

A VILLAIN PARANORMAL ROMANCE

RUTHLESS DEMON KING

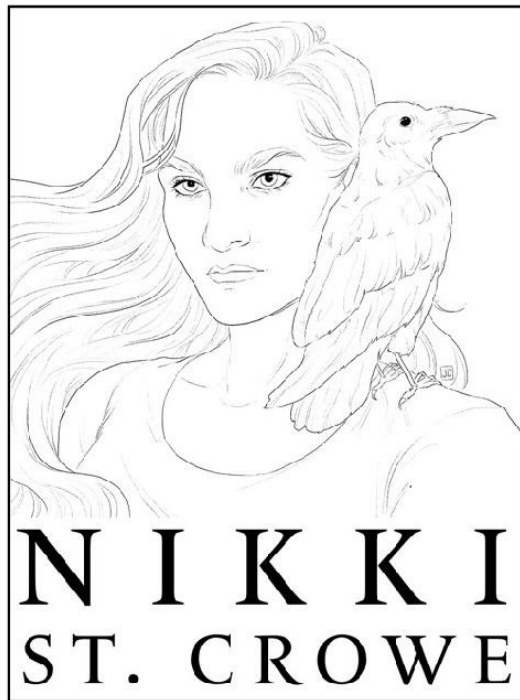
NIKKI ST. CROWE

RUTHLESS DEMON KING

WRATH & RAIN BOOK ONE

NIKKI ST. CROWE

BLACKWELL HOUSE LLC



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PROLOGUE

EVERYONE HAS A STORY ABOUT WHERE THEY WERE WHEN THE DEMON KING arrived.

I was alone in my condo trying to swat a fly.

Looking back, it really was ultra-thematic, considering.

Fly swatter in hand, I stood in the middle of my living room trying to track the buzzing beast when my phone rang and my mom's freckled face popped up on the screen.

I answered and put the phone on speaker. "Hello?"

"Baby, it's Mama."

She said that every time I answered the phone, as if I didn't have her name programmed in.

"I know, Mom. What's up?"

The fly buzzed past. It was one of those fat flies, the kind that defies gravity and logic.

It zoomed past me, and I swung the fly swatter, missing.

"Goddammit," I muttered.

"Baby, what are you doing? Have you watched the news?"

"What? No. Why would I watch the news?"

I had a strict no-news policy because the news was depressing. The world was burning. A mass shooting every other day. Political discord. Governmental nutjobs. I was already not excelling at life. I didn't want to add to the shit with more shit.

"Turn on the news," Mom said.

I only had streaming services. I didn't even know how to *turn on the*

news.

With a grumble, I took the phone in hand and logged into Twitter.

And that's when I first came across his name.

The Demon King.

I'm not sure who named him, if it was a media thing, like the Zodiac Killer, or if *Demon King* was the name he arrived with and some brave soul dared to ask him for it.

After scrolling my feed for a bit, I stumbled on the first image of him—a grainy picture snapped in the dark by some amateur photographer who used an on-camera flash.

But while the image was low quality, it did its job.

The Demon King was otherworldly gorgeous.

Judging by the tweets, everyone else was having a similar reaction.

We were all captivated by him, starved for beauty, greedy for drama, attracted to power like a moth to the flame.

We were all hungry to burn.

And this man, this gorgeous man, had walked into the White House, demanded to see our leader, then disappeared when he was taken into custody.

Not disappeared as in *someone lost track of him*.

Disappeared as in *twelve witnesses watched him literally disappear*.

He found our president a few hours later and demanded her supplication.

He was shot. The bullets bounced off of him.

Not long after, the U.S. government declared war against him.

But everyone who tried to take him out failed.

Miserably.

Spectacularly.

Like me with that damn fly.

We never stood a fucking chance.

SIX MONTHS LATER

I'M A PHOTOGRAPHER, AND I HATE TAKING PICTURES OF PEOPLE.

“Josiah,” I say to the little demon running from me and my camera, “make a funny face!”

He turns around long enough to flip me the bird and then darts behind a tree, laughing.

“Josiah!” his mother shouts. “Get back here right now!” She gives him chase in her pretty boho dress as Dad stands by, hands in the pockets of his khakis looking bored and annoyed all at the same time.

Dads are sometimes harder to come around than the kids.

I got into photography because of my mother, and I *do* love the art form, but everything leading up to that final image is a nightmare.

Somedays I think if I have to take one more sun-drenched photo of a perfect (dysfunctional) family on the beach or in a field, I might scream.

But here I am, taking more photos, chasing after more monsters, wondering where the hell I went wrong with my life.

Well, that's not entirely true. I know where I went wrong. It's my temper. It always gets the best of me. I've been fired from more than one minimum wage job because I yelled at a customer or told a manager to fuck off.

I'd like to blame it on my mother, but that's just a lazy excuse. I was raised by her, though *raised* is a stretch. She's a product of a hippie

commune, a vegan, new age woman who always smells of lavender and patchouli. She's a world-renowned photographer whose images hang in the lobbies of billion-dollar corporations. Sunshine Low, or Sunny Low as everyone calls her.

It's no surprise that my hippie, vegan, new age mother named me Rain.

Growing up, I traveled with her when she chased one idea or another, but she had always been hands-off with her parenting, leaning into that whole freewill, feral-child parenting style. It made me extremely independent, but also stubborn and wild, if I'm honest.

I learned how to use a DSLR camera on manual when I was eight. I know all about shutter speeds and aperture and chasing the perfect light. I learned how to take photos from one of the best photographers in the world, but what my mom photographs isn't what I want to photograph. Mountains don't move me. An artful curl of an ocean wave doesn't spark passion. Not that family photography is where my heart is either. It's like I'm searching for something through my lens that I just haven't found yet.

For now, family photography pays the bills, and I'm my own boss, but it's starting to feel like every session I do chisels a little more off my soul.

My cracks are widening, and I don't know how to fix it.

If I'm not successful at the one skill I have, then what more can I possibly do with my life? I have my mother's wandering spirit, I think, but while Mom is perfectly happy with the wandering, I'm in a hurry to reach the destination.

I just don't know where that is or what I have to do to find it.

Josiah finally warms up to me, but Dad doesn't, and by the end of the session, once the sun has descended below the horizon, I have about seven hundred images of Dad scowling.

I wrap up, promise to have the images processed within two weeks, and then say goodbye.

Leaving Riverside Park where I held the session, I head on foot to the heart of downtown Norton Harbor. It's a picturesque tourist town on the shore of Lake Norton, about thirty minutes from Saint Sabine.

In the summertime, every day feels like a vacation. Colorful beach towels hang out to dry on picket fences, while locals and tourists alike travel the cobblestone streets in golf carts. Live music can be heard around every street corner.

Though I'm a homebody, there's something about Norton Harbor's

energy that I just can't get enough of. It's one of the reasons I decided to call it home after traveling like a nomad with my mother most of my life.

I love the sea of pedestrians and the buzz of conversation and the glow of string lights.

Everything about it is perfect.

Except for the Demon King.

It's been months since the last confrontation with him. I'm not sure if the country just gave up trying or if some kind of peace was agreed upon. The government isn't making those details known.

Three months ago, the Demon King started appearing regularly in Norton Harbor, so now the picturesque lakeside town is a haven for Demon Devotees.

If my photo session didn't make me crabby enough, the horde of fangirls and boys outside Par House have me toeing the line of damn near volcanic.

The Demon King loves Par House.

That's a sentence I never thought I'd utter.

Hands balling into fists, I approach the crowd that is growing by the second. A woman has her phone up and trained on the front door, filming, waiting for a glimpse. Sometimes I think he does it on purpose, this building of tension and apprehension.

When will he come out?

Who knows, and I don't fucking care.

"One of the waitresses who works here said he was in last week and he ordered a sushi platter!" a redhead says.

Her friend hangs on this fact like it's made of gold and tied in ribbon.

It makes me sick. It makes me hate him more.

This reminds me of what used to garner our attention—the pages in glossy Hollywood magazines. *Stars, they're just like us! They tie their shoes and buy batteries!*

So the Demon King eats sushi. Big friggin' deal.

I skirt past a newspaper box and see the Demon King's face on the front page. The headline reads, "*Can We Have Peace with Wrath?*"

That's his other name. Maybe his official one? I don't know.

Wrath the Demon King.

A scrawny guy fluffs his hair and says, "I nearly brushed up against him in the town square a month ago, and I think I levitated."

His friends laugh.

Since his appearance, and the U.S. government's failure to kill him or send him back to whence he came, the Demon King has been making a name for himself.

There are thousands of fan accounts dedicated to him on all of the social media platforms. Countless internet memes and websites and devoted clubs.

He's everywhere. All of the time.

We fear him and bow to him—sometimes literally.

But no one seems to know what the hell he wants or even how he got here. Was he always here and we didn't notice until he wanted us to? Was he summoned? Was he lying dormant in some dank hole and finally crawled out?

Or my favorite theory—he comes from another universe. This is the one that has string theorists and multiverse nerds losing their goddamn minds. If there are other worlds, then how do we access them?

Humans love to discover new land then destroy it.

But that sounds like kicking a hornet's nest to me. The Demon King cannot be killed. Do we really want to explore where he came from?

No thank you.

I think the biggest question I have is why now? Rumor is he's looking for something, but what, no one knows.

The crowd's twittering grows louder, and I look back over my shoulder to see a bald man step out of the restaurant.

The crowd lets out a collective and disappointed *oooooh*.

I text my best friend Gus. *Fangirls be fanning at Par House.*

Come to the T shop, is his reply.

I am. Almost there.

Collie's Tea Shop is owned by Gus's aunt, and he helps her run it. It's at the end of the short block just behind Par House. It used to be a millinery back when Norton Harbor was first founded, and the shop still has a lot of the late 19th century charm.

The door to Collie's is heavy and massive, and it always takes me two hands to pull it open. It slams shut behind me when I step into the cool, air-conditioned interior, and though I've been here a million times, it still makes me flinch.

Soft coffee house music plays through the sound system while the three matching ceiling fans that hang from the tin ceiling lazily churn the already chilly air. Just below them, zigzagging across the shop, Edison bulb lights

glow brightly.

Collie's might be my favorite place on the planet.

None of the furniture matches, and at least half of it is losing its paint. In some spots, the old plaster has been allowed to crumble away from the lath, giving it this rustic look that I absolutely love.

Nothing is perfect in this world, and allowing something to show its cracks should be beautiful. Not in our glossy, social media obsession though. Every photo should be perfect. Every angle well-lit. The mess hidden. The lipstick flawless.

I hate that on my own social account, the photos that get the most attention are the ones that are staged. Then again, I've never been brave enough to post the flawed images.

For a Thursday night, Collie's is packed. There's a game of backgammon going on in the far corner, a group of friends at the benches to the left, and a trio of older women taking up the toile settee by the piano.

As I make my way to the counter, I'm immediately hit with the smell of fine Earl Grey tea and fresh scones. Gus smiles at me as I slide onto one of the vintage soda shop stools. "Hey, babe," he says. "Is it a dirty tea night or an herbal blend night?"

"Give it to me dirty," I say.

He immediately hands me a cup of iced tea and grins. "Figured."

I take a sip through the straw. He's made me a half-and-half spiked with rum. Black tea, lemonade, and all the booze a girl could get.

"I love you," I say.

He winks. "I love *you*."

Gus was one of the first friends I made when I moved to Norton Harbor. At the time, my mom was living here too, and she had joined a group of new ageists and became fast friends with a woman named Gloria. Mom had a best friend before I was born, Tatiana was her name, but they drifted apart after a while, and I got the distinct sense Mom had always been looking for a new kindred soul.

The new ageist group was hosting a get-together with a psychic. Mom wanted me to meet Gloria and then maybe snap some pictures for their blog.

Turned out Gloria was Gus's mom. Gus came along for the food. When we left that night, we were practically best friends, and when Gloria died a few years back from breast cancer, it really cemented our friendship. It somehow made us closer, losing someone we loved.

Losing Gloria drove my mom back onto the road though. She's been traveling pretty much ever since.

Gus puts his elbows on the worn counter and curves his hand along his jaw. "Tell me the worst thing about this session."

I take another sip of the drink and then tell him about Josiah flipping me off. Gus hangs his head back and laughs at the ceiling, his bleached blond hair flopping over his head. When he sobers again, his single cross earring swings back and forth from his ear.

"That's a good one," he says, "but that still doesn't come close to the kid that farted on you."

I curl my upper lip. "Bosley. That kid was a menace."

"Such a menace."

The rum is already hitting me, sending warmth through my limbs and a bit of euphoria to my brain. The stress of the night starts to dissipate.

The backgammon crowd roars with laughter.

"What are your plans for the rest of the weekend?" Gus asks. "Adam is taking me to Saint Sabine to see a show. Want to come?"

Adam is Gus's sorta boyfriend. They aren't exclusive yet, despite Adam's eagerness for it. Gus has always been independent, and a little flighty, if I'm honest. He's a Gemini and he loves to flirt. I think he's worried that by being in a serious relationship, he'll have to tone down his personality.

He's not entirely wrong. Adam is former military and still acts like a rigid soldier. I can never seem to get anything out of him. He's stoic, distant, and has no compromising bone in his body.

But I don't tell Gus that. Obviously. While I like to be straightforward in just about everything, my best friend's love life isn't something I meddle with.

"While that sounds like fun—"

Gus gives me a look like he knows I'm lying.

"—I have a ton of pictures to sort and process. Maybe next time?"

"Liar," he says. "You don't like Adam."

I take a long sip of my drink, then, "I don't *not* like him."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Is it?"

The heavy door slams shut with a new customer, and when Gus looks up, he makes a face. "Incoming," he mutters.

"Rain! Hey!"

I swivel on my stool to see Harper Caldwell coming at me, arms open for a hug. I shrink back as if I can avoid the physical contact, but Harper is relentless. She wraps me in her arms, overwhelming my nose with the smell of her expensive perfume. It's sharp and irritating in the back of my throat and immediately makes me think *prostitute in Paris*.

Two years ago, she slept with a guy I was dating at the time. She said she didn't realize we were exclusive, which is a total lie because I'd literally told her we were just the week before.

But Harper is the type of rich, spoiled brat who thinks whatever she wants can be taken without consequence.

I've hated her ever since, and while I've made my distaste for her quite clear, she seems completely oblivious to it.

"How are you?" she asks.

"I'm fine." I twirl my straw in my drink, then take another sip. "How are you?"

She widens her eyes, and her fake lashes swallow up her eyebrows. "It's been a *day*. I was just at Par House for drinks with Daddy, but he stood me up because of some dumpster fire in DC. Anyway, Wrath was there holding court as he does, you know?"

Gus and I nod even though we don't. Not really. I mean, you hear the stories about Wrath, about the powerful people who gravitate to him and orbit him like he's a planet, but we've never literally witnessed it. I've avoided Par House or really any place Wrath is. I don't want to fawn. I don't want to beg for his attention.

I think a little part of me is afraid that I'm not as immune to him as I want to believe.

I just want him to go away.

"Anyway," Harper says, "the service was horrendous tonight because when the Demon King walks in the door, everyone else turns into a toad, apparently. I just wanted a lavender margarita. It took over a half hour to get it and then it was light on Patrón!" She makes a growly noise in the back of her throat as she slides onto the stool next to me. "Can I have a dirty tea, Gus?"

"Sure. Coming right up." He hurries away to make the drink, abandoning me with Harper.

"To make matters worse, I was practically steamrolled when I came out of Par House," Harper goes on. "I don't know why the devotees huddle

around the front door like that. It's like, duh, the Demon King can literally poof out of the restaurant and poof to wherever he lives in his dark castle or whatever."

"Totally," I answer as I slide off my stool. The world sways a bit.

Might have drunk too much too soon. I duck down and grab my camera bag, looping it over my body.

"I should probably go," I say. "Lots of work to do."

Harper pouts. "You never hang with me."

The pout manages to squeeze a drop of guilt out of me. Harper really knows how to manipulate people. "Maybe next weekend?"

"Fab." She claps her hands together.

Gus eyes me over his shoulder. He knows the chances of me cancelling are at about 99%.

"Have fun in the city," I tell him. "Let me know how the show is."

"If you change your mind," he says, leaving it open, knowing I won't.

Drink in hand, I head out and take a shortcut through one of the cobblestone alleyways where more string lights glitter in the growing dusk. Norton Harbor loves its string lights. I will admit, they do add some coziness to a photograph.

I check my social accounts to take care of some media work while I walk.

A bride-to-be has commented on one of my new mom sessions to ask if I do weddings.

If family sessions are a nightmare, weddings would be absolute torture. I try to respond as best as I can, but it's hard typing with only one hand.

Autocorrect changes, "Congrats on getting married!" to "Congrats on getting murdered!"

"Well, that might be fitting—"

I cut off when I slam into something.

My plastic cup is crushed between me and the thing I ran into, and spiked half-and-half spills down the front of me.

"Fucking motherfucker!" I quickly pull my camera bag off and away from my body. I haven't backed up any photos! Losing an entire session of Josiah and his disgruntled dad would just be my luck. I do not want to have to repeat that session—for free.

When I'm sure the camera is safe, I look up to see what the hell got in my way.

There's rage in my veins and I'm about to burn this place to the ground.

But it's not some drunk tourist.
It's the Demon King.

WHEN MY MOTHER PHOTOGRAPHED THE GRAND CANYON, SHE SAID IT MADE her feel small and insignificant.

I didn't understand what she meant at the time.

But now I think I do.

Looking at the Demon King is like peering into the heart of an underwater cave and knowing that the darkness is looking back.

Goosebumps lift on my arms despite the summer heat.

The hair rises at the nape of my neck.

Maybe I am levitating.

I swallow hard and feel my eyes well with tears.

I don't know what the fuck is happening, but I can't breathe and I can't think and my mouth is dry and—

Fuck he is...

Hot.

Like so hot it hurts to look at him.

Like so hot I'm already tingling between my legs.

What. Is. Happening?

Straight nose. Sharp cheekbones. A mouth that bows with a sensual curve. Dark hair that swoops back from his forehead.

And his eyes. Not gray, not blue, not green. Something in between. All of the colors and none of the colors.

A gaze that penetrates and cuts and observes and *knows*.

He's wearing all black. A long coat with a high collar that stands sharply against his pale face. He's flawless. Not shining exactly, but radiant. Ethereal.

I get now why our social media world is obsessed with him.
Everything about him is overwhelming.

“The English language has its beauty,” the Demon King says in a voice so rich, it’s practically sinful, “but it has its filth too.”

“Huh?” I say.

I realize I’ve never heard him speak until now. I’m sure there are videos online, but I’ve never sought them out. I never had a reason to.

But if I had, maybe I’d be prepared to hear the deep tenor of his voice, the way it rakes over my skin like sharp fingernails.

I shiver. I can’t help it. I can’t help anything about this entire encounter.

“You cussed,” the Demon King says. “Rather spectacularly.”

I finally take a full breath. “You ran into me.”

He narrows his eyes. “Did I?”

The spiked half-and-half is seeping into my bra and starting to grow sticky on my boobs. I look down quickly to see how bad it is. My black lace bra is starting to show through my wet t-shirt.

When I glance up again, I catch the Demon King eyeing my chest.

I curl my lip at him. “My eyes are up here.”

“I’m glad you’re aware. Perhaps use them next time.”

“I...*What?*”

I’m breathless again, and a lump grows in my throat.

I don’t feel so good. I have to get out of here.

“There he is!” someone shouts behind me.

The Demon King looks over my shoulder and the scowl deepens on his elegant face. Footsteps pound down the alleyway.

I almost don’t hear him over the screeching. *Almost.*

“Bow,” he says, with an edge of disdain.

“Excuse me?”

“Bow to me,” he says, raising his voice.

The crowd reaches us, and like good little idolaters, they fall to their knees.

But I keep standing.

I can’t tell if it’s a good idea though. Am I the lighthouse standing against the raging storm? Or the single dandelion trying to face a tornado?

The Demon King turns those fathomless eyes on me. I think I know which I am.

My mom said that after she photographed the Grand Canyon, she sank to

her knees and wept.

Tears spring up again, and I can feel my chin wobbling as I grit my teeth. I don't know why I'm close to sobbing, but I am, and it doesn't make any fucking sense.

The Demon King takes a step toward me, and I inhale sharply.

The air turns frigid. The crowd goes silent.

"Bow," he says again, voice sharp.

My head goes a little swimmy. I sway on my feet.

Maybe I should do as he commands.

How hard is it to sink to my knees?

I might not read the blogs dedicated to him or the news articles about his exploits, but it's impossible not to hear about the bad stuff. The Demon King has killed countless men and women in the initial fight between him and the country.

I know he can easily kill me.

But thinking about surrendering to this man makes my chest tight and my blood boil.

Whenever I'd throw a mini tantrum when I was a kid, my mom would turn to the witnesses in the grocery store or the library and just shake her head and say, "She's an Aries," as if they should know that meant I'm stubborn and I have a temper and I hate being told what to do.

And I do.

I really, really hate being told what to do.

I level my shoulders, bunch my hands into fists, and stare into those bright, bottomless eyes of the Demon King and say, "No."

THE DEMON KING CANTS HIS HEAD. “NO?”

There’s the telltale sound of feet shuffling over cobblestones and footsteps fading away as the crowd thins and people run.

There is a single moment where I think, *What have I done?*

The string lights flicker and go out.

The crowd starts shrieking, but it’s a sound controlled behind gnashed teeth and hands clasped over mouths.

Too much noise might draw the king’s attention, after all.

It’s at this moment that I realize just how much shit I’m in.

My distaste for the Demon King means that I’ve somewhat kept myself in the dark about him. It got to the point that if I saw an image of him, I scrolled quickly past, as if my indifference would somehow keep him out of my life.

I hate men who think they’re powerful. Who think they can tell people what to do.

If I learned anything from my mother, it’s how to stand on my own two feet, dependent on no one.

But by not bothering to learn about the Demon King, I’ve put myself at an extreme disadvantage. Because now I’m standing in front of him, and the lights have gone out, and the people have run away, and I don’t entirely know what he’s capable of.

My heart is beating so hard in my chest, I think it might leap out of my skin.

Shit. Shit.

I can just hear my mom in the back of my head. *See what that temper has*

gotten you into? Rainy baby, you have to stop and breathe and think these things through.

Well, Mom, now what?

The shadows take shape around me. I frown and step back. The Demon King hasn't moved. He's looking at me like I'm a bug that dared to sully his picnic.

Like he's ready to squash me.

And then, right before my eyes, the shadows become shadow men. Six of them in total, three on either side of the Demon King. Dark mist rises from them. Their features are indistinct from one another, smudged along the edges.

They step toward me.

"You should have bowed," the Demon King says.

Oh fuck.

The shadows lunge for me. Adrenaline shoots through my veins. Everything gets fuzzy and faraway.

I'm dead. I'm so dead.

I can feel their bruising hands on my skin trying to tear me apart. I squeeze my eyes shut. Maybe if I don't look at them, maybe if I retreat as far into my head as I possibly can, maybe it won't hurt as much. Maybe it'll be over quickly.

I should have bowed. I should have surrendered.

I should have... Wait. *No.*

Fuck no. I'm Rain Low. Wild child. Aries woman.

I surrender to no one.

Who the fuck does this guy think he is? Barreling into our world, into *my* town. Who the fuck does he think he is, demanding *I* bow to *him*?

Heat scorches through me. Bright red light flashes in my field of vision.

I can't tell if it's the surrounding light or pure rage.

The light burns like fire, flickering, warming my skin. As the light spreads out, the shadow soldiers rear back, lifting their arms like shields.

They burn up like kindling, there one minute, gone the next.

The only thing that remains is a curl of bright red smoke.

I look over at the Demon King. There's a deep frown on his face, his dark brows sunk in a V. His hands are tightened into fists, and there's something glowing beneath the collar of his shirt.

It's too much to absorb. Too much has happened. Too much doesn't

make sense.

I do the only thing I can do—I turn around and run.

AS SOON AS I'M OUT OF THE ALLEY, THE CITY COMES ALIVE AGAIN. THE string lights are lit. The crowds are gathered. There's the clinking of glasses and the din of conversation.

But I'm running.

I'm running for my fucking life.

I just stood against the Demon King and...I won?

I don't know how the hell that happened. I don't know *what* happened. I don't want to look at it too closely because there are more questions than answers and I hate when I don't have answers.

I run down Stearns Boulevard, then cut left, away from the heart of downtown. My lungs tighten up. My shirt is plastered to my skin, sticky and wet. My legs ache. But I can't slow down. Not yet.

What the hell am I going to do?

When my building comes into view at the end of Platte Avenue, relief flares in the center of my chest. And when I punch in the code on the main entrance and the lock clanks open, I lunge inside and yank the door closed behind me.

I scan the street through the thick glass, heart pounding in my ears. Everything looks normal. I don't see the Demon King in any of the shadows.

At the elevator bank, I punch the arrow and pace in front of it as I wait. Once inside the car, I collapse against the back and suck in a deep breath.

I'm okay. Everything is going to be okay.

I hurry down my hall and then into my condo.

Am I safe?

I'm not sure anywhere is safe at this point. When the military sent a small squadron of men and women to fight the Demon King, he destroyed the troops. Killed them all.

Now I know how. He's got his own soldiers, monsters that can appear at will and tear a person apart. Except...how did they disappear? Did someone light a fire? I mean, if it just took fire to defeat the Demon King, I'm sure the army would have figured that out by now.

I make sure my deadbolt is locked behind me and then stumble into my living room, kick off my shoes, and drop onto my couch. I don't turn on any lights. My condo is on the waterfront and lampposts line the marina walk down below. There's always been plenty of light in my house.

I can hear the water of Norton Lake lapping against the concrete barrier down below. I left one of my balcony doors open when I left for my photo session and—

Oh fuck. My camera bag!

I dropped it when I spilled my drink, and I never bothered to pick it back up.

Laying my head back, I groan at the ceiling. How fucking ironic that right in this moment, I'm dreading another Josiah photo session when I literally just flipped the Demon King the bird?

Maybe he'll just forget about it?

Ha. He's probably plotting my demise right this second. Not that I think I'm special enough to take up any space in the Demon King's head.

I need a drink.

Something to calm my nerves.

I get up and flick on the under-cabinet lighting in the kitchen. It sends a soft glow around the room.

Ducking into the fridge, I find lots of takeout and several bottles of white and red wine. Wine helps me relax, helps me think.

Pulling out the corkscrew, I tear off the wrap on a bottle of white and pop out the cork. The glug-glug of the wine as I fill my glass is a familiar sound and it makes the night feel normal. Except when the fridge kicks on, I yelp and nearly leap out of my skin.

“Calm down. You're home now. Everything is fine and normal, and you'll probably never see the Demon King again.”

Wine glass in one hand, and the bottle in the other, I head out to my balcony and lie on one of my chaise lounges. The first sip of wine, the

sweetness of it on my tongue, helps soothe some of my nerves.

Across the lake, million-dollar homes glow in the night. Yachts and sailboats bob in the water in the marina. I can hear people chatting and laughing on the boardwalk down below.

I take another long pull from my wine glass.

It's a little sad how easily we accepted the Demon King into our lives, taking over our towns and our minds.

The first month he was here, I seriously thought we were headed for the apocalypse. I mean, Demon King? What else comes to mind other than brimstone and hellfire and destruction?

There were a few weeks there where everyone was urged to stay home and stay off the streets after dark. But several days into it, when nothing happened, when no hellfire filled our streets, we grew bored and antsy.

There were only two major confrontations with the Demon King—the fight that broke out when he first arrived and tried to dominate our president, and the second in a field in Indiana.

After the first confrontation where the government learned bullets did little damage to him, they tracked him down to a field in Indiana. Troops showed up. Men and women dressed in tactical gear, carrying assault rifles.

I guess they thought that if handguns didn't work, an onslaught of bullets might do the trick.

That was the first and only time I watched video of the Demon King.

Somehow body cam footage was leaked to the internet, and the jerky footage showed the team opening fire on the Demon King and blasting him with hundreds of rounds of ammunition. Nothing landed. He slaughtered half the troops there, forcing the army to retreat.

