. Maybe these new friends will.

Artificial lights shine across the chamber. Can they not see in the dark? How unfortunate. They recoil sharply, and the beams of light land on me, then all the figures freeze. The pounding in their chests increases, and their fear fills the air. It's a repugnant and addictive scent, one I know well. I used to feel it all the time before the bad man took that ability away from me. Now, all I feel is loneliness and an empty chasm in my chest.

There was once a time when I felt something, which is why I keep trying with new friends, hoping they can fill that void and make me human again.

Human . . . is that what I was?

“Is that a fucking marionette?” one of them mutters, their voice filled with awe and terror, pulling me from my macabre thoughts.

“Oh, absolutely fucking not. That is creepy as shit. I’m out of here,” a different voice responds.

Lifting my head jerkily, I move my arms and legs. It’s wrong, uneven, and uncoordinated, not quite human, but that is not my fault either.

The bad man made me like this—his eternal doll, a plaything for the daughter he loved.

“Have you come to play with me as well?” I call, and their heartbeats triple. “I do like new friends.”

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ABOUT K.A. KNIGHT



K.A Knight is a New York Times Best Selling Author trying to get all of the stories and characters out of her head, writing the monsters that you love to hate. She loves reading and devours every book she can get her hands on, and she also has a worrying caffeine addiction.

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Read more at K.A Knight's website or join her Facebook Reader Group.
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