After that, there were rumors that he offered the government a treaty—let him do what he came here to do, and he wouldn't harm anyone so long as they didn't get in his way.

Since then, over the last several months, the Demon King has popped up all over the country, doing whatever he came here to do, but leaving most people to their business.

Of course, there are a few rebel groups that have been promising to kill him. Religious fanatics and militia men.

But for the last several months, the Demon King has only been spotted in Norton Harbor. Which is wild, considering the only thing to be found here is fro-yo, tie-dye tourist t-shirts, and lots of boats.

What could he possibly be looking for?

And also, did I just break the one rule of the treaty? Did I get in his way?

Technically he was in *my* way, since I was just minding my business heading home.

I drain the rest of my glass and then pour a second. Maybe I should leave Norton. My mom has been traveling the world again and right now...well, I can't remember where she is right now, but I bet it's somewhere far away from the Demon King.

The second glass of wine goes straight to my head, and soon the twilight sky is just a blur of light.

I think I'm drunk.

Officially.

Oh, my cup is empty.

I bend over the side of the lounge chair to grab my bottle but overreach and end up rolling off the chair and to the concrete patio.

"Fuck fuckity," I say to the sky. "Also ouch." I fumble around for the bottle but spot it on its side far out of reach. Apparently I drank it all.

"I should just rest here a second," I tell the sky. "I bet in the morning all of this will feel silly. I bet in the morning the Demon King will have forgotten about the girl in the alley with the wet t-shirt."

I close my eyes against the heaviness. The world spins in the darkness.

But when I wake in the morning, it's not just a headache I'm fighting off.

The Demon King hasn't forgotten about me.

In fact, now he's hellbent on finding me.

I WAKE TO THE SUN BURNING BRIGHTLY OVERHEAD. EVERYTHING HURTS AND my skin is so tight, it feels like it might break open at the slightest prick. I probably look like an ill-prepared tourist with skin the color of a tomato.

I get onto all fours and immediately regret it.

The dull pounding in my head rushes to my eyes, thumping through my eye sockets and into my sinuses.

“Oh god. *Regrets.*”

My phone is ringing incessantly somewhere inside the condo. I stumble through the balcony doors and the ringing stops.

Once out of the sun, there’s a slight respite on my skin and the burning subsides a little bit. I need aloe, stat.

The phone rings again, and a sharp flare of annoyance lights in my chest. Fucking phone and its stupid ringing!

I finally locate it on the kitchen counter. My mom’s face beams up at me from her contact photo.

“Hi, Mom,” I say, putting it on speaker as I rummage inside the fridge for the bottle of green aloe goo. I wish I could say this is the first time I’ve ever fallen asleep in the sun, but living in a tourist town on the water, you get used to summer burns. You always gotta be prepared. Cold aloe goo is a godsend.

“Baby, where are you?”

“Where are *you*?” It sounds like she’s standing in a tornado, the wind whipping past the phone.

“I’m in the Scottish Highlands. Never mind where I am!”

Spotting the aloe in the door behind my massive collection of ranch

bottles, I pull it out and squirt a puddle into the palm of my hand. The second I rub it on my burnt arm, it's like fucking nirvana.

"Oh god, that's better," I say.

"Rain!" Mom shouts.

"What?"

"You're on the news!"

"I—*what?*"

"Turn on the news."

Turn on the news. I can't turn on the news!

I pick up the phone with my aloe-free hand and go to Twitter.

The burning returns to my skin immediately and now throbs as the blood rushes to my face.

What the fuck?

I have thousands of messages.

Holy shit.

What the hell is happening?

"Are you watching the news?" Mom asks.

I scroll through my messages.

Are you alive?

How did you stand against the Demon King? Tell us your secrets!

How the hell did you not cream your panties? someone says with several squirting emojis.

And then I come across a video clip.

Hand trembling, I hit play.

The footage is grainy and shaky, but I can make out myself on the left and the Demon King on the right. Whoever is shooting the footage is hiding behind a dumpster, I think, because half the frame is dark, and their vantage point looks like it's right behind Chef John's across the alley from where I ran into the Demon King.

It's hard to make out our words.

"Rain," Mom says.

"Shhh."

My heart is beating loudly in my head and in my chest, and I'm hot all over.

It's almost like I'm watching someone else stand against the Demon King, and I'm afraid for the girl, even though I know how this ends.

The Demon King's shadow soldiers rush at me and then—

A flash of red light so bright, the person filming yanks back. There's some clunking in the sound, a gasp, then the camera goes back up, and I'm gone.

It's just the Demon King standing in the alley staring after me.

That's where the footage ends.

Goosebumps roll up my arms.

Was that really me? Was that really how it happened? And what was with that light?

"Rain," Mom says, panic lacing her voice. "Did you see the Demon King?"

"It's complicated, Mom. I ran into him, or rather he was in my way and —"

"Not last night," she cuts in. "This morning. He was on the news."

"Oh? Oh." I click through to my main feed, and he is *everywhere*.

I quickly find a clip of him. His ethereal face nearly glows in the camera's frame. I can just make out bookshelves behind him, like an entire wall of them. His house, maybe? No one seems to know where he lives, but for some reason, I never pictured him having a library.

I thought he lived in a cave. Or in hell.

Taking in a breath, I hit play.

His smooth voice glides over my fevered skin.

"Many of you have watched the footage from last night," he says, "and I'm concerned for the safety and well-being of the young woman in the footage. I've been able to identify her."

His gaze narrows, and it feels like he's peering straight through the camera, right into my soul.

"Rain Low," he says.

A shiver rolls down my spine, making my body quake.

My hearing diminishes as blood rushes to my head.

"If you have any information on this woman," the Demon King says, "I'm offering a reward. Price is negotiable depending on the validity and value of the information."

The video ends, frozen on the Demon King's pale, gorgeous face.

I hate everything about this man, and yet...

I'm clenched up tight, trembling and excited and fucking terrified all at the same time.

"Rain," Mom says, reminding me that she's there. "Baby, what

happened? Is that really you in that footage?”

“I...Well...”

“*What happened?*” she asks again.

I answer with the only thing I can. “I don’t know.”

There’s a buzz at my door. I hurry over to the control panel to check the camera only to find a small crowd at my building’s front door.

That can’t be good.

“Mom,” I say, “I have to go.”

“Where, though, honey? Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know, but...I’ll keep you up to date, okay?”

I hang up, because if I know my mom, she’s got a dozen suggestions and not all of them are good. Sometimes, when I didn’t feel like traveling, I’d stay home while Mom went on assignment.

I’m no stranger to figuring things out. I’ve practically been taking care of myself since I was twelve years old.

As soon as I end the call, a new call comes through from a number I don’t recognize. The door buzzer sounds again.

“Fuck!” I put my hands on the counter and suck in two quick breaths. The rage is burning through me now. I just want to be left alone!

Who does the Demon King think he is?

I look up, aloe goo drying on my hand, and try to make sense of everything that has suddenly gone wrong.

My skin is still throbbing in time with my headache, and I could really use a shower and my condo is still a mess and I still have photos to process for work and—

Okay, work can wait. Shower can wait. I need to leave until I figure out what to do.

My phone rings again from an unknown contact. I silence it and hurry to my bedroom and toss a few things into a bag. Next, I yank off my clothes from the night before, the material stiff from the spiked half-and-half. I pull on a fresh white t-shirt and a pair of cut-off shorts.

Maybe I need a disguise?

I tie up my dark hair with a rubber band, then thread the ponytail through the back of a Par House baseball cap.

On my way out the door, I put on sunglasses.

Since there’s a crowd growing at the building’s front door, I decide to go out through the parking garage. I don’t have a car. I’ve never needed one in

Norton Harbor where everything is within walking distance. But I'm guessing I might be able to slip out that way without being spotted.

Except when I get down to the garage, I can hear the voices of people gathered at the entrance.

Son of a bitch.

I press myself against the wall just outside the elevator and suck in a deep breath. I've dealt with high-stress situations before. There was that one time in Greece—I was barely thirteen—when my mom was run over by a motorbike and knocked unconscious. I punched the asshole in the nose and then got to work finding Mom some help.

And when Gus and I got trapped in an elevator for over an hour when we had a blackout in a snowstorm? Gus freaked out. I did not.

I've always been able to pause my anxiety and focus on the crisis at hand, but somehow this is different.

This isn't a crisis. It's a manhunt and I'm the man.

I scan the garage and spot Mrs. Mulhang at her Audi, her cute little Bottega Veneta bag hanging from her forearm. I stay to the perimeter of the garage and then weave through several vehicles until I reach the Audi.

"Mrs. Mulhang!" I whisper-shout.

Hand at her chest, she shrieks and whirls around.

"Oh, Rain, you scared me half to death! I thought you were a thief!"

"Sorry. Are you leaving? I need a ride out of here."

Her gaze cuts to the garage entrance. "I heard you had a run-in with the devil."

I wince. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Well, get in." Her bag bangs against her hip as she gestures for me to go around to the passenger side.

"Thank you, Mrs. M."

As soon as I'm inside the dark, lush interior of the Audi, I feel better. This is a solution, one that will get me to the next step of my nonexistent plan.

Mrs. M sets her bag in the backseat and presses the ignition button. The car purrs to life. She's approaching seventy and drives like it, so the slow backup and the crawl out of the parking garage feels like an eternity.

When we approach the entrance, I duck down in my seat, grateful for the dark tinted windows. I hold my breath as Mrs. M presses the button for the guardrail and it slides open.

Within seconds, we're out of the garage in the late morning light, breezing past the gathering crowd. I exhale, close my eyes, and say a silent prayer to all the gods even though I'm not the least bit religious.

"Where do you want to go?" Mrs. M asks.

That's a really good question. I can't go to my mom's condo. Even if someone is unfamiliar with me, they'll easily see the connection with a simple internet search. Sunny and Rain.

I could go to Gus's...

Wait, he's probably already in the city with Adam.

I need to go somewhere no one would think to look.

And then it comes to me—Harper's house. Ugh. It's a good idea. Harper isn't a best friend and we're rarely tagged in each other's photos online. She's a close enough acquaintance that I could ask for help, but not so close that people would think to look at her house.

As Mrs. M heads down Platte Avenue, I pull out my phone and text Harper.

I need a place to lay low. Would you be willing to let me crash at your house?

Harper replies quickly. *OMG Rain. I can't even believe this is happening. Come over. You can stay here. And you have to tell me everything.*

I never thought I'd be so relieved to have Harper.

I give Mrs. M directions, and within ten minutes, I'm climbing out of the cool, dark privacy of her Audi. "Good luck," she says, moving her Bottega bag to the front seat. That thing probably cost more than my camera. Which I now realize I've lost to the Demon King. Fucking hell.

Mrs. M drives off, and I hurry up the paved path to Harper's front door. She lives on the south end of town in one of the quieter neighborhoods with its own private marina. I'm pretty sure her dad bought her the house with cash. He's a U.S. senator worth millions. I'm not sure what her mom does. Harper doesn't talk about her much.

Despite the wealth of Harper's family, her house is a quaint little cottage with gray cedar shake shingle and a black tin roof. There are several varieties of flowers growing in the manicured flower beds—that I'm absolutely certain Harper has never touched—and a little white picket fence around the yard.

In the cool shade of the front porch, I pull down the bill of my hat and knock on the screen door. "Come in!" Harper calls, and I quickly duck inside.

The screen door bangs shut behind me. She can afford a nice, quiet screen

door, but here in the south end of Norton Harbor, it's all about the *authenticity*.

I find Harper in the all-white kitchen slicing an avocado. It smells like there might be bread in the toaster. There's definitely fresh coffee.

"May I?" I ask and nod at the coffeemaker that might as well be a spaceship. The authenticity can only go so far.

"Oh for sure. Help yourself."

I've been to Harper's a few times when she hosted a get-together, so I know where to find the cups. I pull down a white mug, find the oatmilk creamer in the fridge, and add it to a cup of coffee.

The toaster pops up, revealing bread so seedy, it might as well be a bird treat.

"So," Harper says, "you saw the Demon King last night." The smile that comes across her face can almost be described as *maniacal*.

I lean against the marble counter and fold an arm over my middle, coffee cup in the other hand. "I did."

"So like, *how* did that even happen?"

I take a sip of the coffee and damn near moan with delight. Harper only drinks the good stuff, and the coffee is rich and nutty. It's a small comfort that makes me a little emotional.

"It's a long story," I answer when really, it's not. I just don't feel like talking about it.

She spreads mashed avocado on her toasted bread. "What was he like?"

My headache has lessened a bit, but being suddenly dislodged from my home with a hangover is making my soul hurt more than my brain. "Smug," I answer.

Harper picks up her plate and her own cup of coffee and tips her chin for me to follow her. We go out the back door to a giant deck that overlooks one of Norton Harbor's many parks.

More potted flowers flutter in the breeze and the air smells crisp and sweet.

I've never had to struggle with poverty, but we haven't always had the best in life. There was that time we stayed in a seedy motel outside of the Mojave Desert where their idea of a continental breakfast was fruit loop cereal in an unmarked plastic container and a pitcher of room temperature orange juice.

And I can't forget the budget apartment in Florida when Mom went

through her wildlife photography phase, and was hellbent on photographing alligators. Half of the windows in that apartment were painted shut and there was no AC. The heat and humidity were so bad, I spent most of our time there feeling like I was swimming in our own apartment.

Harper's life is just a reminder that some people have it so easy, and really have no idea how easy they have it.

We sit at one of two patio tables. There's a large umbrella open above us, driving away the summer sun.

"Demon King was smug," Harper says as she takes a slice of toast in hand. "Tell me something I don't know."

Shrugging, I kick off my shoes so the breeze can hit my bare feet. "I don't know what else there is to say."

Harper sucks avocado off her thumb. "Really? You faced off against Wrath and lived to tell the tale. How about that? Like how did you manage to get away?" Her eyes light up whenever she says the Demon King's name.

"I don't know. There was light and chaos and...I just ran."

She narrows her eyes at me. "You just...*ran*?"

"Pretty much."

She blinks several times, the fan of her long, fake lashes fluttering against her cheeks. "That is...crazy."

"Yeah."

She shakes her head and then takes a bite of her toast. The bread crunches between her white teeth.

After she swallows the bite, she takes her coffee cup in hand. "Daddy said they're working on a way to deal with Wrath. He won't tell me what, exactly." She pouts and then takes a sip of the coffee. "Daddy never tells me the important things. He says I can't keep a secret, which is so not true."

Uh, yeah it is, because she was literally the one who told me she slept with my sorta-boyfriend.

"I don't know what they can possibly do to combat him." The clouds thin, sending sharp sunlight down around us. I pull the sunglasses from the top of my head and slide them over my eyes.

Harper eyes me across the table, then leans in and lowers her voice. "Well, I did overhear Daddy saying something about someone working for them who knows a thing or two about Wrath. Like from his world."

"Really?"

She nods and then takes another bite of toast.

Maybe that someone really can help us defeat the Demon King, and then I can forget any of this ever happened and I can go back to my normal life.

Even if I do sorta hate where my life is headed.

With a sigh, I hang my head back and watch a sailboat glide past in the harbor.

Right now, here on Harper's deck, things *feel* normal, but I know outside of this little bubble, I have a lot of trouble waiting for me.

If someone had told me a year ago that today I'd be sitting at Harper's house trying to hide from a demon, I would have literally run away from that person because I would have seriously thought they were crazy.

It's a little unsettling how easily we accepted him into our world, how our world immediately absorbed him, and turned him into a commodity.

Does he hate that? Does he think we're all mindless and vapid? Sometimes I think so. Sometimes I hate this world we live in.

"Well," Harper says, "you're welcome to stay here as long as you'd like. But like, what's your plan?"

I slouch down and rest the coffee cup on the arm of the chair. Good question. Thankfully I'm saved from answering her by the ringing of my phone. I had put it on Do Not Disturb except for my favorites, which means it's either Gus or my mom calling.

When I dig my phone out of my pocket, it's Gus's name flashing across my screen. Though I've fended for myself most of my life, there's a sliver of relief when I answer the phone and hear his scratchy voice.

"I leave town for one day and you go and make friends with the Demon King?" he says, bypassing a hello entirely.

I set my coffee on the table and walk down the deck steps to the grass. The grass is soft between my toes. "I most definitely did not make friends with Wrath," I answer, and as soon as I think about him, about our face-off, I'm clenched up tight, my belly soaring.

I'm sure it's just his effect on people, but fucking hell does it rattle me.

It makes me feel out of control. A mindless slave.

Like the Demon King is a drug my body can't get enough of.

Maybe he is a drug, like pheromones or something. Like whatever his power is, it slithers into our brains and makes us crazy.

I feel crazy.

Because there's this little voice in the back of my head that says I want to see him again just to feel that weightless delirium at the center of my chest.

“Should I come home?” Gus asks.

“What? No way. It’s really not that big of a deal.”

I can literally hear Gus frowning at me through the phone. “Mm-hmm,” he says.

“I’m serious. Enjoy your show. I’m fine. I came to Harper’s house for now.”

Gus guffaws. “Harper’s? Seriously. You must really be desperate.”

I glance at her over my shoulder. She smiles at me over the rim of her coffee cup and waggles her fingers.

“I was,” I reply.

“Listen,” Gus says, “there’s something about Adam I’ve never really gotten into with you, because I know you hate the whole Demon King thing and, well, I didn’t think it mattered to you one way or another. But now that you’re Demon King Enemy Number One—”

“He’s the villain here,” I argue. “I am most definitely not an enemy.”

“—there’s something you should know about Adam.”

“Okay, what is it?”

Gus takes in a breath and lowers his voice. Does Adam know he’s telling me whatever this secret is?

“Adam is part of a group that is working to get rid of the Demon King.”

“Oh. Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“And by group, do you mean...the militia men?”

“Not MAW,” Gus says.

MAW or Men Against Wrath. They’re a group of armed and tatted white men promising to blow the Demon King to smithereens. The only problem is, the one time they came face-to-face with him, seven people died and six of their members disappeared.

They aren’t exactly adept at fighting villains.

Adam is black, so MAW is a stretch anyway, but there are lots of rebel groups working against the Demon King with varying degrees of capability, insanity, and fervor.

Take back our country from the vile heathen! is one group’s slogan.

Another group, the Citizens Against Darkness, likes to hold rallies carrying handwritten signs that say things like, *Don’t become a slave to evil!* They’re the religious fanatics. And another group, Order of Alius, is promising End Times, that the Demon King’s arrival is some kind of

prophecy coming true.

But for every group against him, there are easily two *for* him. It's not hard to imagine Wrath being the winning side of whatever our future might bring. I haven't given our future much thought, to be honest. I'm pretty adaptable, though if the apocalypse came, I would seriously miss showers and Wi-Fi.

"Adam can help," Gus says. "There are safe houses, places you can go—"

Hiding out in a stranger's hut sounds worse than hiding in Harper's beach cottage.

"Thanks, Gus, but I think I'm good here for now until I can figure this whole thing out."

Not that I know how to go about that, but...

"No," he says. "Adam is exactly the guy you want on your side after a run-in with the Demon King."

I believe him. Adam can be scary when he wants to be, which is all of the time. He's six-four and pure muscle. I think he's like a black belt in some kind of martial art too, and he spent several years in the Army. The guy knows his stuff.

But what can he really do to fight the Demon King? Guns don't kill him, knives are as effective against him as a pipe cleaner, and he's apparently got some shadow demons at his beck and call.

"I don't want you to end your weekend early because of me," I say.

"How about this," he says. "We'll watch the show tonight and come home after. It might be late, but at least I'll be back in town. You're more important than a weekend in the city."

I sigh. As much as I like to pretend I can handle everything on my own, I would absolutely love having my best friend by my side. "Okay. Yeah. If you're sure it's not too much trouble."

"Of course not. Lay low at Harper's for now, okay? Promise me."

"I promise."

I really do have the bestest friend in the world.

We say goodbye and I return to the deck. Harper is scrolling through her phone. "You should see what people are saying about you."

I wrinkle my nose. "No thanks."

"You're like famous now or something."

"People will forget about me by tomorrow."

"I don't know," she says, her attention still on her screen. "The Demon

King has been trending number one on Twitter since he arrived, and he's the most searched hashtag on Insta. He's never been interested in one of us like this. I doubt you're just going to fade into the shadows. Besides," she adds, "now that we know you can stand against the Demon King, it won't be just Wrath that wants you."

I had no idea at the time just how right she was.



HARPER LEAVES FOR HALF THE DAY TO ATTEND A YOGA CLASS, A PILATES class, and then a nail appointment. She invites me to all of it, but I'm officially on the lam and don't want to be spotted in town.

I nurse my sunburned skin with aloe I find in Harper's fridge, then try to formulate a plan while hydrating on Harper's deck. The sunburn starts to feel better by late afternoon, and the hangover is gone by then too. Harper texts me that she's going to the city with a friend a little after five, but tells me to stay at the house and make myself at home.

She's being so nice, it's making me feel like an asshole.

Harper's cottage has two guest bedrooms, so I take my pick after I order takeout. I go with the little room in the back of the house because it has its own bathroom. The stand-up shower is tiled in marble, and there's a dual showerhead that surrounds me in hot water when I decide a shower is exactly what I need before bed. It feels absolutely glorious.

Exhausted with the day, I go to bed early and slip into my favorite oversized tie-dye Bob Marley t-shirt I snagged at a yard sale last summer.

Cocooned in Harper's high thread count white sheets, I fall asleep fast thinking I'm safe.

That turns out not to be true.

Because several hours later, I'm jolted awake and yanked from my bed by the Demon King himself.

MOONLIGHT SHINES ON HALF THE DEMON KING'S FACE AS HE THROWS ME against the wall.

This might be the rudest awakening I've ever had.

Oxygen bursts out of me in a useless gasp as my eyes bug out of their sockets. He lifts me off my feet.

Black mist trails off the Demon King's shoulders, blotting out the silver moonlight behind him.

"What are you?" he says.

My feet pedal in the air.

With his other hand, he yanks down the collar of my shirt, but only far enough to eye my clavicle before he lets the shirt go.

What did he think he'd find there?

I scabble at his grip, but his fingers are like a vise.

He gets in closer. The smell of him fills my nose. It's a heady, rich, deep smell that acts like a light switch. I'm suddenly buzzing and hot. My clit throbs.

This is some perverse fucked up shit!

"Fuck you," I manage to choke out.

He grits his teeth. His irises bleed to red and glow in the dark as black mist swims around us. His face sharpens, morphing into a monster right before my eyes.

This is the true demon. The monster hiding beneath.

"What. Are. You?" he asks again, his voice rumbling in the quiet.

I can't breathe. I wrap my hand around his wrist and push.

And somehow, the mighty Demon King is thrown back against the wall. He catches himself easily enough, but the look on his face registers everything.

Shock.

I've surprised him.

He gets his bearings again and the monster returns as he lunges at me. I duck and he misses only to come back around and catch me by the hair.

He's faster than I am, and he's clearly done this before.

I let out a yelp as he throws me on the bed. A lamp is knocked over and shatters on the floor.

The Demon King puts a knee between my legs and bears down on me. "Who are you?" he says, trying a new line.

I might not be a black belt in karate, but my mom did get me into self-defense classes for a summer.

I bring my leg up and around and kick the Demon King in the sternum. He falls back on the floor. I leap off the bed and straddle his waist.

The Demon King is lying on an expensive rug in a beach cottage in Norton Harbor, and he's lying there because of me.

Except he doesn't look as defeated as he should. And that's when I realize I'm straddling him in nothing but an oversized Bob Marley t-shirt. Not exactly the attire of a warrior.

"You've got me on my back," he says. "Now what?"

"Now? Now...you leave me alone."

His face has returned to its ethereal beauty, the monster gone. His hands come to my bare thighs, and a shiver races through me.

"I can't do that," he says.

"Why not?"

The air grows charged. His hands come to my waist, and in one quick, smooth motion, I'm suddenly the one on my back, the Demon King on top of me.

A startled breath stutters up my throat. My heart thrums in my chest as his eyes glow again. The Demon King puts a knee between my legs, pressing at my center, and a needy thrill buzzes at my clit.

Maybe I do understand the obsession with this man, but only on a primal level.

I fucking hate him, and I think we're trying to murder each other right now, but I'm also dangerously close to wanting to rip his clothes off and fuck

him until I can't stand upright.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

He leans over and more of his weight comes down, and I can feel his hardness through his pants.

Knowing that he's as turned on as I am makes me feel fucking powerful.

It makes me feel greedy for more of him, even though it's really the last thing I should be thinking about.

His voice caresses the curve of my neck as he says, "You are somehow immune to me, and I cannot abide that."

Shadows fill the room and coalesce into his shadow soldiers.

Panic grips me by the throat.

The Demon King lifts off of me and jerks me upright with a handful of my shirt.

The shadow soldiers lunge for me as Wrath steps back, letting them do the dirty work.

I can feel the cold, damp hands of the shadows against my skin, their fingers digging into my flesh. Tears burn in my eyes as I try to scream, but no sound comes out.

They're smothering me, overwhelming me. My chest burns, and it's like they're stealing all of the oxygen out of the room.

Pinpoints of light blink behind my closed lids. There's a disconnect between my brain and the rest of my body, like I'm being dragged to the cold, dark ocean floor. Everything is weightless, and all the light is sucked out of the world.

And as I sink lower and lower into it, instinctively, I reach up, up, desperately scrabbling for something even though I can't see, even though I can't tell where my hands are.

There's a moment where I think this is the end. Where I think, hey, your stubborn temper really got you into some shit this time, didn't it? You should have just fucking bowed.

And then—

The shadow soldiers shriek and pull back. I'm able to open my eyes and see and—*holy shit*.

Light blazes in the room almost like it's on fire. Wrath has a hand at his chest, teeth gnashed, face contorted...*like he's in pain*.

The shadows burn away.

The Demon King scowls and stumbles back, sucking in air.

A door bangs open in the front of the house.

The Demon King steps into me and I dance back, bumping into the bedside table. “This has only just begun,” he says, and then he’s gone. There one minute, gone the next, and I blink at the spot he just inhabited until Adam bursts into the room, a large gun in hand, two more strapped to his waist.

I yelp until I realize who he is.

“The Demon King?” he says.

“I...He...”

“Gone?” Adam says, a little breathless from the adrenaline.

I can only nod.

“Rain is clear,” Adam says, and it takes me a second to realize he’s talking to someone through an earpiece.

“Come on.” He gestures me forward. “Grab your things. We’re taking you somewhere safe.”

Numbly, I toss my few belongings into my bag.

I’m not so sure a safe place exists.

I’m now the enemy of our enemy.

And apparently the only one he sees as a threat.

I BARELY NOTICE CLIMBING IN A DARK SUV. I BARELY NOTICE THE DRIVE somewhere, or when I'm helped out of the SUV and guided into a building that I've never seen.

Adam's by my side, but he's barely said two words to me. His finger is still dangerously close to the trigger of his giant gun.

There are more people, men and women dressed in tactical gear, that follow us down a dimly lit hallway.

When we emerge into a central room, Gus is suddenly there, wrapping his arms around me, and I sob into him.

I don't know where I am, and I don't know what is happening and I'm fucking scared.

"It's all right, babe," Gus says by my ear. "You're safe now."

I close my eyes and drink in the smell of him, like sugar cookies and Earl Grey tea and lavender. Gus is as close to home as I've ever gotten. He might not be blood family, but he's my safe space, one of two people I trust in this world.

I like to pretend I don't need anyone, until I do.

I can't do this alone.

I needed Gus, but I was too proud to take the help he was offering.

When the tears finally dry up, I pull back and realize there are at least a dozen people—strangers—standing awkwardly around me, and I'm still standing in my oversized Bob Marley t-shirt.

Christ, could this day get any worse? Or...wait, I think it's after midnight so it's a new day. Already off to a brilliant start.

Adam appears on my left, a tissue in hand.

“Thank you.” I dry my face and wipe my nose.

“We should talk,” Adam says.

“Give her a minute,” Gus says.

I crumple the tissue in my hand. “It’s okay. I’m okay.”

Gus frowns at me and tucks a hair behind my ear. “No you’re not.”

He’s not wrong, but what am I going to do? Curl into a ball in the corner and cry myself to sleep? That’s not my style. Power through, right?

I look around the room. We seem to be in some kind of warehouse or gutted factory. There are large windows around the entire room, but all of them have been covered in newspaper. Several desks and worktables fill up the large space and—damn, lots and lots of guns. There are guns on tables, guns in racks on the walls, guns strapped to hips.

This must be one of the militia, Adam’s team, and apparently their headquarters.

“Is there coffee somewhere?” I ask.

Adam cuts his dark gaze to a short guy across the room. The guy darts away without so much as an order.

“Anything else?” he asks me in a deep, gravelly voice. Gus once told me that voice alone could make him come, and I have to admit, it does hold some weight.

I look down at my bare legs. “Pants?”

“I have some extra fatigues here,” a girl says. “I’ll go grab a pair.”

“Thanks, Sanjay,” Adam says, and the girl hurries away.

Adam takes off his giant gun and hands it to someone. “Come on,” he says to me. “Let’s sit down for a chat.”

“I feel like I’m being led to the principal’s office,” I mutter.

Gus puts an arm around my shoulders. “You should see what happens when Adam hands out a detention.” He winks.

“Gross,” I say with a laugh.

Adam sends a disgruntled look over his shoulder, and Gus bites his lip, trying not to grin.

These two are honestly the oddest pair.

Adam leads us through the central room to a set of iron stairs that wind back and forth up two flights before spilling us into what must have been a control room. All of the machinery has been stripped, but the counters remain. There’s a utilitarian table in the middle with green metal chairs

sitting around it.

Up on the wall, three giant TV screens are currently on mute but playing through news feeds. On the opposite wall, four smaller screens show surveillance footage, maybe from the outside of the factory?

Before I sit, Sanjay shows up with a pair of army green pants. They're a little short, since I'm a bit taller than she is, but they button up just fine, so I don't complain. And right after that, the short guy arrives with a steaming cup of coffee.

"Wasn't sure how you'd take it," he says in a Southern drawl, "so I brought you some sugar and cream."

"Thank you..."

"Eric," he answers.

"Eric. You're a lifesaver."

He smiles and his pale skin flushes.

I doctor up my cup of coffee and take a tentative sip. It doesn't even come close to Harper's expensive brand, but I'll take whatever I can get.

Exhaustion and stress are making me a little ill.

Sanjay sits at the table on my right side. She's petite, but I definitely spy some toned biceps peeking out of the sleeve of her white t-shirt. Her long, black hair is braided tightly into a French braid, and it hangs over her shoulder. She's wearing no jewelry, but I can just make out an empty hole for a piercing on her left nostril.

I suppose when you're fighting bad guys, jewelry is a hazard.

Gus pulls out the chair on my left, and Eric sits on the other side of him. Two other burly men who introduce themselves as Pitch and Tommy fill up the rest of the table.

Adam stays standing, muscular arms crossed over his chest.

He really does cut quite the figure.

His dark hair is cropped close. There are a few black tattoos winding over his arms, but in the sharp fluorescent light, I can't make out what they are.

"Rain," Adam says, "this is my crew. We don't have a name. We're not out for fame and chaos like MAW or religious zeal like the Citizens Against Darkness. We're here to do a job."

I nod when he stares at me because it's hard not to fall in line like a dutiful soldier when Adam is looking at you. "And what's the job?"

The others glance at each other like they're trying to decide if the secret should be spilled even though I think I already know what it is.

“Neutralize the Demon King,” Adam answers.

“And by neutralize, you mean...”

“Kill him,” Pitch says.

I let out a puff of air. It sounds like *pah*.

No one says a word.

“He’s unkillable,” I say. “The entire United States government has tried to take him out. And you think you’re somehow going to do a job they couldn’t?”

Adam’s nostrils flare. I make out the bulge of a vein in his forehead. Clearly he’s trying really hard not to put me in my place.

“Every man has a weakness,” he answers.

“He’s not a man.” I set the cup of coffee down. It rings out on the metal table. “You plan to what, use some flood lights against him? Burn him to a crisp?” I get a flash of memory, of Wrath’s face contorted in pain, and the surprise that registered in the glint of his colorless eyes. “I mean...the fire or whatever it was seemed to do some damage, but—”

The others shift in their seats and look at one another.

“What?” I say.

“That wasn’t us,” Sanjay answers.

I frown. “It wasn’t?”

She shakes her head.

I rake my teeth over my bottom lip, trying to recall exactly what happened and *how* it happened. It was all a blur, fear and adrenaline putting me in a reactionary mode instead of allowing me to take in the details.

“If it wasn’t you guys, then who was it?”

Adam uncrosses his big arms and puts his palms on the edge of the table. When he hunches forward, shoulders rising in his army green t-shirt, it makes him seem bigger, like a bull getting ready to charge.

“Every man has a weakness,” Adam repeats. “And the Demon King? You’re his.”

OH CRAP.

They can't really believe that, can they? This ragtag group of highly trained and motivated men and women armed to the teeth.

They can't really think I can somehow help them take out the Demon King.

Can they?

I stand up, the chair groaning across the concrete floor as I push it back. "No," I say and shake my head for emphasis in case they didn't hear my very loud objection. "No."

"Rain," Gus says, reaching for me.

I yank my arm away.

Adam straightens. "Sit down, Rain."

The room goes quiet when Adam speaks. He and I have a showdown of intense stares.

Maybe my reluctance to get to know Adam has to do with our stubbornness. The clashing of horns. Though I think he's a Virgo, which is the virgin, so maybe that metaphor is wrong. Maybe Adam's stubbornness comes from his deep well, his patience to wait out my Aries ram.

With a huff, I sit and fold my arms over my chest. I suddenly feel silly in my thrift store Bob Marley t-shirt.

"No one has stood against Wrath," Adam says. "That is a fact."

So okay, maybe that's true.

"Which means you are the closest we've come to a defense."

"But...I'm no one special."

“You’re something,” Sanjay says quietly, reassuringly.

Tommy and Pitch nod at me. “Sorry, darling,” Pitch says, “but it is what it is.”

“So, what, I’m like Wrath’s kryptonite or something?”

“That’s not a perfect example,” Eric says, “because Superman is repelled by Kryptonite, and the Demon King seems to be both drawn to you and affected by you and—” He clamps his mouth shut.

I’m gathering Eric can’t function once he realizes everyone is looking at him.

Adam finishes for him. “You’re immune to Wrath, but I don’t think he’s immune to you. He’s drawn to you.”

“That’s not true,” I argue.

“Oh?” Adam raises a brow and comes around the table so he’s directly across from me. “He came straight to you tonight, and he could have possessed you. Instead, he toyed with you because we think he’s struggling to take you down.”

“Wait...Possess me?”

Tommy mutters something in a language I don’t know. I think it might be Russian.

“What’d he say?”

Adam translates for me. “Have you been living under a rock?”

“Rain has been trying hard not to learn anything about the Demon King,” Gus explains. “She’s almost made it a professional sport.”

“I have my own shit to deal with,” I answer.

“Well, if you’d been paying attention,” Adam says, “you’d know that one of the Demon King’s powers is to possess humans. That’s what his soldiers are. They were originally members of MAW.”

My mouth drops open. “Are you serious?”

I do remember hearing about several MAW members disappearing after a confrontation with the Demon King, but I had no idea he literally stole them and made them into some kind of enslaved dark soldiers.

Of course, it makes sense now, considering he’s *literally* called the Demon King. And what do demons do in our very own lore and mythology? They possess us, steal our bodies and our minds.

It opens up a whole other can of worms—what else from our mythological history might actually be real? And was our mythology based on the Demon King and whatever world he came from? It can’t just be a

fluke, can it?

“How...How does the Demon King possess humans?”

“His dark magic,” Gus answers.

“The shadows,” Adam adds.

Was he trying to possess me? Sic his soldiers on me to try to turn me into one of his monsters? All because I withstood him in the alley and made him look weak.

I take in several deep breaths.

The Demon King is going to come for me. He’s going to keep trying to kill me or enslave me and—

Oh god.

And here I thought the worst thing on my plate was dealing with Josiah at my last family session.

How good I had it!

And then something occurs to me.

“If he found me at Harper’s, can’t he find me here too? Aren’t you guys worried about your safety?”

Adam goes back to the head of the table and juts his chin at the surveillance monitors. “We have this place heavily guarded, but...” He trails off. Adam is not a trail-off kind of guy.

“What?”

“I know this has been a lot to take in for one night,” Gus says.

“What? Just tell me.”

“I’m a witch,” Eric answers. “And I put up a protective barrier around the building.”

“Oh. Ha. Ha *ha*.”

No one else is laughing. Even Adam. Stoic, no-nonsense Adam is standing there like Eric didn’t just literally call himself a witch.

“What?” I say.

Gus rubs my back again, trying to calm me.

“What?” I shout.

Tommy says something in Russian, and Adam nods at him.

“What is happening?” I say.

Adam snaps his fingers at Pitch, and the burly man goes to a cabinet along the far wall.

“I can’t,” I say, and Gus nods and coos at me.

“I know, babe,” he says.

“Witches? Demons? *Possession?*” I can feel my blood pressure rising, my face flushing.

By sticking my head in the sand, I’ve put myself at an extreme disadvantage. I suppose it shouldn’t be much of a shock, the fact that witches are a thing when a demon literally orders sushi at Par House.

But if witches are real, then probably other things that go bump in the night are real too.

And I don’t currently have the mental capacity to reckon with that.

I don’t fucking want any of it. I want to go home, and I want everything to be normal, and hell, I’ll even do family photo sessions for the rest of my life until the cows come home. I’ll take all the demon children over the very real, *very* gorgeous, *very* infuriating Demon King and—

Pitch uncaps a bottle of whisky and gives my coffee a generous pour.

“Drink,” Adam orders.

I lurch to my feet. “I’m not drinking! Drinking got me into this mess! I was drinking a spiked half-and-half when I was on my way home and I ran into the Demon King and that’s what started this whole thing and—”

Adam comes up beside me. He easily towers over me by a foot. “The spiked half-and-half started this?” One of his dark brows rises in an arch. “It was the booze that gave you the ability to stand up against that devil? So if I get drunk, I can slap him around a bit? No worries at all?”

I sputter to a stop.

He picks up my coffee and hands it to me. “I need you.” He gestures to the room with a wave of his arm. “*We* need you. So take a drink. Take a beat. Take a breath. And then help us *stop him.*”

There are tears burning in my eyes. I lick my lips.

They need me. *They need me?*

“You can’t ignore this anymore,” Adam says.

I sniff and nod. It’s easy to ignore the threat the Demon King poses on our future when our social media obsessed world has turned him into a celebrity, into a commodity.

The thing is, I’m no one special. I’m not a decorated soldier like Adam, or a badass like Sanjay. And I don’t possess Gus’s optimism and positivity.

I certainly can’t manhandle a gun like Russian Tommy and burly Pitch. And I’m no witch like adorable little Eric.

They think I’m the only one that can help them.

But what do I think?

I think I'm in over my head.

I take the cup of coffee from Adam and drink. The coffee has already started to cool, but the booze makes it burn down my throat.

Once the alcohol hits my stomach and floods my veins with warmth, I do feel a little more settled. And as long as I don't take too much, the booze will help with the anxiety more than popping a pill.

I need to make sure I have my shit together from here on out. I can't be lagging when the Demon King wants to hunt me down and possess me.

"Good?" Adam says.

I nod. "Yeah. I'm good."

"Gus," he says, "get her something to eat."

Gus stands up and hooks an arm around my waist. "Come on. This way. There's always good takeout leftovers here."

"I ate the tacos," Pitch says.

"There's leftover Chinese food," Sanjay says.

I let Gus guide me back down the stairs and down a hallway and to a giant kitchen that looks more like a cafeteria. He deposits me at one of many metal tables while he goes behind the counter to the industrial refrigerator.

"Ahh," he says to the interior, and then pulls out two cartons of Chinese food and two cans of sparkling water. He returns to me and sets the food down. There are Mason jars on each table filled with silverware but no chopsticks. Gus grabs two forks instead.

I take another long drink of the spiked coffee, then push the mug aside.

Even though I'm in an unfamiliar place, forced from my home, eating leftovers with Gus is the most familiar thing I can think of and it makes me feel settled and safe.

Knowing me well, Gus hands me the container with the chicken fried rice.

I unfold the top and the smell of rice, veggies, eggs, and salty, tangy soy sauce fills my nose. I can tell by the box that it's from Little Sheep Gardens, my favorite.

The first spoonful serves as a weight, pulling me back down to earth, to reality.

"I didn't realize how much I needed this," I say around a mouthful.

Gus is eating rice and sesame chicken. "Chinese food always makes everything better."

"Mmm," I say and stuff more food in my mouth.

“So,” Gus says as he pops the top on one of the cans of sparkling ice water. “You want to talk about it?” He slides the can across the table to me, then opens his and takes a drink.

Using the tines of the fork, I push around a few carrots, looking for bits of chicken, avoiding eye contact with Gus. I’m afraid that if I look at him while I talk, I might just start sobbing again.

“None of this makes sense,” I say.

“Upheaval rarely does.”

“You’ve got a point. But seriously, Gus.” I drop my fork in the takeout container. “Does this track for you? Why the hell is this happening to me? I don’t get it.”

The lump of his Adam’s apple sinks in his throat as he swallows, looking at me like I’m a delicate flower that needs soft words and gentle watering or else I might wilt. I’m not used to feeling fragile or vulnerable, and the way Gus looks at me makes me think he isn’t sure what to do either.

“You’re Rain Low,” he says. “Stubborn Aries, fiery queen. Of course you stood up against a villain. Remember when you socked Ben Hightower when he called me a fairy?”

I snort a laugh.

Gus grins. “I’ll never forget that look on his face as blood ran from his nose, like he was confused as to how he got there.”

“He never saw it coming,” I answer. “Bully for him, underestimating a girl, picking on my best friend. Bastard deserved it.”

“See? You’ve never backed down. And yeah, maybe it’s a mystery why you’re immune to the Demon King, but the fact that you have the balls to do it? That’s not surprising at all.”

I’m already feeling better.

“Thanks, Gus.”

He reaches across the table and squeezes my hand, his cross earring swinging from his ear. “You don’t have to thank me. I’ve got your back, and so does Adam. He might be all stoic soldier dude on the outside, but the guy has a heart of gold, I’m telling you. It takes a lot of work to get through his defenses, but once you do, watch out, he’ll move heaven and earth to protect those he cares about.”

“It’s not like he cares about me, though.”

“But he cares about *me*,” Gus says. “Which by extension means you too.”

“Yeah, so let’s talk about that for a minute, shall we?”

Gus screws up his mouth. “Um, no.”

“When are you making it exclusive?”

The can of sparkling water glints in the fluorescent light when Gus upends it, swallowing down the rest of it.

“Gus.”

The can clangs loudly when he sets it down. “You know me, I like my freedom.” He pretends to whip back his hair, even though his has always been short and coiffed to perfection. Lately, he’s been combing over his bleached blond hair and taming it with so much product, the shine on it could be seen from space.

“I know you like your freedom,” I say, “but if Adam is as golden as you make him out to be, he’s only going to stick around for so long. I’d hate to see you miss out on something special out of fear.”

“I’m not afraid.”

I give him a look. “Oh really?”

“Well, maybe a little.”

Gus had his heart broken a few years back by a guy that I disliked from the very beginning. I mean, I *am* extremely protective of Gus, and no man is ever good enough for him. And maybe that’s also why I’ve kept Adam at arm’s length—deep down, I know he *is* good for Gus, maybe even too good. And I’m afraid of losing my best friend to love.

Fear keeps us all in our boxes, locked away safe and sound. I think in a lot of ways, doing family photography is my safe little box. I whine and bitch about it, but have I done anything to change it? No. Because it’s safe. Because doing it means I don’t have to take any big risks, it means I don’t have to face failure, or discomfort.

I eat the last spoonful of fried rice and then shove the carton aside. “Well, this got deep real quick, didn’t it?”

Gus sighs. “This is your usual MO though, babe.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When faced with your own obstacle, it’s much easier for you to focus on other people’s problems.”

I frown. “That maybe sounds familiar.”

He hangs his head back and laughs at the ceiling. The sound echoes through the large cafeteria. Gus has the best big laugh. It warms my gut.

When he straightens again, he quickly sobers. “Just like you’ve always helped me through my shit, I’m going to help you through this one. Got it?”

I put my chin in the palm of my hand. “What if I don’t want to do this?”
“Babe,” he says and ducks his head so he can look me right in the eyes. There’s concern pinched between his brows and a frown on his lips. “I don’t think you have a choice.”

Fuck. My stomach flips.

He’s right.

He’s so fucking right.

The Demon King is coming for me whether I like it or not.

IT'S SANJAY WHO SHOWS ME TO A ROOM I CAN CRASH IN. HER LONG, BLACK braid swishes behind her as she walks down a wide hall. The girl can move quickly despite her small frame, and I find I have to power walk to keep up with her.

“So how long have you been working with Adam?” I ask.

She glances at me over her shoulder. “We served together, so I’ve known him about seven years, but after I got out of the Army, I went back home to Detroit and tried to pretend I was cut out for a domestic life. Or an academic one.” She looks at me again with a grin on her face. “Spoiler, I wasn’t. Much to the chagrin of my parents. They wanted me to either go through with an arranged marriage or go into medicine, but I wanted to fight for something.”

She turns a corner, and I scurry after her.

“I’ve always been that way,” she carries on. “Medicine is great for saving people, but so is fighting.”

“God, I love you,” I say.

She smiles again. She has a dazzling smile that reminds me of a daisy opening up. When she turns that smile on you, you just want to bask in it.

“Anyway,” she says when she stops at an unmarked door, “when Adam told me he was putting together a team to try to stop the Demon King, I was all in.”

Sanjay opens the door to my new room and flicks on a light switch. I poke my head inside.

Like everything else about this place, it’s unadorned and practical. There’s an iron-framed bed against the wall with a lumpy mattress on it.

Sheets and a green blanket are folded precisely at the foot of the bed. There's a metal cabinet next to the bed with a curved-arm lamp on top.

There aren't any windows.

I suppose that's for the best. No one can crawl in while I sleep.

I go in and turn a circle. "Have you guys figured out what the Demon King is looking for?"

Sanjay crosses her arms over her chest and leans into the doorframe. "Not yet. But we suspect whatever it is, we don't want him to have it."

I nod. That makes sense. "So the plan is to stop him from finding it."

"Pretty much."

"And you guys really think I can help with that?"

"You're closer than we've ever gotten."

I drop to the bed and the frame squeaks loudly. "I wish I had your confidence, Sanjay."

"I wish I had whatever your power is to withstand the Demon King."

An unladylike snort comes out of me. "It's not a power. Probably a fluke."

"If you say so."

I glance at her, checking for sarcasm. What I find instead is more frightening—hope.

She, like everyone else, is hopeful that I can stop Wrath. But that voice in the back of my mind keeps saying it's all some kind of mistake and that they'll realize their optimism was misplaced in me.

Or worse—someone will end up as one of Wrath's enslaved monsters.

I don't want to be the reason Adam loses his team because I couldn't do what he needed me to do.

The trouble with always fending for myself means I've never had to shoulder the responsibility of anyone else, and I'm finding I don't like it. The feeling chafes.

"I'll let you get some rest," Sanjay says. "Bathroom is at the end of the hall. If you need anything, my room is just two doors down."

"Thanks, Sanjay. I mean it. I really appreciate your kindness."

She smiles again. "No need to thank me for that."

We say goodbye, and she pulls the door shut behind her. I click on the desk lamp and flick off the harsh overhead lights.

I've never been the type of person to get whiny about my surroundings, but this...this is hard to adjust to. Having no windows is great for safety, but

I'm feeling closed off, hedged in, isolated. I don't like it.

I already miss my condo, my bed, and my bathroom.

Trying to distract myself, I make the tiny twin-sized bed with the sheets that have been left out. The material is scratchy, but the white cotton is clean and I can smell the bleach that was used to wash it.

Clean is good. I can handle this.

Once the bed is made, the pillow fluffed, I lie down and flick off the light.

For a massive space like a repurposed factory, you'd think there'd be all sorts of sounds. Clanking and rustling and groaning. But this place must have been built to withstand a bomb because it's silent. Absolutely fucking silent.

I turn onto my back and blink up at the ceiling even though in my windowless room, there's nothing but darkness.

What if this is my destiny? For the rest of my life? To hide away in a barren, windowless room while the ruthless Demon King hunts me down simply because I'm immune to him?

The tears that spring to my eyes catch me off guard.

This isn't something to cry about!

I'm safe. I have a roof over my head. Not everyone can say that. And I'm surrounded by friends and I have a mother that cares about me and—

My face wrinkles up in the dark as the tears come.

I hate that I hate this.

I hate that I can't just be happy with what I have.

But isn't that how I've always lived my life? Nothing is ever good enough. Perpetually dissatisfied. My mom always said as much.

"Like you're always chasing a drug," she would say, "but you don't know what the drug is."

She's not wrong. I feel like I've been searching for *something* my entire life, but I don't know what that is, and now not only do I not have something better, I have something worse—a windowless room in a gutted factory and a very shaky future.

Because Wrath isn't going to let this go. He may have signed a treaty with the government, but when it comes down to it, what do they think they'll do if he breaks it? Nothing. There's nothing anyone can do.

Tears trail down my temples, soaking my hair. I brush them away, but more just replace them. I can't stop. I'm overwhelmed and fucking mad and frustrated and scared and—

"Tears are for the weak."

The voice slithers out of the darkness, caressing my skin.

The tears immediately stop as my heart kicks up in my chest.

Did I just hear that?

I hold my breath as blood pumps hard through my body, goosebumps sending a shiver across my shoulders.

He takes a breath. I can hear it in the dark. I can feel it like a fingertip dragging across my skin.

“You’re not here,” I say.

“Am I not?” he answers.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I can’t see anything but...are the shadows coalescing? He’s going to possess me. Fuck.

The Demon King is here somehow, someway. He’s here and he’s going to take me and then I’ll just be a mindless slave made of darkness.

On three, I’m turning on the lamp.

Anticipation coils in my bones.

One.

My heart races beneath my ribs.

Two.

I slowly reach my hand to the lamp’s hanging chain.

Three.

I yank it down and soft golden light fills the room.

And the Demon King is standing not three feet away.

All of the air dries up in my throat and I think my heart stops beating.

“I’m coming for you,” he says, and then his face contorts into that sharp monster as he charges me, teeth bared.

I SCREAM AND SQUEEZE MY EYES SHUT, PULLING THE BLANKET UP LIKE I'M A child again hiding from the monsters under my bed.

I scream and scream.

The door bursts open.

Boots pound into the room.

When I open my eyes, I find Adam with a gun up, the stock tight against his shoulder as he scans the room through the sight. Sanjay and Eric flank him.

“Clear,” Adam says.

Sanjay and Eric pull back. Sanjay says, “Rain is clear.”

“What happened?” Adam asks.

“I—”

I look around the tiny room. The Demon King is gone. There's nowhere to hide here except—

I leap off the bed and then slowly, tentatively, check under the bed only to find it empty. How the hell am I supposed to explain this one?

“Rain?” Adam says.

“I thought...” I fold my arms over my middle. “I thought I saw something.” I look up at him, my face still wet with tears. I must look like a lunatic.

He's probably starting to get the drift—I'm a liability.

I might be the only person immune to the Demon King, but I'm also losing it.

Gus hurries into the room half dressed. He spots me, then looks to Adam.

Adam gives him a quick nod before Gus rushes over, his hands on either side of my face.

The tears come again and this time, blood pools in my cheeks from the embarrassment. I'm not a damsel in distress, but I feel like one and I can't stop crying.

"You all right?" Gus asks. His hair is askew and there are bags beneath his eyes. He looks tired and worried and stressed and it's all because of me. He's supposed to be enjoying a weekend in the city with his sorta-boyfriend. Not taking care of me in a depressing factory.

"I'm okay," I say, feeling stupid. Maybe I was dreaming and didn't realize it? I could have sworn Wrath was here. I *felt* him. But I can't tell them that or they'll really think I'm losing it. Maybe I am.

"I think I'm just really tired," I answer.

"Was he here?" Adam asks, his expression blank.

My heart kicks up again and butterflies fill my belly.

Was he here?

Wrath. The Demon King.

Did he come right to me?

Why does it feel like my body is hoping he was? It's turning into a damn traitor.

"I...I *thought* I saw him," I admit. "But that's not possible, right? Because of the barrier thing?" I wave my hand vaguely through the air as if I even understand what a witch barrier is.

Adam casts a glance over his shoulder. Eric nods and hurries off.

"Anything is possible with Wrath. Let's not forget that," Adam says. "We'll search the grounds."

Gus tucks me protectively into his side. He's warm and familiar, and being near him unwinds some of the knots in my chest. I'm so grateful to have him that the tears burn in my sinuses again before I sniff them back.

"She can't stay in here alone," Gus says.

"Agreed." Adam drops his rifle. It's strapped to his body by a black nylon strap, and when he cinches it up, the gun tightens to his chest, the barrel pointed at the floor. "We'll move her to the living room and keep eyes on her at all times."

"Can she go there now?" Gus asks.

"Wait until we clear the building," Adam answers. "Tommy and Pitch," he shouts as he leaves the room. "Guard Rain."

“Aye, boss,” Pitch says.

Tommy says something that sounds like *pon-you*.

Gus guides me back down to the bed, but doesn't leave my side. It isn't until he drapes the army green blanket over my shoulders that I realize I'm shivering.

I don't like feeling like I can't take care of myself, like I'm weak.

The Demon King is making me feel like a grade A loser.

“If he's here, Adam will find him,” Gus says as he rubs warmth into my arms.

“And if he does? Find him, I mean?”

Gus frowns, but he doesn't answer.

We both know what happens.



IT DOESN'T TAKE ADAM'S TEAM LONG TO CLEAR THE BUILDING, AND THEY find nothing. Not even a window screen out of place. While I'm glad they didn't run into the Demon King, I'm a little defeated by it because it makes me think maybe I did imagine him.

Still, as Gus takes me to the living room, I can't shake the feeling that Wrath is still with me, watching, waiting, and that eventually, he will come to me and there will be nothing anyone can do to stop him.

The living room is much smaller in size than the central room, and it feels cozy despite the sterile gray paint on the concrete walls. Like Collie's Tea Shop, the furniture here is mismatched and has clearly been thrifted or commandeered from other places.

I sit on the end of a gray tweed sofa that smells faintly of a grandma.

An 80s movie plays on the flat screen TV hanging on the far wall. The characters are wearing button-up shirts with wild patterns, hair slicked back.

“Wish I would have found the bastard,” a scrawny guy says in the corner. He's sitting at a round table with another guy. There's an unfinished game of chess between them. “I would have put a bullet straight through his brain.”

Sanjay is sitting on the arm of a side chair, her rifle close at hand. I've never been around guns much and it's a little unsettling how comfortable everyone is with them. I'm used to being surrounded by coffee table art books and camera equipment.

“You could have tried to put a bullet through his brain,” Sanjay says, “and then you would have had your heart ripped out by the Demon King when you failed.”

One of the other guys laughs.

The scrawny guy turns red. “Why we keeping this girl around anyway?” He tips his chin at me. “Maybe we should use her as bait.”

Sanjay’s eyes go round like she’s silently telling the guy to shut it.

And that’s when Adam steps up.

He crosses his arms over his chest and his muscles strain against his sleeves.

The room goes silent.

I’m learning that when Adam levels his shoulders and crosses his arms, it’s akin to a cobra opening its hood.

Somebody is about to get bit.

“Rain is one of our own,” Adam says as he looks over the room. Most of those assembled avoid eye contact with him. “Do we sacrifice our own?”

The scrawny guy opens his mouth like he’s about to argue, but Adam silences him with a glare. “Do we sacrifice our own?” he repeats. “Darren?”

The scrawny guy, Darren, apparently, shakes his head. “Sorry, boss.”

I look across the tweed sofa and see Gus practically drooling as he watches his man bring the room to heel.

I can’t say I blame him.

“Rain,” Adam says when he turns back to me. “Sanjay and Pitch will be your personal guards. They’ll follow you everywhere. Do not stray from them. Understood?”

Even though I’m not one of Adam’s soldiers, I still find myself dutifully nodding my head. “Understood.”

“Tommy and Eric,” Adam says. “With me.”

When they leave the room, conversation filters back in.

Gus leans into me and whispers, “I can’t wait to fuck that man tonight. Or is it day?”

“How can you even think about sex right now?” I scrunch into the couch’s corner, tucking my knees up into my chest, pulling my Bob Marley shirt over my legs. I’m so frickin tired, and yet I can’t seem to commit to sleep. What if I did dream about the Demon King? And what if he comes back?

“Sex helps me relax,” Gus answers, shifting himself sideways on the sofa

so he can spread out his long legs. His feet are bare and he arches his toes my way. "It's a natural anti-anxiety med."

I close my eyes. I might not be ready to sleep, but my eyes are burning so badly, I just need a few minutes of respite. "Maybe I should proposition Eric then. I could use all the anti-anxiety I can get."

"You could try," Sanjay says, "but he's asexual."

"Tommy then," I say and look over at the burly man watching the doorway.

When Gus laughs, a lock of blond hair flops over his forehead. More proof that my freak-out roused him from bed. He's disheveled, not coiffed like usual.

"What's so funny about that?" I ask.

"Oh nothing, other than Tommy is old enough to be your dad."

"Maybe I have a daddy fetish. How will I know until I try it?" Except when I think about having sex, the first image that pops into my brain is the Demon King.

It immediately makes me clench up, and I untuck my legs, disliking the rush of blood to my clit at just the mere thought of the Demon King between my thighs.

Guilt wends into my gut. These people are risking their lives to protect me from Wrath, and here I am fantasizing about screwing him?

It's just...every breath he exhales around me feels like a storm rolling in, like I'm the ocean, and he's the thundercloud churning my insides.

I can't fight it any more than the ocean can fight the storm.

This isn't good. Not good at all.

It must be a facet of his power. It would explain why we're all gaga for him.

Summoning all of the mental energy I have left, I shove down those thoughts and turn my focus to the TV and the 80s movie nearing its montage. But as I sit here, I can feel Darren and his friend watching me warily.

Adam might have made it clear that I was off limits, but how loyal are these people? My gut instinct says I can trust Sanjay and Eric and Tommy and Pitch, but there's something about Darren that makes my skin crawl.

I inhale to settle my nerves. I have a lot of good people on my side. I just have to trust in them.

But for how long?

How long do I have to surrender to this hide-and-seek life?



I DOZE ON THE COUCH FOR A WHILE, BUT KEEP MY LEGS TANGLED WITH GUS'S just to ensure my subconscious that a friend is nearby.

My sleep this time is blissfully uneventful, but when Gus shakes me awake sometime later, instinct has me lurching upright like I'm under attack.

"It's just me," he says, holding up his hands.

"Sorry." I scrub my eyes. "What's going on?"

"You gotta see this." He shows me his phone, and I wince at the light, my eyes still burning with sleep.

"Oh, hold on." He turns the phone back around to slide down the brightness. "Here."

I sit up and run my hands through my hair. I can already feel it getting greasy and knotted. I take a shower every day without fail, and I'm now overdue. It's like my hair has an expiration date and as soon as it hits, it's full-on dirty. It's just one more reminder that I'm not at home and nothing is normal.

I haven't checked out the bathroom situation here yet—do they even have showers?

Phone in hand, sleepiness fading, I finally focus on the screen.

Gus is logged into Instagram, and he's landed on a photoshopped picture that makes me go cold.

It's me and the Demon King.

My photo is from two years back when I was experimenting with fine art self-portraits. My hair was shorter, and I'd gotten a blowout specifically for the photo, then promptly mussed it as soon as I got home to give it an artfully messy vibe.

Bright sunlight filtered in through a window behind me, turning everything hazy and warm. I was wearing a men's oxford shirt fully unbuttoned baring a sliver of flesh and some serious cleavage.

I thought I was being risqué, but in today's Instagram world, the photo was practically biblical.

Now someone had taken the photo and composited it with an image of Wrath and his pale, gorgeous face.

The artist added shadows around Wrath, and mood and texture to the final image. Dark mist wreathed the edges, and pale filigree stamped the corners.

There was a quote written in small, slanted cursive just below Wrath.

A light here required a shadow there – Virginia Woolf

Looking at the image, I feel a chill slither down my spine.

My mom taught me that no art can be dismissed. Anything that's made with creativity is art. Even this photoshopped image on Instagram.

I've lived and breathed all kinds of art my entire life. I once lived in the back of a gallery with my mom when I was a kid when she took part in a live exhibit.

I *know* art. I know that not all of it makes sense, but that good art makes you feel something.

And right now...I feel like that ocean again, weightless, boundless, *restless*.

There's an excited flutter in my chest, one that I try hard to ignore.

I open up the comments to read what others think about it.

I ship it.

I hate this girl and I want to be her all at the same time.

I volunteer!

Couple goals.

If she's not currently jumping his bones, I will gladly take her place.

I scroll back up to the image.

It's like Wrath is looking at me through the phone's screen. Everything about this man makes me...

No. No. Everything about him makes me irate.

If he shows up again, I'm going to stab him.

"You think that's bad?" Sanjay says as she points the remote at the TV and turns up the volume.

There are news teams and amateur YouTubers racing after a dark figure on the street.

It doesn't take much to recognize the broad shoulders of Wrath. Or maybe it's the confident, determined gait, as if he's headed for a battle he knows he's already won.

"Wrath!" someone shouts.

"Your Highness!" another man yells.

Oh, we're giving him titles now, are we?

"Mr. Wrath," a woman yells. "Can you tell us more about Rain Low and why she's so special?"

Wrath abruptly stops, and everyone chasing him bounces off of each other as they come to a halt.

Lights flash, cameras click. There's a crowd gathering on the street curb.

My heart is beating like a drum in my chest.

Why am I so special? What is he going to say?

I desperately want to know.

The sharp cut of Wrath's jawline comes into stark relief as he turns just enough to speak to the cameras. He doesn't look at the viewer, but it's clear he's speaking to us.

Or maybe he's just talking to one person in particular.

Me.

"I wish only to speak to Rain," he says, and then adds, "Alone."

I lick my lips. All of the exhaustion is gone from my bones and I feel charged up, electric.

I sit upright and lean toward the TV.

The most wanted/most popular man in the country is currently talking about me on national TV and all over the internet. It's easy to pretend this is just my problem in my little bubble, but this, the Instagram post, it all proves just how big this has gotten in a very short amount of time.

It's no longer a fluke.

It's no longer something I can bury my head in the sand over and wait it out.

This is very, very real and it's snowballing.

"In fact," Wrath says, "I'm upping the reward."

The crowd murmurs around him. More cameras click.

"If you have Rain's current location," he says, the deep timbre of his voice filling the speakers, wending through the room, slithering over to me on the couch and lifting the hair at the nape of my neck. "I'm offering one million dollars to anyone who can tell me where to find her."

"Holy shit," Gus says.

"Holy shit is right," Sanjay says.

Pitch pipes up behind me. "That's not good. Tell the boss."

Sanjay pulls out her cell phone and taps in a message. Their panic has me panicking, and it's suddenly hard to breathe.

I stand up, thinking that walking around might help, but my head swims and I have to catch myself on the arm of one of the side chairs.

"Rain?" Gus says.

My stomach rolls.

This isn't good, Pitch said. Not good. Fuck. If he's worried...

“I think I’m going to be sick.” I clamp my hand over my mouth.

The room erupts in a flurry of movement and then someone shoves an empty bucket beneath me at the exact moment I start retching. What little I ate immediately comes up, burning through my sinuses, lighting my throat on fire.

My stomach is in knots and my chest hurts and it’s all too much.

Someone holds my hair back. I think it might be Gus, but I can’t be sure. I keep retching, unable to stop it, my body violently opposing this shit show. And I’ve gotta say, I’m right there with it.

When it finally stops, I collapse against the wall. Putting my hands on my knees, bending over, I suck in several deep breaths. Someone hands me a wet rag and I paw at my face, flushed and probably covered in red splotches. I always break out in hives when I vomit.

As I stand there, half hunched over, pristine black boots appear in my line of sight. I can feel Adam’s energy before I look up at him. He’s like the lion sauntering into the circle. I don’t want to face him. He and I might not be the best of friends, but being around him just serves as a reminder that I don’t have my shit as together as I thought I did.

I’m supposed to be okay fending for myself, but Adam keeps having to rush in to save me.

I wish I could summon just an ounce of his unshakeable demeanor because I really am losing my shit right now.

“Rain,” he says.

I wince and straighten. “Yeah?”

“You all right?”

Gus is standing just behind him, a pinch of concern between his blond brows.

“I’m fine,” I answer.

Adam frowns but says nothing.

“I’m fine,” I repeat like I’m trying to convince him as much as myself.

“Come with me.”

“What? Where?”

“Come on.” He’s already moving toward the door.

I shoot Gus a panicked look. “I’ll come with you,” Gus says, hooking his arm through mine.

We follow Adam from the living room and down the hallway. We pass a few people dressed in varying shades of army green and camouflage. They

nod at Adam and shoot looks of curiosity and wariness my way.

Do they know the bounty has been raised on my head? A million dollars is a lot of money. How the hell is Adam ignoring it anyway? He could outfit his entire team with all the bells and whistles and then really have a fighting chance against Wrath. Maybe. Probably not. But they'd look damn good doing it.

Adam finally comes up to a set of double doors. They're the kind with a metal bar for a handle and the bar clanks loudly as Adam pushes through. The fluorescent lights buzz high above us. Several caged ceiling fans churn out tepid air.

Half the room is covered in a blue floor mat, the other a thinner black mat. One side seems to be for sparring, while the other, with several barbells and weights, seems to be for lifting.

I look around. "What is this?"

"You're going to make her workout?" Gus says.

Adam goes to the blue mat and loosens up his stance. "You feel out of control."

It's a statement, not a question, and I can't help but give a quick nod.

"Why?"

I'm still clinging to Gus when I answer, "I'm afraid."

That's the honest to god truth, and I hate that it makes me feel weak. I mean, this entire time, I knew that Wrath was dangerous. I knew that he posed a real threat to our way of life, but it isn't like he went looking for a fight anywhere. It isn't like he blew up buildings or planted bombs or started opening fire on innocent bystanders.

Our world is already dangerous, but it's a danger I'm familiar with.

Wrath is a new monster, but he's one I was naive enough to believe wasn't *my* problem. I thought I could ignore him.

But now that I'm the center of his mission? Now that his eyes are on me?

I'm fucking terrified.

Why can I withstand him? And does he really just want to talk? Or is that a ploy to get me alone so he can turn me into one of his obedient soldiers?

I've always fended for myself, but I enjoyed that freedom. I was always grateful to have it. And now? Wrath and his very existence threaten to take that away, and I don't know what to do about it or how to fight it.

I don't know how to take his eyes off me.

And there's some depraved part of me that doesn't want to.

And what the hell does that say about me?

He's enemy number one, and I'm practically buzzing just thinking about being alone with him.

Maybe in the long run, that's what scares me most, how badly I want his attention. Because that makes me no better than the rest of them, so hungry for the spectacle, the power.

Wrath is living, breathing art.

And a little twisted part of me wants to be overwhelmed by him like my mom at the Grand Canyon, staring into the chasm.

Adam slides on a pair of boxing pads. "Punch."

"Why?"

"Because hitting something will make you feel better, will make you feel in control."

"I'm not going to box with you," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because!"

"Because why?"

I turn to Gus. He holds up his hands, excusing himself from the entire scenario. "I like the guy," he says, "but sometimes his methods are weird."

Adam snorts. "You once tried to give me advice through a deck of cards."

"Hey, hey now. Do not disrespect the Rider-Waite."

With a sigh, I walk onto the cushy blue mat. Adam waits for me. When I get within swinging distance of him, he asks, "Do you know how to make a fist?"

I roll my eyes. "Of course I do."

"Good." Adam brings up the mitts. "Take a swing then."

I bring my fist up and Adam shakes his head.

"What?"

Dropping the mitts, he comes over and grabs my hand. "Like this." He tucks my fingers into my palm, curling my thumb over my index and middle finger. "Keep your knuckles level, and make sure your fist is in a straight line with your forearm to prevent your wrist from buckling."

So maybe I didn't pay that great of attention during the self-defense class.

Once my fist is to Adam's liking, he steps away again and slides the pads back onto his hands. "Now go."

I feel a little out of sorts, but I've never been one to back down from a challenge.

I step toward him and throw a punch. It lands uselessly on the pad.

“Again,” he says.

I throw another punch.

“Again. Harder this time.”

I punch and keep punching, and the more I punch, the more frustrated I become as Adam keeps yelling at me to keep going. I grit my teeth as sweat beads on my forehead.

My breathing quickens as my heart rate spikes.

“How are you feeling?” Adam asks.

“Angry.” I throw a punch at his right.

“Why?”

I inhale, fill my lungs, and throw another punch. “Because...I want...my own bed.”

My knuckles are starting to ache, but I keep going. There’s a pressure in my chest like I’m either about to scream or sob or maybe both.

I want to go home. I want my life back. I don’t want to be stuck in a factory guarded by others like I’m some weakling.

I punch again, then alternate and punch with my left. Adam remains stoic, his boxing mitts taking the beating. Soon the knots in my stomach loosen, and some of the stress melts away and a smile comes across my face.

Maybe Adam does know what he’s doing.

And then someone calls out his name and he pulls the mitts away.

I step back, hands on my hips, chest heaving. Sweat trickles down the side of my face and down my spine. I’ve never been the gym type, but I’m starting to rethink my resistance to exercise. I feel fucking great.

“There’s something you need to have a look at,” Tommy says from the doorway.

Adam returns the mitts to a rack along the wall. He stops by my side before he leaves. “I’ll get you home again. You just gotta trust me.”

I give him a quick nod, and then he’s gone.

“What he didn’t say,” Gus says, “is that the tarot deck gave him some excellent advice.”

I laugh and push sweaty hair off my forehead. “The Rider-Waite never lies.”

“He doesn’t like anything he can’t verify with his eyes.”

“I bet Wrath’s arrival here threw him for a loop.”

We walk toward the double doors. Pitch is there, having taken over guard

duty for Sanjay. He holds the door open for us.

“I think it threw most of us for a loop,” Gus admits. “I mean, maybe not so much for people like you and me. Our mothers believe in fairies and sprites.”

“Yeah, maybe Eric being a witch shouldn’t have surprised me as much as it did. My mom once spent a month with a shaman. Remember that?”

“How could I forget? When she came home, she made us drink her special tea every day for a month to cleanse our souls.”

“It was awful tea.”

“The worst.”

We spill out into the hallway. It’s ridiculously quiet, and I realize I have no idea what time it is. Not sleeping straight through the night, and the lack of windows here, makes it feel like a black hole of time.

“Are there showers?” I ask.

Pitch falls into step beside me. “Yes. I can show you if you’d like. And I can ask Sanjay to take over for me so—”

“That’s not necessary. She was up all night. I trust you, Pitch.”

He gives me a serious look. “I’m duty bound to protect you. I’ll even clear out the bathroom for you.”

“Thanks.”

“I think I’m going to crash for a while too,” Gus says. “I’m beat.”

Gus is the type of person who can operate just fine on three hours of sleep, but glancing over at him, I note the heaviness beneath his eyes. “Of course,” I say and give him a hug. “Thank you for sitting with me earlier. The only reason I was able to sleep was because you were there.”

He squeezes me back. “Don’t thank me. I love you. That’s what friends do.”

We part ways and I return to my room for my bag. It feels like a boon, the fact that I had the foresight to pack clean underwear and a clean sports bra.

“Bathroom is this way,” Pitch says and takes me to the door at the very end of my hall. “Wait here.” He deposits me at the door and then goes inside, checking the stalls, then the shower. “All clear, Ms. Low. You’ll have the bathroom to yourself.”

I pat the big guy on the shoulder as I pass. “You’re a godsend, Pitch.”

He beams at me. “My mama used to say the same thing.”

“And did you believe her?”

He chuckles, his barrel chest heaving up and down. “I once told my

teacher I didn't have to do my math homework. 'And why's that?' my teacher asked. And I said, 'Because I'm a godsend. And god doesn't want me to do math homework.'"

I laugh with him as I hang up my bag on one of the metal hooks. "Your teacher let you get away with that?"

"Not a chance." He goes to the door and pulls it closed, but not all the way. "I'll be right here if you need me, Ms. Low."

"Rain, please."

"Rain then." He doffs his baseball cap at me and takes position just outside the door.

There's a rack of clean white towels along the tiled wall. I unfold one and hang it on the hook next to my bag.

There are three shower stalls in the communal bathroom, each separated by a green tiled wall. A plastic shower curtain hangs from rings on the doorway. I pull mine closed, the rings clanging against the rod.

When I turn on the showerhead, cold water blasts me in the face, and I clamp my hand over my mouth, trying not to scream. Don't want the entire factory running to me in the shower.

It takes the water a while to heat up, but once it does, and the steam starts to fill the alcove, I breathe out a sigh of relief.

A hot shower can seriously repair any bad day. I stand beneath the spray for several minutes just drinking in the heat and the steam. I find shampoo and conditioner in a dispenser on the wall.

It's probably cheap surplus soap, but right now, I don't care. I pump out several globs and scrub it into my scalp. It smells like strawberries and reminds me of when my mom and I stayed at a rural cabin just on the edge of a strawberry farm. She had dreams of writing a book about creativity, and the cabin was supposed to be her writing oasis.

We ended up spending most days picking strawberries by the carton and getting paid in pints.

We ate a lot of strawberry shortcake and fruit smoothies that summer.

And thinking of that reminds me I haven't called Mom back. She's probably stressing.

In fact, I haven't checked my phone in a while.

I rinse out the shampoo, then rake some conditioner into my ends. I'm just rinsing it out when I hear shouting outside the bathroom.

I step out of the spray to listen and then—

Pop-pop.

Were those gunshots?

Pop-pop-pop.

Holy shit.

I shut the shower off and quickly wrap myself in a towel. “Pitch?” I call, as water drips from my soaking wet hair.

There’s no answer. More shouting. A grunt. Another *pop-pop-pop*.

I tie the towel around my body.

Something heavy hits the wall and the door rattles on its hinges. I slink back with a yelp, then clamp my hand over my mouth again.

Fear needles along my spine as I tiptoe to the doorway.

I poke my head out to see Pitch fighting a man dressed entirely in black, face covered with a tactical mask. Pitch grunts. He’s the one who got slammed against the wall, and he’s fighting the other guy, who has a dagger pointed at Pitch’s neck.

“Oh my god!” I yell because I’m an idiot.

Pitch flinches.

I suck in a breath, terrified tears already burning in my eyes as the assailant drives the knife into Pitch’s throat.

Blood spurts from the wound. Pitch chokes on it as he slumps down the wall.

I just stand there frozen, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. The only thing I can think about is how Pitch just told me a silly story about math class and his mom and now he’s bleeding out right before my eyes.

Holy fucking shit.

This is real.

This is very real.

The guy turns to me, the bloody dagger clutched in his hand.

I do the only thing I can do—I turn around and run.

MY WET FEET SLAP AGAINST THE CONCRETE FLOOR AS I CHARGE DOWN THE hallway having no idea which way I'm going. Is this the way to the sparring room or the central room? Where's Adam? Where's Gus?

Oh shit, Gus.

Please let him be okay!

Footsteps pound behind me as the guy gives chase. I can feel him getting closer and closer. It's like a spider crawling up my back.

Any second he'll be on me.

I jam through an unmarked door and charge into the darkness. It takes me a few seconds to realize my feet are no longer on concrete, but dirt, and I'm no longer inside the factory—I'm in some kind of courtyard.

I spin around as my eyes adjust to the darkness. There's a dead tree to my left and a bunch of scrub bushes to my right. The entire courtyard is surrounded by a brick wall easily seven feet tall.

There's no way I can climb that.

The door bursts open behind me and the assailant comes to a stop.

I stand on an old pathway, clutching the towel to my body, wet hair plastered to the side of my face. The guy brings his hand up. He's no longer holding a dagger. Now he has a handgun and the barrel is pointed right at me.

A useless scream gets lodged in my throat, and even if I could get it out, there's no one here to help me.

I'm going to die in a barren courtyard at some nameless factory all because I got drunk and ran into the Demon King.

The assailant, his face still hidden behind a mask, aims the gun at me and

pulls the trigger.

I brace, body clenched up tight.

This is how it ends.

I'm dead. I'm dead.

The air snaps, and suddenly Wrath is in front of me, black mist trailing off of him like the tentacles of a dark, terrifying monster.

The bullets hit him and plink uselessly to the stone path.

“Shit,” the assailant murmurs and then backs into the door.

With water still dripping from my body, I step to the side so I can see over the broad line of Wrath's shoulders.

The assailant yanks at the door handle, but it doesn't budge.

Wrath advances.

“Help!” the guy screams. “Fucking open the door!” He pulls harder, boots dug into the ground, knees bent. “Fuck. Help!”

Wrath disappears.

The air goes still. A bead of water wends down my spine.

There's a feeling in the air, like we've stumbled into a dark jungle, a predator watching us from the shadows. I pull the towel closer, hands shaking.

“Help!” the guy screams again.

Wrath reappears right next to him and grabs him by the throat. The guy tries to yell again, but it just comes out as a wet, garbled mess. His feet leave the ground and pedal in the air. Wrath's pale hand stands out in the darkness, fingers tightening as the swaths of mist emanating from him sharpen to spears.

The guy kicks and scrabbles as the telltale sound of bones cracking rents through the night.

“Please,” the guy gasps out as blood trickles from the corner of his mouth.

The shadow spears pull back and then charge through the air, impaling the man against the door.

One final gasp bursts from his throat and then his head lolls to the side, blood spurting from the wounds.

I step back, heart ramming in my chest and in my throat and—

Wrath turns to me. The shadows trailing off of him pull back, and the impaled man thuds to the ground.

Oh fuck.

I clutch tighter at the towel as I scan the surrounding courtyard for a weapon. But what's the point? If I was defenseless against a human with a gun, I'm hopeless against Wrath, the Demon King, invincible, untouchable.

"*Dieva,*" he says, his voice like liquid metal rolling down my spine.

"No." I backpedal, get tangled in a fallen tree limb, and then lose my balance. I tip sideways, my arm out to catch me.

But I don't land. Instead, I hang in midair, my wet hair dripping to the stone.

When I look up, I find Wrath's deft fingers wrapped around my wrist, his eyes glowing red in the weak light.

He yanks me upright, and I twist my arm, trying to pull out of his grasp. It only manages to bring me closer to him when he tightens his hold.

My head sways as my nose fills with the rich, sweet scent of him. I'm shivering again, but for a different reason.

"Let me go," I say, tapping a fresh vein of courage.

His jaw flexes when he grits his teeth. "I save you and this is how you repay me?"

"I didn't need saving."

"Oh?" The way he says the one word makes his eyes narrow and his brows sink, like I'm an annoying toddler who's just said something profoundly stupid.

"Yes." I test his grip again with another yank, but his fingers don't budge.

"There's another on his way here," Wrath says, and his eyes glint in the dark. "Shall I lead the way to him? I'm sure he'll be delighted to put a bullet in your brain."

I look past Wrath to the lump of a man lying at the door. I can't hear anything beyond the blood rushing through my ears, but I'm sure there are more men and women in black tactical gear with plenty of knives and bullets for me.

But I'm not sure which is the lesser foe—they or Wrath.

No, scratch that, I do know.

No one can kill Wrath. Therefore he's the greater adversary.

But I can't ignore the fact that he *did* just save me, and while his grip is tight, it isn't painful. I haven't seen one of his possessed soldiers either, so that's a good sign.

"What do you want from me?" I ask.

He cants his head, a sliver of moonlight finding his face. There is

something dangerously beautiful about him, like a blade made of glass. “I’m not sure yet.”

Something slams into the courtyard door, making me jump. Wrath’s attention slides away from me briefly, and the absence of his attention is like losing the sunlight on a cold winter day.

I shiver. Wrath turns his gaze back to me. “If I gave you a choice as to whether you came with me or stayed here to face the cretins of the Citizens Against Darkness, which would you choose?”

“The Citizens?” I say, my arm still clutched in his hand, his body still impossibly close. “How do you know that? The soldier was wearing all black.”

The door pushes open again, but there’s currently a dead body blocking it. Is it Adam trying to get through? Gus? Or just another soldier?

“They’re wearing patches,” Wrath says like it should be obvious, like I should have noticed this small detail while being chased by a knife-wielding murderer. “Answer the question.”

“Why?”

“Because your answer matters.”

My heart kicks up again. From the little I know about Wrath, nothing any human has ever done or said mattered to him.

“Why?” I ask again.

The courtyard door opens another few inches, and the sharp fluorescent light of the hallway spills out into the darkness.

“Ticktock,” he says.

You’d think he would have learned by now that I don’t like being told what to do.

“I’d choose the Citizens,” I say, more out of spite than anything else.

“Wrong answer.” Wrath twists me around and wraps his arm across my torso. Butterflies take flight in my stomach as his next exhale pours down the curve of my throat.

The dead soldier finally rolls away and the door swings open.

It’s not Gus or Adam. It’s Darren at the head of three other Citizen soldiers.

That little piece of shit!

Darren pulls his gun from the holster at his hip and slides his finger onto the trigger.

“He’s going to shoot,” I shriek and push against Wrath, trying to get out

of the way.

Swaths of his dark mist bleed into the air around us like ink dropped into water. The darkness cages us in as a gun goes off. Wrath growls at my ear and the darkness pulls in on itself, perfuming the air with a scent that's deep and dark and reminds me of starlight and burning wood.

The bullet hits the Demon King's dark magic and falls to the stone pathway.

"Hold on," Wrath says.

"Hold on? For what?"

Suddenly, the ground disappears and I'm yanked backwards, my hair flying in front of my face, blocking out the courtyard and the factory beyond.

I squeeze my eyes shut as the world tilts and my center of gravity goes with it. It's not unlike being on a carnival ride, the gravitational force flattening me against Wrath's body.

I clutch at his arm, and he tightens his hold on me.

When I can sense solid ground beneath me again, I open my eyes and look around.

We're no longer outside. In fact, I don't recognize *where* we are.

The floor is rough stone and it's cold on my bare feet, but the fire crackling in the fireplace to my right helps drive away some of the chill.

That, and Wrath is still wrapped around me, his chest to my back. He's warmer than I would have thought. Everything about him makes me think of a dark winter night, but the comforting heat of him is driving away the chill of my damp hair still dripping on my shoulders.

And realizing that I'm currently pressed against him has a depraved thrill racing from my belly down between my legs.

I'm still naked in nothing but a towel, and Wrath, the Demon King, the *villain*, is so close his breath tickles at my neck and spills beneath the hem of the towel, down the valley between my breasts.

I lurch away and stumble toward the fireplace. No, no, no. I am not going to be one of those crazed fangirls that turns to a blubbering mess when Wrath comes within a square mile of them.

"Where are we? How did we even get here?"

Wrath stands beside an overstuffed leather side chair, his hands hanging by his side. His eyes are no longer glowing, and all of that black magic that trails off him is gone, but even so, even when he's standing by as casual as can be, there's something menacing about him that disturbs the air like he's a

volcano that could blow at any moment.

It makes my heart thump in the hollow spaces of my body, this constant closeness to something that could destroy me with such little effort.

“I’ve brought you to safety,” he answers, and I snort.

“I doubt that.”

I gaze around the room. The ceiling height is easily twenty feet, if not more, with heavy wood beams running from one end of the room to the other. The leather furniture is arranged in a half circle around the fireplace, but there are two more seating areas—two large sofas by the floor to ceiling windows and another overstuffed chair in the far corner, an iron floor lamp beside it.

Persian rugs, several of them bigger than my entire living room, are spread over the hardwood floor. The room is dark and cozy.

“Is this your house?”

Wrath just looks at me and says nothing, which I think says enough.

It’s not what I expected, but now that I’m in the space, drinking in his rich, spicy, wintertime scent, it’s exactly what it should be.

“How did we get here?” I ask again.

“I brought you.”

“Obviously. But *how*?”

He disappears, dark mist pluming in his wake.

I sense him behind me and whirl around.

“Like that,” he answers. “I believe your scientists will someday describe it as traveling through the sub-dimension.”

“Will? Can you predict the future too?”

There’s a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. “No. They just need time to catch up.”

This entire conversation is making my head spin. “So what’s a sub-dimension?”

He thinks for a second, his gaze going far away. I like watching him consider for me, as if my question has merit.

It makes a faint flicker of warmth light in my sternum.

“Think of an old house with plaster and lath walls,” he says. “The space between those walls is the space between dimensions. The walls keep the dimensions from spilling into one another. I can travel through that space—the sub-dimension.”

“So that’s how you disappeared from custody the first time you were taken in,” I say.

He gives me no indication that I'm wrong.

The scientists who've been enamored with Wrath's very existence would likely nerd out over this detail. But is it magic or science?

"Can anybody travel through the sub-dimension?"

His face is still blank when he answers, "Absolutely not."

I turn away, back to the fire. I'm starting to shiver. I'm still in nothing but a towel, and I'm dripping all over Wrath's pretty Persian rugs.

The heat of the fire is enticing, and I gravitate toward it like a cat to a patch of sunlight.

But as I turn, the air grows charged again, and Wrath is suddenly behind me, his hand fisted in my hair.

"Ouch!"

I fight to get away, but he yanks me back, his other hand on my bare shoulder, holding me in place.

That flame ignites in the center of me as adrenaline pumps through my veins, that prey flight instinct screaming *go, go*.

"What the hell?" I shout.

"Where did you get this?"

"What? Get what?"

"This mark," he says. His thumb trails down from the ridge of my shoulder blade, just barely grazing the space where I know my birthmark sits at the base of my neck.

I ball my hands into fists, fighting the urge to lean into him even though he's got my hair in his grip and his hand on my naked shoulder, forcing me still.

Shame wedges into my chest. I shouldn't be feeling this way with the enemy. Adam would give me the world's biggest scowl if he saw me now, practically mewling at Wrath's touch.

But fuck if it doesn't ignite something in my core.

I don't like it. And also, I like it very, very much.

And both of those emotions have me reaching for what I'm most comfortable with—anger.

I grab his left wrist and try to disengage from him, but he just pulls my hair harder.

His mouth is suddenly at the soft shell of my ear, his voice like silk on my skin. "If I brought you here with barely any effort at all, imagine where I could deposit you now, *dieva*, naked and trembling."

Fuck.

“I’m not trembling,” I argue, even though my voice breaks on the words.

“Oh?” His other hand, the one on my shoulder, trails down my arm, teasing goosebumps on my skin. I’m suddenly wet again, and not just from the shower.

He’s toying with me, and goddammit, my body is here for it.

I close my eyes, a breath stuttering up my throat. I don’t want this to end. I want him to keep touching me even though everything inside of me is screaming to snap out of it.

His hand moves from my arm to the curve of my waist.

My waist and my hips have always been the place that gets me going, that makes me ravenous for more.

My chest rises and falls with quicker breaths. It would be so easy to let the towel go, let it fall to the floor, to feel Wrath’s hands on my—

“Where did you get the mark?”

I swallow hard. “It’s a birthmark. The answer is in the name.”

“You’re lying.”

I snap my eyes open. “Why would I lie about that?”

Black mist kicks up around me. Not even twenty minutes ago, that mist was protecting me, but now I get the distinct impression it’s meant to do the opposite.

The darkness blots out the firelight.

My desire is dripping down my thighs, and now I’m on the edge of being murdered by the Demon King. It’s perverse and wrong and I hate what he does to me.

The darkness solidifies.

Fuck, fuck.

Think, Rain.

Adam kept saying I was the only one who could stand against Wrath.

I just...I need to focus. I bet Wrath has some kind of power that turns people into mewling sycophants and I’m just falling prey to it.

I rack my brain for the self-defense tactics I learned. It was so long ago...

Kicking was always a tactic the instructor recommended using when you had your back to your attacker.

I lift my leg and jam it back, kicking Wrath in the knee.

He grunts and drops my hair. I whirl around only to find him gone, the son of a bitch.

I spot the door on the other side of the room. There are windows beside me, but fighting to get them open is only going to waste time, and I have no idea what floor we're on or how far of a jump it'd be.

I run to the door.

Wrath reappears ten feet away. I swivel—window it is—when he's suddenly on me. He grabs me by the wrist, swings me around, and throws me against the nearest wall, my back to his chest again as his body cages me in place.

I'm not getting out of here, not alive anyway.

Wrath is indomitable, untouchable.

Nothing I have in my very limited toolbox comes even close to matching his power. It's no wonder our army is useless against him.

"I'm going to ask you again," he says. "Where did you get that mark? Was it a witch? A traveler?" He presses even closer as I wiggle beneath him, the heat of his body, the heady scent of him overwhelming me.

My breath fans out loudly against the wall. "It's a fucking birthmark," I say.

"Lies," he says in the most menacing voice I've ever heard.

My heart drops to my gut as his anger becomes its own monster. I can literally feel it seething behind me.

Hand at my throat, fingers tightening, he says, "Tell me, *dieva*, or I will break this pretty little neck."

I hate being called a liar. I rarely lie. It was a characteristic my mother loved to brag about to her friends. My mom always knew she could trust me.

"I don't know what else you want me to say!"

The darkness kicks up again, almost sentient.

He's going to snap at any second, but I don't have the answers he's looking for. I don't know what he wants from me.

"It's the truth!" I shout again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the shadows sharpen. Will it hurt to be gutted by his black magic?

I brace for it and wait for my life to literally flash before my eyes when the door to the room bursts open and a girl spills in. She comes to an abrupt stop when her eyes land on me.

"Oh," the girl says. "I didn't realize you were bringing *her* here."

I don't miss the way she refers to me like I'm a toad covered in warts even though I'm literally pressed against the wall by a monster, his dark

magic billowing around me.

“As if I need your permission,” Wrath says to her.

“She’s a liability.”

I breathe out with a little hiccup of relief.

Who is this girl? She looks close to my age, early twenties. She reminds me of some of the rich girls I went to school with—long blond hair, perfect features aligned in perfect symmetry, and lips too big for her face.

“What do you want, Lauren?” Wrath asks, still holding me against the wall.

“Arthur needs you.”

“For what?”

“Rhys Roman.”

Wrath lets me go and steps away, but I stay there pressed against the wall, unsure of where I go from here.

He just threatened to kill me. He didn’t, obviously, but would he have?

I hear Adam’s words echoing in my head—you’re *immune to Wrath*, but I don’t think he’s immune to you.

Before now, no one was safe when it came to the Demon King. I almost think the fact that I *am* somehow puts me in *more* danger. Or maybe the line between *immune* and *dead* is an extremely thin one.

Maybe he doesn’t know what to do with me either.

Wrath stalks for the door and breezes past Lauren. “Show her to a room,” he says, “and get her some clothes.”

Lauren scrunches up her face, looking me up and down. “What am I, her personal stylist now?”

Wrath stops at the door. The black mist lifts from his shoulders. When he turns just enough to look at her over his shoulder, his eyes are glowing red.

The monster is threatening to snap.

Lauren licks her lips. “Fine, I’ll see what I can find,” she says, but the bite to her words has been filed down to a dull edge.

Wrath says nothing more and disappears, *literally*.

I put my back to the wall and clutch at the loosening knot of the towel. It’s a damn miracle the thing hasn’t fallen off yet.

When Lauren turns her gaze on me again, her eyes narrowed, scrutinizing, I straighten my spine and lift my chin. I’m older than she is—I think—and I don’t suffer no bullshit.

Even when I’m at her mercy.

“Come on,” she says. “Follow me.”



LAUREN LEADS ME OUT OF THE ROOM, AND I LOOK FOR THE NEAREST EXIT only to find closed doors.

“Where are we?” I ask again.

“Upstate New York.”

Well at least I’m still in the same state.

“Do you have a phone I can use? My friends back at the factory—”

“Your friends are probably fine,” Lauren answers.

“Probably? We were under attack when Wrath showed up. I need to know if they’re all right.”

Lauren sighs and pulls a cell phone from the back pocket of her jeans. “Make it quick.”

I punch in Gus’s number and clutch the phone to my ear. Please, please answer.

It rings four times before he picks up. “Hello?”

“Gus?”

“Rain! Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine-ish. Is Adam good? What about Pitch?”

“Pitch is...” He sighs. “Pitch is dead. Adam is fine. Where are you?” he asks again.

“You’re never going to believe me,” I start, and then Lauren yanks the phone out of my grip and ends the call.

“Hey!”

“Your friend is okay. That’s what you wanted. I don’t have time for a long-winded conversation.” She swivels around and keeps walking.

With a groan, I follow after her.

We go down a wide hallway where oil paintings hang in gilded frames. There are a few of familiar landscapes—the Cliffs of Moher, Tuscany, a Greek island where white stucco buildings crowd the shoreline—and dotted throughout are portraits of old white men looking down on me with judging eyes. There’s a military commander in full decorated uniform and another man in a heavy velvet jerkin. A man with an aggressive moustache stands beside a throne wearing a puffy white collar.

“Wrath has some unique taste in art,” I mutter.

“It’s not his.”

“Oh. Someone else lives here?”

We come out to a central corridor, and Lauren’s voice echoes down the hall when she speaks. “The castle was given to Wrath.”

Castle? Holy shit.

“Given or taken?” I ask.

“Sometimes they’re the same thing, aren’t they?”

“Umm...no.”

Lauren snorts and keeps walking.

“Are you a friend of Wrath’s? I didn’t think he had friends here.”

“*Friend* is a mortal word and one Wrath detests.”

“I’m assuming since you’re here, you’re an ally then at the very least.”

“You would assume right.”

“So...what are you?”

“What are *you*?” She sends a scathing look back at me.

“A photographer.”

“You and everyone else these days.”

She’s not entirely wrong about that. I used to complain to my mom about all the rookies claiming to be professional photographers online. People who made obvious mistakes in their photography, like using the on-camera flash for portrait sessions. Just thinking about it makes me grimace.

My mom liked to point out that everyone had to start somewhere. “No one is born an expert,” she said.

But I know that’s not what Lauren is asking me. She wants to know why I can withstand Wrath, not what I do for a living. I would give her the truth if I had it.

Lauren slows her pace and yanks down the collar of her shirt. There’s an intricate tattoo on her skin—delicate filigrees and a small medallion just above her ample cleavage. “I’m a demon.” She lets her shirt fall back into place.

“Whoa. Seriously? Like Wrath?”

“Comparing me to Wrath is like comparing a rock to an asteroid. But yes, if you want to label us as something, we’re both demons.”

“And the mark has something to do with that?”

“All demons have a mark.”

My first encounter with Wrath comes back to me. My shirt had been

soaked with spiked half-and-half, and he'd checked out my chest. At the time, I thought he was ogling me, but this makes more sense. He was looking for a mark.

"What's the mark mean?" I ask.

"It shows their rank."

"There are different types of demons?"

She nods. "Like humans, we're all different. But there's a hierarchy too, a royal line—the king and five princes. The royal line can bestow rank to lords. Everyone under a lord is just a demon."

"Which are you?"

She doesn't answer, so I'm guessing that means she's just a low-level demon. She strikes me as the type of person who would brag about royal blood or a title if she had it.

And the fact that I'm even thinking about *royal demons* blows my mind. How is this my life?

"And here I thought 'Demon King' was something the media came up with," I say.

We eventually come to a massive staircase that goes up to a landing where gorgeous, arched, stained glass windows glow beneath the golden orbs of wall sconces. On the landing, we turn left and go up another set of stairs to the second floor.

Another long, wide hallway runs for what seems like miles. Like literally, I think it would take me a good ten minutes just to reach the end where a half-moon window is lighting up with early morning light.

I stop to gaze around the space, and Lauren quickly pulls ahead, so I have to jog to catch up with her. "How long have you known Wrath?"

She side-eyes me. "For some of us, we've always known him, even when he was in Alius."

Why does that name sound familiar?

Right. "Isn't there a fanatic group called Order of Alius?"

"There is."

"What does that mean? Alius?"

"It's where all supernaturals come from," she says with an air of superiority. "Demons. Witches. Vampires. Fae. Shifters."

I come to a halt. Did she just say what I thought she said?

"There are more than demons and witches?"

She sniffs. "Of course there are."

I shouldn't be surprised by this, but...

This is a lot of information to take in while wearing only a towel after traveling through some portal through time and space.

Lauren cuts left down another hallway without warning, and I backpedal to switch directions. We stop at the third door on our right, and Lauren uses a skeleton key to unlock it, pushing the door in. I peer around her, aware that at least here, I'm always on the cusp of getting my head lobbed off.

"It's not booby trapped," she says as she goes inside and flicks on a few lamps.

I step into a bedroom with a giant four-poster bed to my right, flanked on either side by heavy wooden tables with vintage lamps. There's another massive rug beneath the bed, this one in shades of emerald and red and cream.

There's a barren fireplace across from the bed and two wingback chairs in front of it.

"There's a bathroom through that door." Lauren tips her chin at a closed door beside the fireplace. "I'll see what clothes I can find for you on such short notice. You clearly won't fit into mine."

"I'm sorry...have I done something to offend you?"

She looks me up and down again. I tighten the towel around my body.

"A few days ago, no one knew your name." Lauren crosses her thin arms over her chest. "Now everyone is salivating over you, including Wrath. I don't like it. It makes him look weak."

"I don't think he's salivating over me."

She rolls her eyes. "Who even are you?"

"What do you mean?" Does she want my name? My blood type?

She steps into my personal bubble, but for some reason, I just get angry with her. I'm not afraid of her, even though I think maybe I should be.

I've seen some of Wrath's powers. As a demon, what can Lauren do? Can she possess others too?

"Are you a spy?" she asks.

"For who?"

"What's your game?"

I wrinkle my nose. "I don't have a game."

Her eyes sweep over me again. I really wish I'd thought to grab my bag from the hook because this towel is starting to seriously irk me. It puts me at a disadvantage and worse, makes me uncomfortable.

“If you’re not a spy...” Lauren scowls at my chest, then her eyes flick up to meet mine. “If you’re just some rando, then I have news for you—you don’t understand what you’ve stepped into.”

“I totally agree,” I say, because that’s the honest truth.

“So leave.”

“I’ve tried,” I say, “but Wrath doesn’t seem to want to let me.”

That pisses her off. Fine lines appear around her eyes as the air takes on the scent of something sickly sweet, like cheap floral perfume.

“I hope he destroys you,” she says.

“Well, I’d say the odds are good considering that’s what he seems hellbent on doing to our world.”

“Is that what you think?”

Now it’s my turn to snort my derision.

“You don’t even know what you stand to lose or how hard Wrath is working to save your ass and this entire world and you—”

She clamps her mouth shut, lip curling at the corner.

“What?” I coax. I think Lauren’s spilled some tea I’d very much like to taste.

I mean, I buried my head in the sand about Wrath for too long, and now that I’m in the middle of it, with no prospect of getting out of it, I need to arm myself with information. No one really knows why he’s here. This is the most I’ve heard of the details since he popped up months ago.

But Lauren shakes her head again and turns for the door. “I’ll be back with clothes. If you want the blood to stay in your body, I suggest you stay here.”

With that, she slams the door closed, leaving me alone.

I wait a good twenty minutes and then check the bedroom door and find it unlocked.

Okay, so not entirely a prisoner here. I poke my head out and find an empty hallway. I want to try for an escape, but clothes would make it a hell of a lot easier.

As I wait, I check the windows. Both bottom panes open without complaint, but I’m on the second floor and the bushes below look prickly and sparse, not enough to soften my fall.

A yawn escapes me as I pace the room, trying to think of an escape plan. The plush bed practically calls out my name every time I pass it.

“I’ll just test it out,” I mutter like I’m Goldilocks or something.

But as soon as I lie back on the bed, exhaustion washes over me. Before I know it, I'm fast asleep in the Demon King's castle.

I WAKE TO THE DOOR OPENING AND LURCH UPRIGHT, BLEARY-EYED AND disoriented and apparently naked in the sheets.

I don't remember dumping the towel, but damn if these sheets aren't the softest white cotton I've ever slept on.

Lauren comes in, her arms full of clothing. Outside the windows, the sky is gray and overcast.

"What time is it?" I ask.

"A little after four. Here." She tosses me the clothes.

I blink through the sleepiness and smooth over my hair as if I can somehow match her prettiness. I probably look like hell.

On the top of the clothing pile, I find a pair of jeans. I'd prefer leggings but I'm not going to complain in a time like this. Except when I hold up the jeans, I can't help but scowl at them.

"What the hell are these?" There are so many holes and tears in the jeans I'm not sure they could even be called pants.

"It's trendy," Lauren says.

The t-shirt advertises something called Deer Camp Fun Run from 1997. The material is like tissue paper between my fingers, and when I put my hand inside, I can clearly see my fingers.

"No bra or panties?" I ask.

"It's the best I could do on short notice." She tosses me a pair of cheap flip-flops and a comb. "You're welcome." She swivels for the door and leaves me again.

It takes me another hour just to get through my tangled, knotted hair.

Apparently traveling through a sub-dimension is not good for a girl's hair. I curse more than once when I have to rip out a knot.

When I finish up, I check my reflection in the giant, gilded mirror hanging on the wall in my temporary bedroom.

I look like a fucking wreck. My hair is at least tamed, but letting it air dry without brushing it has left a weird swoop in my bangs.

My nipples are pebbled in the shirt and sticking out so badly, I think I could write my name in the sand. And with the tears in my jeans, my bare lady bits are practically flapping in the breeze.

With a sigh, I turn away and go to the door. I pull it open and peek out into the corridor. The place is vast and silent.

What is Wrath really going to do to me if I explore?

Kill you.

That voice in the back of my head is thinking rationally, but my gut instinct tells me something else. That maybe he plans to keep me around for now because he has yet to figure me out.

And what was with his fascination with my birthmark? Because it's between my shoulder blades, I tend to forget it's there. My mom used to call it my off button because it's shaped like a ring.

Whenever I'd descend into a tantrum, she'd press that spot between my shoulders and say, "Rainy baby, it's time to power down."

Sometimes it'd get a laugh out of me. Sometimes it'd just rile me up even more.

I leave my room behind, my heart rate kicking up in my chest. It's almost like I'm daring Wrath to appear to chastise me. The thought sends butterflies skittering across my belly.

I make a left turn at the next intersection of hallways and quickly get lost in the labyrinth of the castle. Most doors I test are locked, so once I manage to find my way back to the stairs, I go down.

On the ground floor, I pause for a beat to listen. For being a giant castle, the place is oddly quiet. I follow the hallway to the left and stop at one of the arched windows in the stone wall.

The window has a lead muntin with stained glass in the three top panes. I check out the location and the grounds.

There's only greenery as far as the eye can see.

There's a road leading from the castle, but it disappears in the trees so I can't tell where it leads. Down below is a stone roundabout with a fountain in

the center. The faint sound of trickling water can be heard through the bubbled glass.

I can't help but feel like I'm in an entirely different world.

What does *Alius* look like anyway? And was Wrath trying to *escape* it? Lauren hinted at something greater than Wrath, though whether that was another demon or a greater power or some kind of social experiment, I don't know.

Maybe he's trying to bring us the dark holy spirit. The way our society is fawning over him, he's quickly becoming a cult leader.

Farther down the hall, I finally come to a door, and when I pull it open, a footpath leads away from the castle and into the woods.

I look over my shoulder and scan the hallway. I'm alone, and as far as I've been able to tell, there are no cameras here.

I could walk right out this door and run.

But something keeps me frozen in place, my bare feet just on the other side of the threshold.

What would running accomplish? Wrath can find me just about anywhere, I suspect. Unless Eric creates another one of those witch barriers, and even then, I'm not so sure that's a viable option.

Am I really going to hide for the rest of my life? The stubbornness in me wants to see this through and find a solution. Not a temporary fix.

I shut the door and keep walking, finding numerous sitting rooms, then a large dining hall with heavy dark wood tables. In another room, I find three billiards tables and a bar stocked with every kind of liquor imaginable. If I wasn't literally in the den of a monster, I might pour myself a drink. I could certainly use one right about now.

Down another hallway, a rich aroma makes my stomach growl, and I quickly follow the trail of it into a kitchen three times the size of my condo. Steam rises from a pot on the industrial stove top and red sauce bubbles in a pot next to it.

There's a man at the stove stirring something in a pan.

When he spots me, he looks up and frowns. "The mighty Rain, I presume?" There's a hoarseness to his voice that reminds me of my grandmother who smoked two packs of cigarettes a day. She died from lung cancer when I was nine—surprise, surprise.

"Hi," I say as I come around the long kitchen island. "Who are you?"

"The name is Arthur."

I recall Lauren mentioning an Arthur. I'm surprised Wrath has people. I guess I always pictured him as a solitary creature.

Arthur is much older than Wrath or Lauren with a salt and pepper beard trimmed neatly on his tanned face. His hair matches the beard and is closely cropped along the sides, longer on top.

Heavy wrinkles surround his brown eyes. The man is all muscle and sinew without an ounce of fat on him, and he's not much taller than I am.

"What are you making?"

"Spaghetti." He gives the meat another stir. "Are you hungry?"

My stomach growls loudly. "I'm starving, actually."

"Sit." He nods at one of the metal stools by the island. "This is just about done."

I watch Arthur drain the pasta, then put a generous helping on a plate. Next, he drowns it in sauce and meat and finishes it off with a fresh slice of garlic bread that he pulled from the oven.

"Eat it while it's hot," he says, and I dive right in. I don't even care about the risk of poisoning. Seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to just to poison me when Wrath could literally impale me with his dark magic.

My first bite is heavenly. I had leftover Chinese food and then promptly barfed it up. I can't even remember the last meal I had before the leftovers.

"This is really good," I say around a mouthful.

Arthur makes himself a bowl that he eats standing up. "I'm glad to share it. Wrath doesn't eat much, and Lauren avoids carbs."

I finish off the food in record time, barely coming up for air or conversation. When my plate is empty, I drop my fork and it rings out.

"That was exactly what I needed." I fold my arms on the marble countertop. "I didn't realize how hungry I was."

"Food is good in a crisis." Arthur spins his fork in the last of his spaghetti.

"I've had the pleasure of getting to know Lauren," I start, when Arthur smirks and says, "Pleasure, was it?"

"Exaggeration, maybe. Anyway, she said she's a demon. Are you one too?"

Arthur takes our dishes to the sink. "I'm human."

"Really?" I slid off the stool and lean against the counter. "How the hell did you get hooked up with the Demon King then?"

I know there's no shortage of sympathizers and fangirls and people

clamoring for Wrath's power, but I have to assume very few are worth Wrath's attention. And probably not deemed trustworthy enough to be in his house.

"I was the first human that Wrath encountered when he came to our world."

"Came to our world," I echo. "That still blows my mind. So what happened when you met him?" I ask.

"Well, I'm an alcoholic and I was extremely intoxicated at the time." Arthur rinses our dishes and laughs. "And you know what alcohol does to you."

"Makes you bold."

"Precisely. I was stumbling around downtown Saint Sabine, and I asked him for money. He told me he'd give me something better if I helped him. I couldn't imagine anything better than booze or the money to buy it, so I tried to rob him."

"You *what*?"

Arthur laughs. "I know. It's a miracle I'm still alive."

"What happened?"

"He gave me the equivalent of a slap to the face, let's just put it that way. He said he could help me. I said no one could help me. I'd been broken for a long time. Didn't think it was possible to heal."

"What do you mean?"

"Bad car accident." He turns and lifts the back of his shirt to reveal a very distinct box-like shape beneath his skin.

"What is that?"

"It's a spinal cord stimulator for chronic back pain. I damaged my spine in the accident." His gaze goes far away. "Amongst other things."

"Ahhhhggg. That sounds like it hurts."

"Oh, it does."

"So what did Wrath do?"

Arthur deposits the dishes in a stainless steel dishwasher, and it occurs to me that the Demon King has a dishwasher. But does he know how to use it? Probably not.

"Wrath's power can give me temporary relief from the pain. Better than any pill, better than the stimulator. It allowed me enough of a reprieve to get clean."

I can see where this is going. "He dangles the power over you like a

carrot, doesn't he? Just giving you enough to keep you coming back for more."

"No." Arthur pops a soap pack into the dishwasher and presses a button. The appliance churns to life. "There's a limit to what he can do."

For one blinding second, my opinion of Wrath changes. Arthur doesn't look like a broken man, an addict. He looks healthy and strong and happy. And Wrath helped him do that? All I know of Wrath is the scary monster, the man who kills and destroys all for some unknown mission.

But then I have to remind myself that he *is* the destroyer, the man who threatened our president, who decimated an entire troop of soldiers. The same man currently holding me hostage in his pretty castle.

"Where is he now?" I ask. "Wrath?"

Arthur's gaze jets to a space just beyond me and I whirl around, yelping when I see Wrath standing behind me, arms clasped behind his back.

"Holy shit. You did that on purpose. You were probably listening the entire time."

He scowls and steps forward. "Contrary to what you may think, *dieva*, I do not spend all of my waking hours fretting about what you say or do."

"Could have fooled me."

His scowl deepens.

"What's *dieva* mean anyway?"

He comes up beside me, towering over me. The kitchen is massive, but with Wrath in it, it shrinks in size, not just because of his toned biceps or his broad shoulders, or all his inches over six feet, but because he exudes power.

Because when he steps into a room, it's clear he'll always be the one in charge.

His scent overrides the tang of spaghetti sauce, and my breath unconsciously quickens just so I can drink in more of him.

I hate him.

I really hate him.

"It means," he says and peers down his pale, perfect nose at me, "*little girl*."

My mouth drops open. "That's demeaning."

"Is it?"

"Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Challenge me with a question. It's so...so...pretentious and arrogant."

“Is it?” he says again.

“See?” I look at Arthur as if he’s really going to commiserate with me. Arthur just gives me a shrug.

“Can I go home now?” I ask.

“No,” the Demon King says, and then he looks up at Arthur. “Rhys Roman will be here soon. I need you by my side.”

“Of course.”

“Who is this Rhys Roman anyway?”

“A vampire.” Wrath turns away.

“Seriously?” I look to Arthur again. There’s something about him I know I can trust. Arthur raises the line of his brow like, *Surprise!*

Because I have nothing better to do and I’m a brave soul, I follow Wrath out of the kitchen. “What do you need with a vampire?”

“It’s not the vampire I want, but his witch.”

“Does he own her?”

“She’s loyal to him, so in a sense, yes.”

Wrath is wearing a different outfit than before. Gone is the long black coat. Now he’s wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt. It’s so very human that it almost makes me forget who and what he is.

“What do you need a witch for?”

“You.”

“Me?”

Arthur comes up alongside me. I notice there’s a slight stoop to his posture, but his gait is strong, and I don’t detect any pain on his face. Gus’s mom, toward the end of her life, was in constant pain, and she was so doped up, sometimes it was hard to have a coherent conversation with her. I don’t know how anyone lives day to day with chronic pain. It’s either the pain or the drugs and no happy medium. I felt so bad for Gloria. It was an impossible situation to be in.

“You won’t tell me what you are,” Wrath says over his shoulder, “so the witch will tell me instead.”

We go down a hallway I haven’t explored yet and enter another one of the countless sitting rooms. This one has the distinct feeling of being used though. There are books stacked on side tables and disheveled newspapers on one of the buffets.

“I’ve already told you,” I say, “I’m human. I’m not trying to keep anything from you.”

Maybe I can save my life and get the hell out of here if I can convince him of that truth.

Wrath goes to a mini bar and pours himself a drink of some expensive bourbon. He slings the tumbler back.

The Demon King drinks. I'd think silly mortal stuff would be beneath him.

I glance at Arthur out of the corner of my eye. There's no indication of craving the booze.

"Pour me one." I come up alongside the mini bar and look up expectantly. Wrath's gaze goes to my chest, but this time, I know he's not looking for a demon mark. Instead, his eyes go straight to my hard nipples.

When his eyes lift to mine, his irises are glowing red.

I'm not sure if I should fold my arms over my chest to hide my boobs or arch my back to tempt him. A little thrill pulses in my clit.

Wrath's nostrils flare, the tumbler clutched tightly in his grip.

I put my hands in the back pockets of my borrowed jeans, pushing out my chest even more, and the Demon King takes a step toward me.

Arthur clears his throat.

The glow disappears when Wrath blinks. He turns to pour one shot into a second tumbler that he hands over to me. "Here, *dieva*." His voice purrs when he speaks. "Drink your fill."

Is that a challenge?

I take the glass and drink the liquor in one gulp. It burns all the way down my throat and warms my belly. Holy shit. This stuff is no joke.

"Man, that stuff is weak," I say, my voice reedy, just on the edge of a cough. The alcohol quickly hits my veins.

The Demon King just looks at me silently, calling out my lies.

I set the glass down. "So what are you going to do when Mr. Roman tells you I'm a nobody?"

"If he tells me you're only human, it'll be a lie," Wrath says, "so I will kill him."

My mouth drops open just as the doorbell rings.

RHYS ROMAN IS GORGEOUS. LIKE 90S BRAD PITT MEETS GREEK GOD gorgeous.

His dirty blond hair is raked back over his forehead, and his piercing blue eyes search everything as he steps into the room.

Beside him is a girl that looks like a doll compared to his long, lethal body. Her hair is dark and wavy around her face. She looks sweet, but there's an authority to her that I like.

On Rhys's right side is a man with dark hair and amber eyes and a smoothness about him that feels like mischief.

On the other end is a tall, statuesque woman with plump ruby red lips and a body to die for. She's wearing an emerald green dress that plunges low on big boobs and nips in tightly at her tiny waist.

When her eyes land on me, I can tell she's the one who's come here for a job. She must be the witch.

The newcomers cross the room and stop in front of Wrath.

Wrath is a foot in front of me, almost like a shield. His hands are clasped behind his back, and though a vampire has just walked into the room, it's not the vampire that holds my attention, but the pale hands of a demon king, the strong, deft fingers.

Those fingers were wrapped around my throat not that long ago, and thinking about that makes my insides quake and a thrill sink to my clit.

With the alcohol still humming along through my bloodstream, and my head a little fuzzy, desire rears its ugly head.

The vampires look at me. Wrath turns his strong, pale jaw toward me.

“Did we interrupt something kinky?” the dark-haired man asks.

Rhys sends a scathing look his way, but the man barely flinches.

The air crackles. Wrath disappears. Rhys Roman shifts his body in front of the small girl, his eyes glowing neon blue.

Wrath reappears in front of the dark-haired man, and his slick, sharp magic forms a blade that pierces the man’s chest.

I yelp, startled.

The girls step back as blood spurts from the wound.

“Holy shit,” I breathe out.

Wrath is eerily still. I can’t see his face, but I imagine his eyes are glowing too, but in a more sinister way, all fire and rage. “Be respectful,” he says evenly, as the spear retracts. “Now get on your knees.”

Rhys growls. The dark-haired man clutches at the wound in his chest, blood gurgling through his fingers. His teeth are set in pain, and as the blood leaves his body, his face grows pale.

The small woman goes to her knees.

Rhys scowls down at her. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” she squeaks as she bows her head.

“She’s a demon. She cannot refuse me,” Wrath explains.

The dark-haired man sways on his feet.

“Is someone going to help him?” I ask. “Arthur?”

“He’s a vampire,” the witch says. “He’ll survive.”

“He’ll survive if he gets on his knees,” Wrath says, his gaze still pinned on the man.

With a groan, the man shakily sinks to the floor.

The witch sighs. “I didn’t come dressed for supplication.”

Wrath looks over at her. “Then next time, come prepared.”

There’s cat-eye eyeliner on her wide eyes that grows sharper as she arches a brow.

“Rhys?” the witch says.

Wrath’s dark magic billows up like a cloud of locusts, and the darkness quickly takes shape. Within seconds, he’s surrounded by his possessed men.

Rhys Roman scans the shadows. “Impressive. What do you call them?”

“The *norrow*,” Wrath answers. “It means *the enslaved*.”

“How quaint,” Rhys says.

Wrath stands still, waiting.

Frustration pinches at the corner of Rhys’s mouth, but he finally gives in

and gets to his knees. “Bow, Kat,” he says, and the witch—Kat—hikes up her dress to mid-thigh so she can get to the floor. I don’t miss the murder eyes she gives Wrath.

If the Army had a witch or two, could they finally match Wrath’s power? The Citizens and Wrath got through Eric’s barrier, so I don’t know how useful a witch can be. Or maybe the barrier only works on supernatural beings who aren’t Wrath. Nothing seems capable of stopping him.

“Are you happy now?” Rhys asks.

Wrath walks away. “This wasn’t for my benefit.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” the dark-haired vampire says.

“Dane,” Rhys warns.

“If a ruler demands supplication only to stroke his ego, then he’s doing it wrong.” Wrath comes up beside me and turns to face his guests currently on their knees.

“Does everyone bow to you?” I mutter beneath my breath.

He gives me a pointed look. “Not everyone.” He turns back to the group. “Get up,” he says warily.

Rhys is on his feet in a blink, and he gives the shorter girl his hand, which she happily takes. Dane is a blur as he goes to help Kat. I try not to show my shock or amazement. I guess vampire speed is a thing pop culture got right.

The girl smooths over the front of her silk blouse, and the collar pulls down an inch, revealing a thread of what looks like a demon mark. Wrath *did* say she’s a demon.

So two vampires, a demon, and a witch.

I bet outside of Wrath, this group is a power to be reckoned with. And it must be extremely irritating to have to bow to him.

“Can we get on with this then?” Kat says, her gaze darting to me.

Wrath holds out his hand to me. I look from it to his face. I don’t want to cooperate with him. Like Kat, I didn’t come for supplication, but Wrath just stabbed a man for...well, I’m not exactly sure why he stabbed Dane. Some minor slight, clearly. If I disobey him now, what’ll he do to me in front of all these people?

I can just hear Adam in the back of my head—*unnecessary risk*.

I need to play along for now.

I lick my lips and take his hand. My body hums to life at his cool touch. He walks me across the room to Kat. Up close, she’s even more striking. Not a hair is out of place and her skin is flawless.

“Rain Low,” she says. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Kat.” She gestures to the shorter girl. “This is Emery, Rhys, and Dane. We’re from House Roman in Saint Sabine.”

“Nice to meet you all.” I take a settling breath, trying not to freak out about meeting two vampires, a witch, and a demon.

Have these people always been living amongst us and we just never paid attention? I suppose if they didn’t want to be found, they had ways to keep their secrets.

“I’m a witch from the Redheart line,” Kat explains. “We are known for our ability to read the body. It won’t hurt and it shouldn’t be uncomfortable in any way. All right?”

For some reason, I look to Wrath, almost for reassurance. I hate that I do. And I hate that he knows exactly what that means. Instinctively, I want his approval.

Thankfully, he gives me only a blank stare. There’s no nod, no gesture to speak of permission or reassurance, but his presence at my side feels like it just the same.

“I’m ready when you are,” I tell Kat.

“Just stand still. I don’t have to touch you, just so you know what to expect.”

“Okay.”

She takes a step toward me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Wrath’s darkness kick up.

“Calm down, Demon King,” Kat says. “I said I wouldn’t hurt her.”

Butterflies fill my stomach.

Kat stands by my shoulder and puts one hand over my chest, the other at my back between my shoulder blades. She sucks in a deep breath and closes her eyes.

There’s no indication that she’s using magic, but something coppery and sweet coats my tongue and the hair at the nape of my neck rises.

No one speaks as Kat works, and I try not to freak out about what she might tell us.

There’s no way I’m anything other than human. I would know. If I had magic, I would have used it by now.

Magic.

The thought is ridiculous. Me, have magic? I’m a photographer who hates her job, who has no idea what she actually wants to do with her life.

“Well?” Wrath says.

Kat sighs and drops her hands. “You’re not going to like the answer.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

What is that supposed to mean? Sweat beads on my lower back.

I’m human, goddammit!

“When I read someone,” Kat says, “it’s like opening the pages of their book. I read the text and I know the answer.”

Wrath clasps his hands behind his back, causing his biceps to swell against the sleeves of his black t-shirt. “Go on.”

“Rain’s book is blank.”

“What?” I say.

“What does that mean?” Wrath asks.

Hands on her hips, Kat answers, “Any number of things. A binding. A shield. Some other kind of magic. Or...” She trails off, her gaze going distant.

“Or what?” Wrath prompts. I can hear the faintest tremor in his voice. But is it excitement? Fear?

Kat frowns. “Or I don’t know the language?”

“No. No, no.” I shake my head. “I know what you’re all insinuating. I’m not from your magic fairy land. I don’t have magic. I’m human!” The panic forms a lump in my throat. “I’m no one.”

Kat tilts her head, brows sinking in concern. “They’re just theories, Rain.”

“No,” I say with more venom than I mean. “I’m not like you.”

Emery steps forward, her hands up. “It’s okay to freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out,” I argue through gritted teeth, while I most definitely freak out.

“Can I talk to her alone for a second?” She looks to Wrath for permission, but it’s Rhys that steps forward.

“Absolutely not.”

She scowls at him over her shoulder. “I don’t need your permission.”

“But you need his?” Rhys says, fangs sharpening in his mouth.

If I didn’t believe he was a vampire before, I definitely do now.

Emery frowns at Rhys, then turns to Wrath. “May I?”

Wrath gives one dip of his chin, and Emery hooks her arm through mine and guides me out the door.



AS FAR AS I KNOW, EMERY HAS NEVER BEEN TO THE DEMON KING'S CASTLE, but she leads me down the hallway with a determination and surety I admire. We duck into another damn sitting room, and she sits me down on a cushioned window seat that overlooks a pond surrounded by cattails and dotted with lily pads.

If I had come here under any other circumstances, I'd be completely enamored with this place and out exploring the grounds. It would make a fantastic location for photo shoots.

But this isn't some other circumstance, and photography is so far away right now, it almost feels like another life.

"Okay," Emery says, "take a deep breath."

I inhale, filling my lungs, shoulders rising.

"Good. Now. I know this is a lot to take in—"

"How would you? You're a demon. I'm just...I'm..."

Emery smiles at me and takes my hand in hers. In the cool light of early evening, she looks like a woodland sprite with freckles dusting the tip of her nose and the apples of her cheeks.

"In this world, nothing is as it seems," she says. "In fact, a year ago, I didn't know vampires were real, and I had no idea I was a demon."

"Really?"

She nods. "Rhys was cursed," she says and shakes her head, making a face like it was a whole thing that she doesn't feel like getting into. "It was chance that we ran into each other, or at least I thought it was at the time. Turns out it was my destiny all along."

"And now?" I ask because I'll take any distraction.

"And now?" She looks at the door, but I can tell she's really looking in Rhys's direction. I can see love and admiration on her face. A demon and a vampire. How about that?

"Now," she says with a small smile, "now I have mind-blowing sex with that gorgeous man practically every day."

I burst out laughing, and Emery laughs with me.

"That's not what I expected you to say."

"I aim to surprise," she says.

"Does he...like..." I make fangs with my first two fingers and she blushes.

“Yes. It’s actually...*sensual*. If you can believe it.”

I think of Wrath, the way he terrifies and excites me all at the same time. A few days ago, I wouldn’t believe Emery. Today I do.

“I know it’s overwhelming right now, but thankfully you had a bit of a head start with Wrath. You’ve known about him for a while.”

“Yes, but I never thought I’d get pulled into his world, into the spectacle and the drama.”

“I think we were all pulled into his world when he arrived.”

“I suppose that’s true. I just tried really hard to resist it.”

“If you find out you’re something else, you will get through it, and I’m here if you need me. Any time of day or night.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks, but I’m not something else. I’m really not and —” I cut off when Emery tilts her head, eyes pinched at the corners. “What?”

“I can’t read your mind.”

“Umm.” I pull back. “Is that a thing that you normally do?”

“Demons can read minds,” she says matter-of-factly.

I level my gaze at her. “Demons can read minds. Like *read...minds*.”

She nods. “I’m not sure if all of them can, but *I* can and I’m guessing Wrath definitely can. But it’s harder for me to read supernatural beings. They usually know how to shield their minds. Are you shielding me now?”

I laugh nervously. “Am I shielding you from reading my mind?” Tears well in my eyes, I’m laughing so hard. I think I’m a little delirious.

Emery squeezes my hand again.

“No, I’m not shielding you from reading my mind!”

“Okay,” she says. “So...”

“So?”

“So?” She shrugs. “I’m not sure what that says other than you probably aren’t entirely human.” Her voice rises in an upward inflection, the way someone might deliver news no one wants to hear.

Like me. I’m that person.

“No,” I try again, because maybe if I tell these people no enough times, they’ll stop thinking crazy things.

“Rain,” she starts, but I stand and pace in front of the window, trying to make sense of all of this.

“Wrath can read minds?”

“I’m guessing so, if he’s king. He’s way more powerful than I am.” Her body does a little shiver, but from her, I read it like a spider crawling along

her skin. There's no enjoyment on her face.

"Have you ever been unable to read a human?" I ask.

"Not that I'm aware of. Before Rhys, I hadn't really met anyone I couldn't read."

"Maybe your power is broken. Maybe Wrath is doing something to it."

She bites her lower lip, then says, "Maybe? What do you know about your origins?"

I stop pacing. "What do you mean?"

"Your birth?"

"Uneventful," I answer. "My mom had me at Osco General in New Hampshire on March 30th."

"And your dad?"

My mom has always been open and honest with me about my biological father. They met on a group camping trip and had a wild two weeks together. They parted ways, thinking nothing of it. Except a month later, Mom realized she was pregnant and had no way of getting hold of him. She, like me, had always embraced independence, and she decided she was all right with raising me alone.

"I never knew my dad," I say, feeling a slight wedge of panic jamming between my ribs.

"Okay. Well. This gives you somewhere to start, right? See if your mom has any information on him. Then go from there."

I breathe in deep and then exhale.

Could it be that my birth father was something other than human? Did my mom know? And how the hell can I find out now? Even Kat the witch couldn't find anything definitive about me.

I grimace and run my hand through my hair.

Emery stands and cuts off my path. She's a few inches shorter than I am, but something tells me she could stop me if she wanted to. She's a demon, after all.

"It's going to be all right," she says. "You just have to take it one step at a time."

I close my eyes and sigh. She's right. I can handle this. I'm no stranger to powering through.

When I look over at her again, I smile. "You're really good at this, you know."

"Well, my own freak-out was not so tidy, but I used to be an executive

assistant. You have to prioritize and keep a level head when dealing with an inept CEO.”

“I’m a family photographer. You think there are similarities between an inept CEO and bratty kids?”

“Oh, I’d imagine that’s a yes.”

We laugh together.

“Thank you, Emery. Really.” I breathe out in a rush. “I didn’t realize until now just how alone I was feeling. It’s like there’s Wrath and all of this in one hand, and my life, my friends, and normalcy in the other. I needed something in between.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“Maybe we should get back? Your vampire boyfriend and my…” I trail off. Was I about to refer to Wrath as mine? He’s not *my* anything.

My enemy.

The bad guy.

The villain.

Emery finishes the sentence for me. “The thorn in your side?”

“Yes, exactly.”

She nods and heads for the door. “Something tells me leaving those two alone for long could be a very bad thing.”

“Like two lions in a den?”

“Precisely.”

THANKFULLY WE FIND EVERYONE IN ONE PIECE WHEN WE RETURN, THOUGH there's considerable tension between Rhys and Wrath.

"If I should need you again," Wrath says, and lets the sentence hang in the air.

Rhys's jaw flexes. "You can call on me," he finally answers.

Wrath nods, and Rhys weaves his arm around Emery and leads them out.

"Well, that was insightful," I say.

Wrath scowls. "Are you being sarcastic? Arthur, is she being sarcastic?" The tone of his voice says he already knows the answer, but Arthur answers anyway.

"I believe she is."

Wrath pours himself another shot and drinks it, his back to us.

"Can you read my mind?"

Arthur shoots a look between me and Wrath.

Wrath does that thing again where he turns his head just enough, chin meeting the line of his broad shoulder. "No," he answers.

I cross the room. "Can you read others?"

"Ms. Low," Arthur starts, but Wrath cuts him off.

"The *dieva* already knows the answer, Arthur. I see no reason to keep it from her."

Arthur frowns. I get what he's trying to do. He's protecting Wrath. Wrath saved him, and for that, Arthur will always be loyal to the Demon King. But if he's going to hold me prisoner here, I need answers.

"Yes," Wrath says. "I can read minds." He turns to us, a refilled crystal

tumbler in the grip of his pale fingers. “No mortal can shield themselves from me. Very few supernatural beings can either. In Alius, I am king. No one outranks me.”

He levels me with a stare, and a breath stutters up my throat. It’s so easy to forget about the royal title. I mean, even here, royalty is losing its power, it’s stature. Yeah, we go a little gaga over the English royalty, but do they really hold power over us? If they asked us to bow to them, we’d laugh. Or do it just for the novelty.

When Wrath asks us to bow, we get to our knees.

Well, *most* people do.

Wrath drinks back the bourbon and winces when he exhales.

“What about Rhys? Can you read him?”

“Not entirely. With him, it’s more of an impression rather than a clear thought.”

“Emery?”

He puts the glass down and sweeps across the room. “Emery is a demon. There is nothing she can hide from me.”

Interesting.

“And me?”

He stops. Tension pulls into the space between his shoulder blades. I’m not sure if he’s on the verge of gutting me with a spear or laughing at me.

I think I already know the answer, but I want to hear it from him.

“No,” he says, his voice low and threaded with wariness.

The earlier panic flickers like a flame in the dark. “What does that mean?”

He looks at me over his shoulder, a curtain of dark mist hiding the flare in his eyes. “If I knew, Ms. Low, I wouldn’t have brought the witch here, now would I?”

Then he exits through the door.

When Arthur comes up beside me, his stoop is more pronounced, but he still shows no discomfort on his face. “Careful, Ms. Low. Just...be careful, okay?”

“How am I supposed to do that when he’s holding me captive? When he’s insinuating I’m not human? I feel like I’m losing my damn mind, Arthur. I want to go home.”

“He has his reasons.”

Lauren said something similar, didn’t she? Something about Wrath’s

plan, and how he was trying to save our world and we didn't even realize we needed saving.

But isn't that the opinion of all dictators and ruthless kings? They think their way is the only way.

"What are his reasons?" I try.

Arthur shakes his head. "Just be careful."

"Of what?"

His gaze darts from me to the door. "Sometimes the king's methods are ruthless," Arthur says, "and I don't want to see you get hurt. Don't test him, all right? If I give you any piece of advice, it's that."

I frown but nod, and Arthur leaves me.

His warning is a sound one. I know what Wrath can do. But there's another nagging thought in the back of my mind.

The fact that Arthur had to warn me not to test Wrath at all leads me to believe...

I might be the only one who can.



I WATCH DUSK TURN TO NIGHT THROUGH ONE OF THE LARGE ARCHED WINDOWS in the sitting room. The castle has gone silent again. Am I supposed to just sit here waiting like Sleeping Beauty until Wrath decides he needs me?

Fuck that.

I can't get Emery's words out of my head.

What do you know about your origins?

I sometimes wondered about my birth father, but in an abstract way. It's hard to think anything concrete when you have nothing to go on.

My mom was always upfront about him and his absence. She wanted me to know how lucky she felt to have me in her life and that my father's absence was just bad luck.

I think I need to talk to her. Maybe there's some detail she remembers that could help shed some light on this whole thing, and I haven't spoken to her since I left my condo. She's definitely going to yell at me for not checking in.

I leave the sitting room and search the castle for Lauren, but I find every room empty, and I get to a point where I'm unsure of whether or not I'm

checking the same rooms over and over.

This place is a labyrinth.

When I come to a side door that clearly leads outside, I decide what the hell, might as well take a look. If I'm not supposed to be outside, I'm sure Wrath will go all misty and pop up to stop me, and then I'll really know I'm a prisoner.

The door creaks on old iron hinges when I pull it back. I pause to wait and listen, but no possessed soldiers—the *norrow*—show up, so I trudge on. Pea gravel crunches beneath my flip-flops. Victorian lampposts shed golden light on the footpath that leads around the side of the castle and through a garden archway where little purple flowers bloom from waxy vines.

I eventually come to a garage, though *garage* might be an understatement. It's a two-story structure with five dormers and three large bay doors. There's a newer model Ford Mustang parked in the driveway. It's done entirely in black.

I try the door handle and find it unlocked. The interior is dark and empty, so I slide into the driver's seat. The leather is buttery soft. Though there's nothing personal about the car's interior, it smells distinctly like Wrath. Like a cool, dark night.

The car has a push-button ignition, but I don't see a fob anywhere.

"Worth a shot," I mutter and press the brake pedal, then the button.

The car purrs to life.

"Holy shit." I look around the driveway and the grounds feeling like a kid that just stuck his hand into the cookie jar. No one comes running.

That rebellious fire that my mom always loathed and loved burns brightly in my chest. I need answers, and I'm not going to get them locked away in Wrath's castle.

I pull the door closed and put the car into drive.

I guess I'll just have to find the answers myself.



HOLY SHIT, I JUST STOLE THE DEMON KING'S CAR.

I'm a little punch-drunk with the thrill as I drive the car down the long, winding driveway, the headlights sweeping through the surrounding woods. He's going to kill me. I can't wait to see the look on his face when he tries.

The driveway eventually spills onto a main road that is vaguely familiar. Lauren said we were outside Norton Harbor, though I don't know which direction. The road follows the rise and fall of gently rolling hills as I pass red barns and wheat fields and cute little farmhouses.

I think Wrath's castle might be northwest of Norton Harbor farther inland.

It takes me about twenty minutes to finally come into the city limits, and I breathe a sigh of relief. It feels good to recognize my surroundings again, and I decide what I really need is to go home.

My hands are shaking on the leather steering wheel, and the butterflies in my stomach have turned into a storm. It's almost like I'm daring Wrath to try to stop me. Can he? Would he?

When I spot my building at the end of Platte Avenue, I nearly weep. I punch in the code to the parking garage and the gate swings open. Even though I don't have a car, I do have a parking space. Time to put it to good use.

I finally locate the key fob in the center console and grab it, locking up behind me.

Stealing the Demon King's car is one thing, letting it get stolen by someone else is quite another.

Stepping back, I can't help but admire the car. It's so very Wrath. Dark and sleek and striking.

I take the elevator up to the third floor and follow the hallway down to my condo. Everything is normal, the same, everything except for me.

At my door, I tap in the code and the deadbolt thuds open. I push inside. I can smell my coconut plug-in air freshener and the faintest hint of the chicken I cooked the other day. The balcony door is still open. Apparently I forgot to shut it.

I drop the key fob on the island and go in search of my tablet. I might have lost my phone, but all of my devices are connected to messenger. I can call my mom that way.

In the living room, I flick on a lamp and pull my tablet from the bottom shelf of the end table. I fold the case open and prop it so it stands up on the coffee table.

The screen lights up when I activate it, and I find a kajillion missed messages, calls, and alerts.

I swipe out of them and go straight to messenger, then tap on my mom's

name. She's been trying to reach me since yesterday.

Guilt turns to stone in my gut.

I tap on the phone icon and the tablet starts ringing. Mom picks up on the second ring.

"Where have you been?" she shouts at me.

Her wavy, auburn hair is twisted up in a messy bun and several frizzy strands flutter in a breeze around her face. The bags beneath her eyes are so big, it's almost like they're holding up the thick, black-frame glasses on her face.

She's tanner than when I saw her last, so her freckles have almost disappeared on her face.

"I'm sorry, Mom," I say with a wince. "It's been a journey."

"Baby, I've been worried sick. You couldn't pick up the phone?" Her eyes are big and wide.

"I lost my phone," I explain. "But the good news is I'm okay."

No matter what, I've never burdened my mother with the exact details of how bad something is. My mother will bend over backwards for me, but I don't like bugging her with stress she doesn't need.

Mom huffs out a sigh and repositions her phone. I can just make out a small living room behind her and a large picture window that's dark with the night. "Should I come home?" she asks.

"No. I'm okay. Really."

Some of the tension leaves her face. "So what happened? What is going on?"

"It's a long story. Basically Wrath—"

"Wrath?" Mom echoes like she's surprised to hear me speak his actual name and not his title.

"The Demon King," I correct. "He thinks I'm someone important when obviously I'm not."

"Is he there now?" She tries to peer around me, but the rest of my condo is dark.

"No. I'm home alone."

"You should stay away from him."

"I'll try." If only it was that easy. He's not like an ex-boyfriend who I can just block on my cell and social media.

Mom picks up the phone and the picture shakes as she walks, setting me down on what I assume is a kitchen counter. She starts filling a teapot with

water. “I just don’t like it.”

“I know. Listen, Mom, there’s something I’ve been wondering about.”

“What’s that, baby?” She shuts off the tap and puts the teapot on the stove top.

“What can you tell me about my birth father?”

She smiles at the mere mention of him. It’s always been this way. Though they were only together those two weeks during summer, I think she really did fall head over heels for him. Her gaze goes far away, and I lose her to the memories for a second before she blinks back. “I’ve told you most of what I know.” The stove’s burner clicks as she lights it beneath the teapot. “His name was Jeffrey. He might have told me his last name, but I don’t remember it. He loved to collect fossils and rocks. He could cook the most amazing chicken over an open fire.” She smiles again. “Why do you ask?”

“Did you ever try to find him?”

A cupboard door opens, blocking my view of her face as she reaches inside. “I asked a few people from our camping group if they knew him, but he was a friend of a friend of a friend. That kind of thing. And if I’m honest”—the cupboard door shuts, and she tears off the top of a tea pouch— “I was conflicted about telling him. I got the impression he didn’t want kids.” She frowns at the phone, at me. “I’m sorry, baby. I don’t want you to think... well...he never—”

“No, I know. I get it.”

I don’t care if this man wants a Father’s Day card or not. I just need to know if he’s human.

A chilly dread crystalizes in my chest.

I might not be human.

I might not be human.

That can’t be true.

Please let it not be true.

Mom puts her hand on her hip and angles toward the phone. “Why do you ask?” She’s wearing one of her favorite outfits—a white t-shirt beneath a silk kimono in shades of brown, black, blue, and burnt orange. My mother loves her kimonos and earth tones.

“I’m just curious,” I say, trying not to get too specific. “It’s just...maybe if I had the details and I could prove to Wrath that I’m just a normal person, he’d leave me alone.”

Mom laughs. “A normal person? Rainy baby, none of us are normal.”

“You know what I mean.”

“But why this sudden fascination with you? What does he think you can do? I saw the video, of course. I saw the light. But you and I both know light artifacts and light pollution are to be expected in photography, especially with an amateur.”

“I know. And especially in Norton Harbor where there’s a string of lights around every corner.”

“Exactly.”

I breathe out. Talking to my mom is making me feel so much better. She’s absolutely right. There’s probably a very good reason for the light in the video.

“Anyway, I just need to do some legwork to prove to him that I’m nobody. Can you tell me how I might get a hold of someone from the camping trip? Someone who might know the friend of a friend of a friend?”

“Oh geez, it’s been so long,” she says out of frame and then comes back into view of the camera, a teacup in hand. “I just don’t want to see you disappointed is all.”

I frown even though she’s not looking at me and instead busies herself with the tea bag. “I promise I won’t be disappointed. Can you give me a name? Any name?”

“Let me see...” She looks at the ceiling, sorting through the memories. “There was...Susanna and Tatiana—”

“Tatiana was on the camping trip?”

“Oh sure. That’s how I met her.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“She hated camping.” She laughs as steam starts to churn from the teapot. “In fact, we ran into her on the trail and found her with no bag, no provisions. She was the worst camper.”

Mom talks about Tatiana in the same way she talks about Jeffrey—wistfully and reverently. Sometimes I wish I could have gotten to know her. She had to move not long after I was born.

“Do you know how to get in touch with Tatiana?”

“No. She hated phones.”

“What about this Susanna?”

“Oh sure. Yeah. She’s on my social. Susanna Narvaez. She’s a ceramicist now. Makes millions making coffee cups. The world is a glorious place these days.”

I snort. I don't know if I'd go that far. The world is a dumpster fire on most days.

"Thanks, Mom. I'll look up Susanna."

She sinks the tea bag into her cup and nods. "Sure, baby. I'm planning on coming home in another week, but if you need me before then, you'll let me know?"

"Of course."

She air kisses by the phone when she picks it up again. "Be careful, please."

"I will."

"I always feel like that's a lie when you say it, knowing you."

I roll my eyes at her, but she's not wrong. Besides, how can I promise to be careful when a demon is after me?

We say goodbye and I close out of the app, opening up my social accounts.

In the search bar, I type in Susanna's name. and she comes up immediately with a blue check mark next to her profile picture. I tap into her feed and find artful pictures of mugs and bowls and vases. She has several hundred thousand followers. I had no idea there was such a market for ceramic.

I hit the MESSAGE button and type out a note.

Hi Susanna! I'm Sunny Low's daughter, Rain. I'm trying to hunt down Jeffrey from that camping trip you guys took before I was born. Do you happen to know him? Or someone who might know how to get hold of him?

Finger hovering over the SEND button, my heart kicks up in my chest. There's always been a small desire to find my father if only to see the man who made half of me. But even as a kid, I was cognizant of the fact that finding him and meeting him was a door I could never shut again.

What if he didn't measure up to the person I had in my head?

And now...what if he isn't even human?

Christ.

Is this really my life?

No turning back now. I hit the SEND button and collapse against the sofa.

I have to tell Gus what I just did. He's going to flip. I bring the tablet back up when a flicker of shadow catches my eye.

Oh shit.

Would Wrath kill a *dieva* just for stealing his car? Technically he doesn't

even need the damn thing.

I stand up, trying to keep the slight tremble from my hands as I reach out for the overhead light switch. My gut tells me Wrath won't kill me, but my head says to stop being a fucking idiot. He's killed lots of people since he came here. Who am I to think I'm special? Who am I to think he'd treat me any differently?

But when I flick the light switch and turn to face him, it's not Wrath standing behind me—it's a line of men dressed in wannabe tactical gear, and I recognize the patches they're sporting right away. A circle with a roaring bear and devil horns.

It's the Men Against Wrath.

IT TAKES MY BRAIN A SECOND TO CATCH UP WITH MY RACING HEART, AND when it does, it tells me to run for the door even though the men stand between me and it.

Stupid rookie mistake.

One of the burly men reaches out for me and gets a handful of my threadbare t-shirt. I backpedal, and the t-shirt rips up the side. He's caught off guard by it and lets go, and I race around the island, grabbing a knife from the butcher block as a second man comes around to cut me off.

I slice out with the weapon, but the man easily dodges. I swipe again, he ducks, then catches my arm in his meaty grip when he comes back up.

Crap.

I drop the blade and kick him in the fucking balls. He sinks into the fetal position.

"Get her," one of them barks as I jump over the man-baby and lunge for the door.

Someone hooks an arm around my waist and hauls me off my feet. I kick and flail and rage. "Motherfucker! Get the fuck off me!"

A sweaty hand clamps over my mouth and anger burns through my body. Using my elbow, I jab at his face and connect with the hard tissue of his nose.

"Fucking bitch," he howls. Blood runs down his face. He hands me off to someone else, and I start flailing like a fish, trying to dislodge them in any way I can.

That's when a tall, Military Man steps in front of me and backhands me.

Bright light flares in my vision as the room sways and the coppery taste

of blood fills my mouth.

“Get her to a chair,” a gruff voice orders, and I’m carried like a limp doll to one of the chairs at my dining table.

The man drops me unceremoniously. Head still spinning, I hear the sound of duct tape being ripped and then feel it being wound around my arms, then my legs, taping me to the chair.

It all happens so fast, I barely have time to register what’s happening, and by then, it’s too late.

I’m royally screwed. Didn’t I promise my mother not ten minutes ago that I’d be careful? Now look at me.

As soon as I’m secured to my own goddamn chair, the assholes of MAW crowd around me. I count five men total. The tall, military man stands at the head of the group. He stares down at me with narrowed eyes, muscular arms crossed over his chest.

There’s a gun strapped to his belt and a giant knife in a sheath around his thigh.

I may be in a really, really bad spot right now.

I test the tape by wiggling my arms, but there’s no give.

“Listen, darling,” the military man says.

“I’m not your fucking darling.”

He backhands me again and tears spring to my eyes as a sharp ache rings through my head and in my ears.

That really fucking hurt. I grit my teeth against the rage boiling in my bones.

When the room stops spinning again, and the pain dissipates, I scowl up at him. I’m going to murder him. I’m going to curb stomp all their balls.

I go feral in the chair, pulling and tearing at the tape when the sound of a bullet being racked in a gun pulls me to a stop.

“Let’s try this again,” the man says.

Blood drips from the corner of my mouth. I poke at the wound with my tongue, then run my tongue along my teeth. All of them seem to be accounted for, but the wound is raw on the inside of my bottom lip.

“If you cooperate,” the man says, “we’ll let you live.”

One of the others, a blond guy wearing camouflage, darts his gaze to the leader as if he’s surprised to hear this news.

So has the blond guy been left out of the loop or is Military Man lying to me? The way they’re handling me is leading me to believe this might be

more than just a shake down.

As my breathing grows shallow, dread creeps up my spine.

I'm taped to a fucking chair in my own goddamn condo surrounded by military wannabes armed to the teeth.

This isn't good. It's not good at all.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice reedy and wet.

"Tell us why the demon trash wants you."

"How the hell should I know?"

Whack.

My head whips back from the hit. A fresh bloom of pain vibrates through my skull.

The rage grows teeth, and I can feel it coiling in my limbs.

"Try again," the guy says.

"I don't know, okay? Wrath doesn't know either. He's been trying to figure me out. He even brought a witch to the house and—"

"You've been to his house?" the man says.

I clamp my mouth shut. Is that a bad thing? It isn't like I made that choice freely and willingly.

And then it dawns on me...no one knows how to find Wrath. That's always been one of the big sticking points for the government and the Citizens and yeah, probably even the Men Against Wrath.

So admitting that I know where his house is, is clearly a very big mistake.

"Do you know how to find it again?" one of the other guys asks. This one is dark-haired with a goatee. He gives me second-in-command vibes by the way he stands at the leader's left shoulder like he's ready to step in to protect the other man at a moment's notice.

"Hey," the guy says. "Focus." He snaps his fingers in my face.

"I don't know how to find it again, no. Wrath took me through the sub-dimension."

"The what?" the second-in-command asks.

"Wrath, is it?" the leader says. "You're on a first name basis, huh?"

"Everyone knows his name. It's not like I have special privileges."

The leader pulls back a hand again as if to slap me and I tense in the chair, braced for the blow when the guy on his left grabs him by the arm to stop him.

Did I misjudge this little band of merry men?

The military man, the one I thought was the leader, takes a step back, and

the other guy steps forward. I *have* misread them, and worse, I barely noticed the shorter guy, the one with the shaved head and the glinting eyes.

He blended in so he could watch and listen.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Low,” the guy says. “I’m Ryder. We’re not here to hurt you—”

I snort, and pain burns through my face.

Ryder goes on. “We’re just desperate for answers and some of us” —he sends a withering look over his shoulder— “have allowed our passion to get the better of us. Will you accept our apologies?”

“Ummm...no.”

“Good. Let’s start over.”

I roll my eyes.

“Can you tell me what the sub-dimension is?” His voice is quiet and even, unlike the military man, all gruff and demanding.

I swallow, lick my lips, and taste blood. “Wrath described it like the space between walls. It’s how he poofs in and out.”

A murmur goes through the men. This is news to them. Which means Wrath has told me more than he’s told most.

Why?

“Do you know how he makes that ability work?” Ryder asks.

“I’m assuming it’s just his power. I don’t know.”

The military man shifts his weight and looks at the blond man.

“Do you know anything about the world where Wrath hails from?” Ryder asks. “We know it’s called Alius, but do you know how to reach it?”

I shake my head. “Sorry.”

“Do you know why Wrath has taken a liking to you?”

“A fascination, I assume. I’m not anything special.”

Ryder nods and casts his gaze to the floor, thinking. The others go quiet. I wiggle my arm in the tape bindings again because sitting still isn’t an option.

“What did he tell you when he took you?” Ryder asks.

“About what?”

“Anything.”

“I don’t know. Listen, I don’t have what you want, okay? I have no information that will help you defeat him or send him back to whence he came. I’m just a photographer, a rando girl, and I’d very much like you to untape me from this chair.”

Ryder takes a step forward and pulls a long knife from a sheath at his hip.

The blade glints in the overhead light and my breath catches in my throat.

“I swear, okay,” I say. “I don’t know anything.”

Ryder slips the blade into one of the many holes in my borrowed jeans and slices up. I yelp and instinct has me trying to pull away, but I’m rooted in place, helpless and at his mercy.

The pant leg falls away. He drags the blade over the bare flesh of my thigh, sending a shiver of fear down my spine.

“Please,” I say.

He crouches in front of me and meets my eyes. His are dead and distant. And it’s at this point that I realize his cool, calm, collected voice is just an act. Get the scared rabbit to calm down so he can slit its throat.

“Give me something I can use,” Ryder says.

“I don’t know what you want.” I inhale deeply, trying to subdue the spindly fingers of panic currently squeezing at my heart. “I’m serious. If I had something, I’d give it to you. I just want to go back to my normal life.”

Ryder turns the blade.

“Please,” I say again.

He puts pressure on the tip of the blade, and it sinks into my flesh, pain radiating out like a starburst. My mind goes numb to everything else, everything but the pain. I hang my head back and cry out, but Military Man clamps his hand over my mouth, squelching my pain.

Pulling the blade back, Ryder drags the bloody tip up toward my core, and terror pounds through me.

“Bet she’s fucking the demon trash,” Military Man says, his meaty hand still clamped over my mouth.

The pain ebbs and I look up at him, narrowing my eyes. I’m not fucking Wrath, not that it’s any of his fucking business.

“Maybe what she needs is a real man between her legs, huh?” Military Man says, his other hand trailing down my neck, down to my torn t-shirt where he takes a handful of my boob and squeezes.

My eyes go round, and I fight at the tape again. The blade comes back to my jeans, and Ryder cuts through the other leg. A chill seeps into the gaping pants, reminding me that I’m not wearing any underwear.

“Ms. Low,” Ryder says, his voice still quiet and even, “how do we kill the demon trash?”

I mumble around Military Man’s hand, but he doesn’t let me go.

The blade hooks into the crotch of my pants, and I immediately go still.

What was I thinking, coming home alone? I should have called Gus, Adam, anyone.

It's in this moment that I realize my normal life is dead. There's no way to go back to it. And not just because of Wrath. Because of assholes like these men who think they can get what they want, when they want it at the expense of everyone else.

They'll never know the fear of being a woman alone in the world. They don't care that the fear a woman feels is only perpetuated by men like them.

They hide behind their mission, pretending to be valiant heroes trying to save the world, but really, they're just bullies afraid of someone more powerful taking over their turf.

Heat flares at my sternum and I latch on to it, hungry for something, anything other than the terror.

The heat builds and grows, flushing my veins with fire.

Military Man curses and yanks his hand back, shaking it out like he's been burned. "What the fuck?"

A strange kind of butterfly fills my gut. Butterflies like firecrackers, popping and fizzing.

A bright red light flashes through the room and the smell of burning plastic fills the air. The duct tape falls away, and suddenly I'm free.

I bring my arms up in front of my eyes, not quite believing it, only to see the duct tape burned along its edges.

The men are scattered around the room, arms up like a shield as the light dies out.

I stand from the chair and find my legs are free too.

Ryder looks from his team back to me, his mouth tightening into a grim line as he brings the blade up.

"There's my answer," he says and charges me.

RYDER SLASHES OUT WITH THE KNIFE AND I LEAP BACK, JUST BARELY avoiding having the top of my head cleaved off.

He turns the blade so it's parallel with his forearm and swings again, cutting through the thin material of my t-shirt and into the flesh above my right breast.

The pain, the wetness of the blood seeping down my chest, is distant.

The rage is in the driver's seat now, fuel in my veins.

I grab the lamp from the end table and lob it at him. He bats it away and it bounces off the island, smashing on the floor. The glass crunches beneath his boot as he advances on me, and I dart back toward the balcony. Except I stumble right into Military Man who fists my hair and steers me back toward the chair.

I'm not getting back in that fucking chair.

I ram my elbow into his side, only to hit my funny bone on what feels like a bulletproof vest.

The pain is so acute, and so quick, my knees buckle, and Military Man drops me on the threshold of the balcony doors.

"Get her up," Ryder orders.

Military Man groans and bends down as I turn on my back and kick up with my bare foot.

He slaps me away.

"Get control of her," Ryder says.

"I'm trying," Military Man says.

The air crackles.

Military Man straightens. The room goes still. Goosebumps lift on my skin and there's a knowing building in my gut, an electric kindling in my chest.

He's here.

Something shoots across the room and the overhead light shatters, the light winking out, plunging us into silver moon darkness.

I hear the telltale sound of guns being pulled from their holsters, bullets being racked into barrels.

As if a bullet could stop the Demon King.

Military Man towers over me, his gun in hand. "Where is he?" he says, voice low.

"Haven't spotted him—*ahhhh!*"

A gun goes off and then a body hits the floor. The air shifts again and the moonlight flickers like a strobe as shadows flit around the room.

I get onto all fours and scurry back toward the balcony, into open air.

Ryder skirts around the dining table, gun up. Military Man is going in the opposite direction with the blond guy, back by my bedroom door, and the goatee guy is by the bathroom.

The fifth guy is lying on the floor by the island and I'm pretty sure he's dead.

A shadow flies through the air and blond guy lets out a strangled cry, blood splattering against the wall behind him as he crumples to his knees, falling onto his face. He didn't even get a shot off.

The shadow disappears.

Goatee guy looks like he's about to piss his pants.

"Look alive," Military Man says.

You're about to be dead.

One of the shadows coalesces into a human-like form in front of the TV, and I see Wrath's pale, gorgeous face in the swirling darkness.

The men swivel to him, guns aimed, and fire. The loud *pop-pop* makes my head ring, and I instinctively shrink down behind one of my lounge chairs.

The dark silhouette of Wrath goes misty on the edges and the bullets pass right through him.

My TV shatters and sparks and wobbles on its stand.

When the guns click with empty cartridges, the real show begins.

Black mist trails off of Wrath like steam rising from hot pavement as the

men fumble with their guns, trying to reload. The shadows sharpen into spears and shoot across the room.

Goatee guy is impaled in the gut. His body jolts from the impact as he coughs up blood.

Military Man ducks at the last second and the spear lodges itself into my bedroom door with a loud, resounding thud.

The last spear shoots across the room, aimed at Ryder, but he's already leapt out of the way, right to my side.

He grabs the back of my shirt and yanks me to my feet, gun aimed at my head.

"Stop," Ryder says, his voice still that menacing calm.

Wrath turns to us, and I catch a barely perceptible wince.

"All right," the Demon King says, "you've got my attention." He takes a step toward the open balcony doors.

"Uh-uh," Ryder warns and pulls me back, closer to the glass railing. "Stay where you are."

Wrath is already through the French doors, but he stops beside my outdoor café table and spreads out his hands. "Now what?"

Military Man edges around Wrath, gun up, but the sights aren't aimed on Wrath, they're squarely on me.

"If she's so important to you," Ryder says, "then we'll do a good old-fashioned horse trade. You get the girl, and we walk out of here alive."

Wrath keeps his hands up, as if those were the only weapons he wields. "You know I can't do that. Not now."

"Why's that?" the military man asks gruffly.

"Because you've already harmed her. You've already put her life in jeopardy."

Military Man frowns, bushy brows sinking over his eyes. "Why do you even care? She's just a girl. Not even a hot one."

Excuse me? If I didn't have a gun trained on my head and blood pouring from two wounds, and pants that are about to fall off, I'd be charging across the balcony to slap that son of a bitch.

"If she's no one special, then why risk your life here and now?" Wrath asks. His face is devoid of emotion. I guess when you know you're invincible, you have no reason to fear an adversary.

Putting more distance between us and Wrath, Ryder guides me back to the edge of the balcony and I bump against the railing. "If she's no one

special, then why do you care if she dies? You've already killed so many. What's one more?"

Wrath flexes his jaw, and the first sliver of emotion tells the truth.

He does care.

He cares very much.

"That's what I thought," Ryder says, and then he yanks me by the arm and shoves me over the balcony railing.



I HEAR WRATH'S STRANGLERED VOICE AS THE SKY GOES UP.

"Nooooo!" he shouts.

My arms pinwheel. People on the boardwalk scream as I plunge for the concrete walk three floors below my balcony.

Will it hurt to hit the pavement?

Will I feel every bone breaking?

On the bright side, this madness will officially end and thinking that almost brings a sort of morbid relief.

I breathe out, exhale at the shining stars and think—*okay. I'm ready.*

And then—

The crowd lets out a collective gasp as strong arms catch me.

The disbelief hits me like a crashing wave, and suddenly I'm sobbing with relief.

Wrath looks down at me, breathing elevated, dark brow sunk into a concerned frown.

He caught me. He saved me. I'm not a puddle of goo and blood on the pavement outside my condo.

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

I clutch him as the emotion overwhelms me. As the realization of how big this is, how real it is, eats away at my bravery and my resolve.

I was just held hostage by five men that were slowly cutting the clothing from my body and—

Wrath pulls me in closer and his darkness envelops us, that rich, spicy night scent filling my nose, easing the panic still knotting my stomach.

The Demon King saved me.

Again.

“Hold on,” he tells me, and then the air cracks open, pulling us away.

WE REAPPEAR SECONDS LATER IN THE COOL, DARK HUSH OF WHAT I THINK IS Wrath's castle. He still holds me close to his body, arms tight around me. His breathing is still fast and rough, and I can hear the rapid beating of his heart through his shirt.

"Arthur!" he shouts as he carries me to a bed and lays me down. He pushes the hair from my face with sure, warm fingers. "Arthur!" he shouts again.

The door opens and light spills in. The silhouette of Arthur appears in the rectangle of light. "What is it?" Arthur calls as he stumbles into the dark and flicks on a lamp. "Oh. Is she—"

My clothing is practically hanging off my body like rags, and there's blood everywhere, running down my leg, down my chest. I can only imagine what my face looks like after getting backhanded so many times by that asshole's meaty hand.

"I'll get some rags," Arthur says and hurries away.

Wrath yanks the collar of my shirt down, assessing the wound above my breast. "Describe to me how you feel," he says, his eyes sweeping over my chest.

My voice comes out squeaky and thick. The tears have somewhat stopped, but the unshed ones are still making my vision blurry, and my throat hoarse. "Sore," I answer. "But I think I'm all right besides that."

Forget the fact that I almost died and that Wrath has officially saved me twice now.

How the hell is it that I'm safer in the hands of a demon king from

another world than I am with mortal men?

They've turned on me. All of them. I want to blame it on Wrath, but even before him, would any of those men have thought twice about protecting me? Or not laying a hand on me if I said no?

My head is spinning and my stomach is knotted and I'm just so fucking exhausted.

Arthur returns with several wet rags and a first aid kit. He moves to the side of the bed like he means to take over, but Wrath yanks the towel from his grip and doesn't move. With a gentle sweep of the cloth, he swipes away the blood.

I wince. The skin is tender and raw and it's starting to turn hot with inflammation. I can only imagine what comes after this clean up.

I rest my head against one of the soft pillows and sling my arm over my eyes, blocking out the weak light of the lamp. Even that is making my eyes burn.

"Here," Arthur says from somewhere beyond Wrath, and when I peek around my arm, I see him offering a blanket.

"Take off your clothes," Wrath says.

Normally I'd argue about the villain wanting to disrobe me, but the clothing is almost useless anyway, and it's starting to stick to my skin as the blood dries, causing fresh pain every time I shift and the material pulls away.

Wrath opens the blanket with a snap and drapes it over me.

I slowly do as instructed, carefully yanking my shirt up. Wrath has to help get it past my head and even though I won't admit it out loud, I'm grateful for his help.

Next, I unbutton the jeans and shimmy out of them. Arthur grabs them by the cuffs and pulls them off the rest of the way.

"Tell Lauren to get her some real fucking clothes," Wrath says over his shoulder, "or I will not only denounce her as an ally, I'll rip out her fucking heart and shove it down her throat."

Arthur gives a half bow. "Of course."

"Those exact words, Arthur," Wrath says with bite.

Arthur nods and ambles away.

Looks like I'm not the only one in pain. Of course, mine will heal and fade. Arthur has to live with his forever.

It makes me suddenly sad. It makes me feel like an ungrateful snot. Here I am always bitching about my life, about what I don't have, about the new

chaos and stress, and Arthur is dealing with chronic pain every single day, trying to navigate life around it.

I sigh.

Wrath frowns down at me. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I say, eyes heavy.

"That's impossible," he points out. "There is never nothing."

True enough.

"You keep saving me," I answer.

"To the surprise and shock of us both."

"You really think I'm something special."

"Special is a stretch. A thorn in my side is more adequate."

"You heard Emery," I say distantly. She used those exact words to describe him.

Wrath drags the rag over my chest, revealing the state of the wound. "It needs stitches," he says. "But I can likely heal you."

He shifts down the edge of the bed to assess the wound in my thigh, and as he pushes up the blanket, fingers dragging over the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh, I clench up tight, a thrill pulsing in my clit.

"Careful, *dieva*," he purrs.

"What?"

"I can smell you," he says.

"Ummm...What do you mean?"

His eyes flash red. "Your desire."

"What?" I screech, eyes suddenly wide, face painted with shame.

Fuck. How the hell am I supposed to control that buzzing in my core? How the hell am I supposed to ignore the way his touch ignites something inside of me even though I'd rather light myself on fire?

Oh really? an inner voice says. *If that's what you think, you're lying to yourself.*

If I'm turned on by Wrath, what the hell does that say about me?

I don't like it. I really like it.

I want him to keep touching me.

"It isn't like I'm doing it on purpose," I mutter, face still hot. "I don't actually like you."

He gives me a look like he's calling me on my bullshit. "We have that in common then, don't we?"

He nudges my leg open to get a better look at the wound, and wetness

spreads between my folds.

I leap off the bed and curse as the wound opens, fresh blood seeping out. I press against the wall, holding the blanket to my chest. I'm right back where I started, naked except for a thin bit of material in Wrath's cool, dark castle.

Why do I keep finding myself in this predicament with him?

He stands, the bloody rag hanging from his hand. "You need to lie down," he growls.

I take in a stuttering breath. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"And standing is a better one?"

My vision swims as I become lightheaded. I sway on my feet and slump down the wall and Wrath darts over to catch me.

Feeling his arms around me again, his hands on the bare flesh of my hips, causes me to let out an audible gasp.

His irises glow brighter and the blackness surges around us. The monster is here, and it makes my belly soar.

"Why are you so stubborn?" he purrs.

"Why are you so infuriating?" I challenge.

He leans in close, his spicy scent overwhelming me. "If I'm so infuriating, then why are you so wet?"

I frown. "I'm not."

"Oh?" He raises his brow as his left hand slips away from my waist. I know what he's going to do before he does it, and my heart kicks up, racing in my chest so fast I worry it might thump right out of my rib cage.

"Infuriating," he says low and throaty as his hand slips beneath the blanket and trails up my thigh.

I close my eyes. I should stop him. I really should. But I don't want to.

It's like I've slipped into an alternate reality, a dream, where I can give in to the Demon King and not suffer any consequences.

So I don't stop him.

His sure, deft fingers tease at my opening and I breathe out.

My eyes are half closed when he brings his hand up and licks my juices from his fingers.

Holy shit.

A needy pulse grows at my core.

I'm in trouble. So much trouble.

"You taste good, *dieva*." His lips are wet with my desire. "Infuriating, indeed," he says, his voice turning into a growl.

“What are we doing?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he admits, and that does weird things to my belly.

For the first time since he arrived here, he seems unsettled, and not because of the Citizens or MAW or the government.

Because of me.

Maybe I do hold some kind of sway over the Demon King.

So I give in. I give in to the power and the thrill of it.

I kiss him.

He goes stiff at first, maybe caught off guard by it, but then he gives in too, and his responding kiss turns hungry.

We’re both starving.

Ravenous for *something*.

His tongue flicks over my lips, and I part my mouth, letting him in. I moan into him as his tongue meets mine, that delicious caress of him sending a shiver down my spine.

I want more. I’ve never been so fucking turned on. And I realize maybe I was never better than the fangirls.

Maybe I was always starving for the Demon King. The power. The sexiness. The dark mystery of him.

Now I have him. Now he’s mine and no one else’s.

He hooks his hands around my thighs and hoists me up against the wall, pressing his groin to my center.

He’s hard, so fucking hard and it makes me instantly wetter.

The Demon King wants me too.

His mouth trails to my jaw, down my neck, and the blanket falls away, pooling between us at my waist.

My nipples peak and he takes one into his mouth, his tongue flicking over the tight bud. I hang my head back and exhale at the ceiling, arching into him.

Fuck, fuck, he feels so fucking good.

“How furious are you now, *dieva*?” he mutters and nips my nipple.

I pant. “So...fucking...furious.”

The pain from my wounds fades away. I’m not sure if it’s the pleasure overriding it, or if he’s somehow healed me like he does for Arthur.

“Tell me to stop,” he says.

“Do you want to stop?”

He growls and presses forward with his hips, grinding his cock against

me. His breathing is heavy, threaded with desire and something that sounds an awful lot like fear.

He's afraid of giving in to me.

"I've been thinking about your tight little pussy since we met in the alley."

I moan at his words and run my fingers through his hair, disheveling it.

"And now?"

He pulls me away from the wall and the room disappears.

There's a rushing noise in my ears as he pulls me into the sub-dimension, then a settling again as we reappear in another room. He drops me on the bed. The duvet is thick and dark and everything smells like him.

Like summer and sin.

He tears the shirt from his body, then unbuttons his pants.

When his cock is free, I let out a little yelp of surprise.

The Demon King is big.

"Get on your knees," he orders.

I'm distantly aware of coming full circle. Of our first meeting in the alley when he told me to bow and I refused.

There's a challenge in his eyes, a desire for control.

If I bow to him now, he won't feel so powerless beside me.

Do I give in?

I burn with the temptation to be submissive before him. I don't know why.

It's all an act, I tell myself as I slide off the edge of the bed and stand in front of him.

A silent moment passes between us as his eyes glow red in the semi-darkness.

I think we're playing a game here, one where we're both the king, swinging for power.

I'll let him have this win.

I sink to my knees and he exhales. "Is this what you wanted?" I ask and look up at him around the hard, thick line of his cock.

The blackness plumes around him and his face sharpens to the monster he is. But for the first time, I'm not afraid of him. I'm not afraid of the villain.

He takes a fistful of my hair and says nothing.

But everything he does, every movement he makes says one word—yes.

He wants to feel in control with me. But he's not. He never will be.

Because I'm an enigma. I don't know why. I'm still not sure if I believe the possibility that I'm something other than human.

In this moment, I don't care.

There's a gaping hole in my center that somehow feels fuller now.

I drag my tongue over the underside of his shaft, and he hisses. I straighten and tease at the tip, circling the head before I take him into my mouth.

He gasps, his hand tightens in my hair as he guides me over his cock, pumping into me.

I feel him grow harder on my tongue, the head of his shaft throbbing against the back of my throat.

A bead of precum hits my tongue and he stops himself suddenly as he pants in the dark.

He hoists me up and throws me on the bed on my stomach. His hand comes back to my hair and yanks my head back.

"This changes nothing," I breathe out.

His mouth is at my ear when he says, "Oh *dieva*, this changes everything."

And then he plunges into me and my vision goes white.

NOT EVEN AN HOUR AGO, I WAS FALLING TO MY DEATH.

I feel like I'm falling again, but I can't tell if it's the dangerous kind or the divine.

I've never been fucked like this.

It's like my body is coiled up tight, ready to burst. Like if I were a circuit board, all of my lights would be glowing bright.

Wrath pounds into me, his hands on my hips, pulling my ass into him. I can feel him throbbing hard inside of me, the head of his shaft hitting a spot that's never been hit before.

He fills me up, and the sensation of his thick cock is painful and sublime all at the same time.

But I think more than the physical, it's the mental pleasure of knowing the Demon King can't get enough of me. The way he thrusts inside of me, it's like he's claiming me as his, claiming me as his divine retribution.

His hand snakes around my thigh, fingers circling my clit, and the pulse of pleasure grows into a supernova in the center of me.

"Oh god," I pant out.

"Not god," he says as he thrusts.

Close enough.

My arms are shaking, and my thighs are quivering as his fingers circle and flick my clit, the tidal wave of pleasure building and building as he hits deep inside of me.

But then he flattens his hand against my wet center, stealing the pleasure from me. He slows his thrusts.

I moan and tremble. “Stop teasing me.”

“Or what?”

I go down on my elbows and push my ass up so the head of his cock rubs against that delicious spot inside of me.

Or what? Or what?

Or I might scream.

His fingers return to my swollen bud and circle, then flick, then circle again in a tempo that has me jolting beneath him.

“Oh fuck.” My breath is hot against the duvet. “Oh fuck.”

The pressure builds, the thrill weaving through my body like a fire about to ignite.

I can feel the wick flaring, the heat pressing against me as Wrath fills me up.

“Go on, *dieva*,” he says with a quick, ragged breath. “Let me hear you come.”

The orgasm crashes through me and I cry out, body trembling and jolting and burning bright. There is nothing but the sensation, like a symphony, a sublime song surging through every vein, every bone in my body.

Wrath moves with me, riding the wave, then picks up the tempo, thrusting hard and deep.

“Fuck,” he says. “You’re so tight.”

And then his rhythm shifts and he pulls out almost entirely before thrusting back in, deep, deeper, his fingers gripping tightly at my hips as he spills inside of me, groaning low through clenched teeth.

I’m hot at the core, trembling and spent, and filled up with the Demon King’s cum.

How did I get here? And now that I am, do I feel bad about it?

The butterflies in my stomach say no, I don’t feel bad one little bit.

He was right—*this changes everything*.

When he pulls out of me, I collapse on my side facing away from him, breathing heavy, eyelids nearly shut. The pain, both physical and mental, of the attack at my condo is a distant memory.

I just fucked the Demon King.

I said I hated him. Detested him. And now I’m in his bed surrounded by his scent, his cum leaking out of me.

I can’t believe it and yet...there’s a thrum of rightness in my chest. Like a knot has been undone.

A feeling almost like...like I've come home.

Wrath's breathing settles, and I roll over to face him. He's on his back, his hands on his taut stomach. With moonlight pouring in through the windows to our right, I can just make out the sharp, dark lines of his demon mark.

It's complex, intricate with curving lines that wind over his shoulders, across his chest, and then—

There's a very distinct circle at his sternum where the mark isn't black but puckered white like a scar.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think it was an exact match for my birthmark.

Without thinking, I reach out to trace my fingers over it, but he snatches me by the wrist, stopping me. "What is that?" I ask.

Moonlight puts catchlights in his eyes as he looks at me silently.

We just fucked, but the Demon King isn't about to give up his secrets.

With a sigh, I start to rise. "I should go."

His grip on me tightens, keeping me in place.

There's a moment where we're both locked in this dueling storm of wants and desires, when we both know what we should be doing, and yet can't seem to make ourselves do it.

"Stay," he says, his voice hoarse in the dark.

This is another face-off, an unspoken challenge. He's given me an order. Will I follow it?

I should go. But I don't want to go.

Instead, I slide across the bed to him. He weaves his arm around me, pulling me in, and I rest my head against his chest right over his heart. The steady thrum of it acts like soothing white noise and I'm quickly out, tucked safely into the Demon King's embrace.

WHEN I WAKE, IT'S STILL DARK AND THE BED IS NOTICEABLY EMPTY. IT TAKES me a second to orient myself and to remember where I am. It's Wrath's smell that reminds me first. Not the softness of the sheets or the windows on the wrong side of the room.

I could sink into his smell and never leave. It makes my stomach flutter and my chest lighter.

I wrap the sheet around myself and tiptoe to the door. It's cracked, letting a sliver of golden light shine through.

I'm just about to pull it open the rest of the way when Arthur's voice and my name pulls me to a stop.

"They're saying you kidnapped Rain and therefore have broken the treaty."

I can't see Wrath through the crack in the door, but I can hear his snort of derision.

"As if I would need to kidnap anyone," he says.

What's that supposed to mean? It's not like I begged him to take me, though truth be told, I *did* need some assistance considering the Citizens were trying to murder me at the factory.

"The Army Chief of Staff has filed an appeal," Arthur goes on.

"And what do they think they'll do? Fight me again? As if they are any match for me."

The bite of his tone, the superior tenor of his voice, makes him sound much closer to the villain I imagined he'd be.

My body goes numb.

Arthur moves around the room, and I catch sight of him beside a wet bar along the far wall. Wrath is still out of sight. “Are you any closer to finding it?”

There’s a sigh, then, “No. I think the girl is connected somehow, but I don’t know how.”

“And you thought seducing her would help you figure it out?”

“Mind your tone,” Wrath says, and Arthur shifts his gaze to the floor.

“Apologies. It’s just...I don’t think she knows. Which means she’s innocent.”

“When has innocence ever protected someone?”

I lick my lips, unsure of how I should feel about this conversation. I’m clearly not supposed to be eavesdropping, and the fact that I’m getting away with it feels both powerful and deceitful.

“And the soldiers?” Arthur asks next.

“They should be ready within a week.”

Arthur folds his hands behind his back. “And after that?”

“If I don’t acquire the *animus* soon...” Wrath trails off. Arthur fidgets, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“Can Chaos cross over without help?” Arthur asks.

“I’m not sure, but I can feel him trying.”

Wait, *him*? Did he just refer to chaos as a person? Someone from Alius? Does the government know there are more supernatural people trying to get through?

Panic flutters beneath my ribs. This isn’t good.

Or maybe...

What’s the saying? *An enemy of my enemy is my friend.*

But the very thought of fighting Wrath burns shame through my veins. I said I hated him but now...now I’m not sure how I feel about him. He’s been kind to me, which yeah, surprised me. I can’t forget that he’s saved me twice when—

“And Rain?” Arthur asks.

I hold my breath again. I don’t want to miss Wrath’s answer.

There’s a long pause, and for a second, I worry I’ve been discovered snooping. If Wrath poofs into the room right now, there’s no hiding what I’m doing, but I really want to hear his response.

I want to know how I figure into this, and how he really feels about me.

“The girl stays until I figure out how to use her to my advantage or until I

bend her to my will. Whichever comes first.”

I clamp my hand over my mouth to tamp down the cry that threatens to escape.

The girl.

That motherfucker.

The euphoria I was feeling earlier turns sour in my gut.

So I’m just a tool he’s trying to figure out how to work?

Was he just fucking me to get closer? So he could use my compliance to his advantage?

Tears burn in my eyes, and there’s a sharp pang of betrayal in my chest.

I fell for it. Just like everyone else. I fell for the power. I fell for the manipulation. I thought I was somehow special. But ever since Wrath got here, he’s looked at all of us like we’re inferior to him and demanded we be subservient.

Fire lights in my veins from pure rage.

I should have known better.

He told me to bow, and I finally got to my knees.

Stupid. So fucking stupid!

The rage blooms at my sternum and light shines into the room.

The hell?

I turn to look for a lamp and see none.

“What’s that?” Arthur says. “You see that light?”

Shit.

I scurry back into the bed, tangling myself into the sheets. *Calm down. Breathe.* I close my eyes and pretend to sleep and count my breaths, trying to quell the pounding of my heart.

“*Dieva.*”

His voice comes to me in the dark, and my heart beats harder. I open my eyes and find his silhouette against the growing dawn. “Hey,” I say in a croak. “You scared me. What are you doing?”

He comes to the bedside and sits beside me, and my damn heart is still ramming against my ribs.

Can he hear it?

“I have something I need to attend to,” he says and pushes the hair from my face. The sharp, haughty tone I heard him use with Arthur is gone, but now I know this is all just part of the act.

“Okay,” I say. “How long will you be gone?”

“Not long. There are clothes for you in the bathroom and plenty of food in the kitchen. I assume you can tend to yourself?”

I roll my eyes, even though it’s still dark in his room. “Obviously.”

“I’ll be back later. Stay within the walls of the castle.” His voice turns dark as he adds, “Behave, *dieva*.”

I snort for grand effect as he sweeps out of the room. “Fine.”

Behave. Behave!

I’m going to burn this son of a bitch to the ground.

WHEN I'M SURE HE'S GONE, I HURRY OUT OF THE BED AND LOOK FOR THE bathroom. I find his closet first, though it's mostly empty. A half hour ago, I would have walked inside and fingered the soft material of his shirts, his jackets, drank in the scent of him.

What an idiot I've been.

I slam the door closed and find the bathroom on the next try. It's massive with white marble floors and a shower stall done in some kind of slick, black tile. There's a rain showerhead about the size of a pothole, and I wish I could take advantage of it.

But no.

I have to get out of here.

Behave.

Ha. He's going to see just why my mother avoided disciplining me the old-fashioned way. Sunny Low had to get clever with her parenting style. When she told me to go left, I went right. When she told me not to stay out after curfew or else I'd be grounded, guess who came home an hour late?

Behave!

I don't care about the consequences.

The clothes Lauren acquired this time are much better. I find a pair of black leggings and a white t-shirt folded on a bench in the bathroom with a pair of white tennis shoes on the floor. There's also a pair of panties that actually fit, though the bra is a sports bra that mashes my boobs to my body.

I'm not complaining. I've pretty much been naked since I got here.

As I'm pulling on the leggings, I pause at mid-thigh where Ryder had cut

me open. The skin is completely healed with only a pink slash where the wound had been. I scan my chest and find the same thing.

That's interesting.

I shake my head and resume dressing.

Once fully clothed, I poke my head through the door where I'd been eavesdropping earlier and find the room empty. Taking a deep breath, I cross through it and then check the hallway outside.

Where is Lauren anyway? And is Arthur with Wrath?

What did Wrath have to attend to?

I need to get out of the castle—again—and this time, I have to escape on foot. Even if Wrath recovered his car, I'm not risking stealing it. Luckily for me, I noticed several farmhouses on the way to Norton Harbor. Plenty of places where I can stop to use the phone.

But there's a voice in the back of my head that can't help but wonder if Wrath can find me regardless of where I am. He found me at my condo, though I suppose that's an obvious place to look for me.

I slip out the door at the back of the kitchen just as the sun rises over the treetops. The woods surrounding the grounds is my best bet for coverage, so as soon as I'm clear of the gardens, I run.

When I'm beneath the cool, shaded canopy of the hardwoods, I lean against the trunk of a giant maple, hands on my knees as I suck in air.

I'm not a runner. In fact, I hate exercise. I might need to rethink that now that I'm running from a monster.

If I've oriented myself correctly, I can escape through the woods that will eventually meet up with the main road, and then I should be able to find a house to stop at.

I'm not sure how long it takes me to get through the woods. I alternate between running and walking fast, my throat tight and raw the entire way.

I finally come out of the woods as the sun burns off the dew that's gathered on the grass. In the distance, I make out the rise of a silo and the pitched roof of a barn.

"Oh, thank god."

I close the rest of the distance in a slow jog.

Free-range chickens squawk in the yard of the old farmhouse when I run up to the front porch. I knock and knock on the wooden screen door. The interior door is propped open with an iron stand so I shout, "Hello? I need a phone! Please help."

A man appears and frowns at me. He's sunbaked and wiry with hair that could rival a model's. He's old though, sixties maybe, judging by the deep wrinkles around his face and the gray threading his hair.

"I need a phone," I pant out.

"Your car breakdown?" He looks past me through the screen.

"Something like that."

The man brings me a cell phone a minute later, and I almost laugh. It's a flip phone. "It's nothing fancy," he says as he hands it to me.

"Not fancy will do." I punch in Gus's number and bring the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" Gus answers on the second ring.

"Gus! It's me. I need a ride."

"Rain! Where are you?"

I ask the kind man for an address and he quickly relays it to me.

"We're coming to get you," Gus says, and I almost sob with relief.

"Thank you."

"Hang tight. We'll be there soon."

We hang up, and I snap the phone closed. "Thank you..."

"Tom," the man answers, then, "Are you okay?"

I sink onto one of his metal porch chairs. "Have you not watched the news?"

"Can't say that I have. I don't have a TV."

"You don't have a TV and you're using a flip phone? Have I time traveled?"

He scratches at the back of his head. "I've got no use for smart phones and sitcoms. Plenty around here to keep me busy." He leans against one of the porch columns. "You in trouble, miss?"

I push sweaty hair out of my face. "You know of the Demon King?"

He nods. "I've heard of him."

"Well, he's after me, and I just escaped his house. He lives right down the road."

The man frowns and looks down the road as if he can spot Wrath. "Can't say I've ever seen him in the neighborhood."

"There's literally a castle that way." I point to the woods I just emerged from.

The man chuckles. "I'd know if there was a castle around here."

"What? What is happening? You've never seen the giant castle literally a

mile down the road?”

He just gives me a confused look.

Could it be more magic? Wrath has witch connections. Maybe the castle is shielded in some way too.

It would explain why the men from MAW were literally torturing me to get a location.

Tom waits with me on his front porch for a good half hour before a black SUV slows down out front. The chickens squawk and trundle out of the way as the SUV eases in off the road.

“I think that’s my ride,” I tell Tom.

He takes off his baseball cap. “Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, Rain. If you ever need the use of a flip phone again, you know where to find me.”

I laugh. “I hope for your sake you don’t ever see me again.”

He smiles a closed mouthed smile and looks at the cap in his hand.

“Rain!” Gus shouts.

“Gus!” I thud down the three porch steps and race across the yard, slamming into Gus’s open arms when we meet up. I drink in the smell of him. It feels like it’s been forever since I saw him. Days, weeks. Too long.

“Thank god,” he says in my ear. “I was so worried about you.” He pulls back, but keeps his hands on my arms as if afraid to let me go. Adam climbs out of the SUV’s driver’s seat, hands on his hips. He nods a hello to Tom, who is still standing at the top of the porch steps.

“You were at your condo last night and you didn’t call us? And then you fell over the balcony and the Demon King saved you?”

“Wait, how do you know all that?”

Gus frowns at me. “It’s all over the news, babe. Like, *all over* the news.”

“Have you been with the Demon King since last night?” Adam asks.

My face pinks just thinking about what I did last night, but I quickly bury the memories and leftover feelings. “I’ve actually been with” —I was about to say Wrath, but I’m acutely aware that every time I say his name, everyone around me looks like I’ve just called the pope by name— “the Demon King since I left your factory.”

Gus’s eyes go wide. “Shut the fuck up.”

Eric and Sanjay climb out to surround us like guards. I don’t miss the guns strapped to their hips.

“Where did he take you?” Adam asks.

“He—” I look over my shoulder at Tom. He’s got a shoulder leaning

against the porch column again and his baseball cap is back in place. I told Tom where Wrath's castle was. I could easily tell Adam, but...

What is stopping me?

I want revenge, don't I?

He was using me, looking to take advantage of me in any way he could.

But I can't seem to get the words out. I'm not ready to give up the Demon King. Maybe it's because I want to gut him and burn him myself, not hand him over to Adam and his team.

There's a little voice in the back of my head that says that's not even close to the reason.

"Can we just get out of here?" I ask. "I have this feeling that the Demon King can find me wherever I go. Maybe Eric can strengthen his barrier or whatever."

"Of course." Gus steers me into the backseat of the SUV. It's got two rows of seats in the back, so plenty of room for all of us to climb in.

I wave goodbye to Tom and he waves back. We need more nice people like him in the world, willing to help a stranger without a single question as to why.

As soon as the SUV is moving down the road in the opposite direction of Wrath's castle, I lean into Gus's shoulder and thread my arm through his, taking his hand in mine. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Same," he says. "Are you okay? Did the Demon King hurt you?"

Does betrayal count? Not that I plan on revealing those details to Gus. Or anyone.

"Oddly enough, no. In fact, he helped clean me up after the attack at my condo."

"What attack?"

"MAW?"

"They were there?" Sanjay asks from the backseat.

I nod. "That's who threw me over the balcony. Some guy named Ryder wanted to know where they could find the Demon King."

Adam makes a disgruntled sound deep in his throat. "Ryder Carrigan. Ex-military. Dishonorable discharge."

"You know him?" Gus asks.

Adam slows for a turn. "The guy is bad news. He's one of the founding members of MAW."

Sanjay frowns. "How come we've never heard of him?"

“Because that’s the way he likes it,” Adam says. “Did you give Ryder a location on the Demon King?”

“I didn’t have one to give.”

Adam makes eye contact with me in the rearview. “But you were there. What did this location look like?”

I shrug and look out the window, feeling caged in suddenly. “It was really big. Regal. Lots of oil paintings on the wall.”

“Really?” Sanjay leans over the seat. “That surprises me. What were the paintings of?”

“Old white men.”

She rolls her eyes. “Also doesn’t surprise me.”

They give me a reprieve from questioning after that. It takes nearly forty-five minutes to reach the factory again, and I see Adam has upped his security. There are more guards out front and a locked gate that we have to be let past.

Gus sticks by my side as we go in through one of the side doors, and I’m ready to ask for a hot shower or a hot meal or both when Adam turns to me, muscular arms crossed over his chest.

“I know you’ve been through a lot, Rain, but time is of the essence.”

Ugh. I wrinkle my nose.

“Okay.”

“Would you be willing to discuss the Demon King and everything you witnessed while with him?”

“Sure. But maybe later?”

“How about in thirty minutes?”

Gus squeezes my hand. I can’t tell if it’s him dropping a hint to say yes or if he’s just trying to be supportive.

Am I in trouble here?

“I guess I can do thirty minutes,” I say.

“Good. Eric, call Hansen. Set it up.”

“Wait, who’s Hansen? Set up what, exactly?”

Gus grimaces in an apologetic way. “So I know you’re probably tired and could use a spiked half-and-half right about now, but how do you feel about meeting the president?”

“President? Of what?”

“Of the United States?”

“Oh shit,” I say, and Gus nods.

I HAVE A MINI PANIC ATTACK JUST THINKING ABOUT THE SERIOUSNESS OF meeting the President of the United States.

In the Low house, our Madame President is holier than the pope.

Naomi Wright was only forty-seven years old when she was elected president. She has a master's degree in English from Yale University and a PhD in political science from Harvard. She founded two non-profit organizations before her twenty-fifth birthday and went on sabbatical for a year so she could photograph remote corners of the world.

My mom loves Naomi Wright and I love Naomi Wright and now I'm going to meet her.

Could this get any more insane?

But what the hell does she want with me?

I guess I can fill in the blanks, but she's going to be sorely disappointed when she realizes I don't have much to contribute to the ongoing war against Wrath.

Sanjay helps fill me up with coffee and the jolt to my veins is welcomed and needed. Eric makes me peanut butter toast, and Gus slices up an apple while I sit at one of the tables in the cafeteria.

"So what exactly happened when the Citizens showed up?" I ask.

"Darren happened," Sanjay answers, her face contorting with anger.

I look at Gus.

"Apparently Darren got greedy," he explains. "He was shooting for two birds, one stone. He gave the Demon King the info he was looking for hoping to score the big payout, while also using you as bait."

“He let the Citizens into the factory,” Eric fills in.

“That little weasel. Pitch died because of him!”

“We lost several other members of the team too,” Sanjay says.

“I’m so sorry, you guys.”

“It happens when you’re in this line of work.”

Eric and Sanjay hold up their cups of coffee in salute.

“Still, it shouldn’t have happened.” And it was partly my fault.

When will this end? I still feel like I’m living in a nightmare.

“Here,” Gus says and sets down a plastic bowl adorned with cute sloths. The apple is sliced neatly inside.

“You guys are amazing,” I say just as Eric grabs the toast from the toaster and slathers it in peanut butter.

“You’re the belle of the ball, babe.” Gus takes a giant bite out of my toast when Eric sets it down in front of me. Peanut butter globs to the corner of his mouth.

“I’m not,” I insist and dab at his mouth with my napkin. “But I’ll pretend I am for food and caffeine to be delivered straight to my face.”

Sanjay has her butt resting against the next table over, her hands resting on her belt. “So you have to tell us...what was he like?”

I think for the rest of my life, I will be constantly faced with this question.

And just the suggestion of Wrath makes my stomach knot and my insides light up. “He was as you’d expect.”

Gus snorts. “Come on. That’s a cop-out answer.”

They’re all staring at me now, waiting, ready to hang on my words. I realize that even if a person hates Wrath, they’re still fascinated by him the same way people are fascinated by true crime and car accidents.

It’s the mystery, the puzzle, the spectacle.

I think I better understand the way we consume everything about him. In our internet, social media world, beauty and power travel faster than anything else.

But I’m not used to the attention. Like I’m some prophet of God, the only one with the inside scoop. It feels unnatural, ill-fitting.

“He was...snarky,” I admit with a smile. “Super intense though too.” I suck peanut butter from my thumb. “Beyond that, he was actually...”

I trail off, the toast still clutched in my hands.

“He was what?” Gus prompts.

I was going to say *kind*, but that’s not the right word. Not when he

literally had me by the throat pressed against a wall. Not kind, but not vicious either. At least not toward me. Everyone else definitely got the bite of his teeth, metaphorically speaking.

But however I'd describe that, I can't admit it to these people, not when they've risked their lives for me. I don't want them thinking I've switched sides. Because I haven't. Wrath just got inside my head. And sleeping with him was a minor misstep. A moment of delirium.

Thank god no one knows about it.

"He was arrogant," I finish, because that's also true. The asshole is captivating, and he knows it.

Sanjay nods like she'd been expecting something like that and Gus plucks a slice of apple from my bowl. "Sometimes arrogant is sexy," he muses.

I frown at him.

"What?" He shrugs. "Confidence is hot."

He's not wrong. I'm also *not* admitting that.

They let me finish my snack in peace, and by the time I've popped the last bite of apple into my mouth, Adam is there, summoning me.

"Get ready," he says as we all catch the sound of some far-off humming.

"What is that?" I ask, because none of them seem to be on alert.

"Chopper," Eric answers and hurries for the door.

Gus smiles. "Come on." He grabs my hand and yanks me to the door, down the hallway. The *whump-whump* sound gets louder, closer. When we push through one of the access doors and spill into a parking lot, the helicopter is circling above, sending a gale force wind down around us.

I bring my arm up, shielding my eyes as the helicopter finally lands. Instinctively, I duck.

"This is insane!" I shout at Gus.

"I know!" He leans down and kisses my forehead. "Good luck!"

"You're not coming with?"

"I wish. I'm not special enough to meet the president."

"But—" *Neither am I.*

Standing beside me, Adam goes rigid and puts his hand up to his forehead in a salute just as a man dressed in full camouflage runs up to us.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sergeant Stone," the man says to Adam.

"Pleasure's all mine, Sergeant Hansen."

Once the pleasantries are over, Sergeant Hansen turns to me and holds up a weird harness he's brought with him. "I've been instructed to ask that you

wear this.”

“What is it?” I side-eye Adam. He seems just as surprised by this as I am. I’m not sure if that’s a good sign or a bad one.

“It’s witch-made,” Hansen says, and points at the dagger-like object in the center of the harness. Its end is a rounded point, and while it’s shaped like a blade, the material it’s made from is dull. “This thing apparently helps shield you from the demon. It goes here.” He taps at his sternum.

This feels sketchy all of a sudden. Wrath might have whisked me away to his castle, but he never forced me to put on a magical object. How am I to trust a stranger? Now that I know there’s more to the world than just Wrath and his dark magic, I have to be careful with who I trust and what I allow them to give me. It’s hard saying what this object will do—fry my uterus?

Now I sound like one of those conspiracy theory nutjobs.

Adam holds out his hand. “May I?”

Sergeant Hansen freely gives it, and Adam turns the center object over, inspecting it. When he looks over at me, I see nothing to warrant suspicion on his face. “I know of Sergeant Hansen,” he says. “I would trust him with my life. It makes sense they’d have a witch on their team, and it makes sense that they’d want to protect your location if you’re meeting the president.”

I really appreciate Adam’s logical side in this moment. I was getting ready to tell this soldier to fuck off, but Adam makes a lot of good points.

“If I refuse?” I say to Hansen.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Low, but I’m not allowed to transport you to the president without wearing the shield.”

I figured as much, but it was worth a shot. “All right. How do I put it on?”

Adam holds it up so the back of the dagger object is facing me. “Arms through here,” he says, and I slip into it. The harness winds around my back where two little clips lock into place.

“Good?” Adam asks.

There’s no sensation, no rush or tingling. I expected to feel something. “I guess I’m good.”

“Let’s be on our way then,” Sergeant Hansen says. “The president is ready for you.”

Adam puts his hand on the small of my back and ushers me forward.

“Are you coming?” I ask him.

“Yes.”

A rush of relief floods through me.

Adam puts his hand on top of my head and forces me to hunch as we approach the helicopter. There's nothing on the side of it to indicate it's a helicopter sent by the president. It's plain black with no markings.

Someone throws open the side door and a man appears wearing full military gear. He salutes Adam and Adam salutes back.

"Climb in, Ms. Low," the man says and offers me his hand for a boost up. I take it and he yanks me inside, depositing me into a bucket seat in the back. He straps me in like I'm a toddler in a high chair, then slides on a headset, adjusting a microphone so it curves toward my mouth.

When he speaks next, I hear him through the headphones. "These are to protect your ears while in flight and to allow us to communicate with one another. Any questions?"

"Umm..." My heart is racing and my hands are shaking and I feel like I've been tossed into a washing machine. Everything is happening so fast. "No," I answer.

Adam drops into the seat beside me and clips himself into the buckles. When his headset is in place, he turns to me and says, "Everything is gonna be all right, Rain."

"I believe that you believe that's true," I tell him as Sergeant Hansen takes the seat across from us and pulls the door closed. "But I'm doubtful."

Adam's team, along with Gus and Sanjay and Eric are gathered outside. As the helicopter leaves the ground, my stomach drops to my feet. Everyone waves goodbye like I'm off on a Caribbean vacation or something. Not on my way to meet the President of the United States because I'm immune to a demon who wants to use me to his advantage.

I take in a deep breath as the factory disappears from my sight and it's nothing but treetops and sky.

"Oh shit," I say, and everyone chuckles, their voices sounding directly in my ears. Adam reaches over and takes my hand, and I almost cry with relief. Adam isn't a guy that shows affection easily. I know this because Gus complains about it all of the time.

The fact that he's given me this kindness means more than I can ever express.

"Tuck in, ladies and gentlemen," one of the pilots says. "We should arrive at our destination in approximately forty-five minutes."

Oh god.

I'm going to meet the president in less than an hour?

What does she think I can do for her?

I guess I'm going to find out.

WE LAND IN AN OPEN FIELD JUST BEYOND A CLUSTER OF ARMY GREEN TENTS. There's lots of activity outside, men and women in black tactical gear and soldiers in camouflage bustling from here to there. I count five tents in varying sizes. One of them is open on all sides with two giant tables beneath.

On the ground, Adam helps me out of the helicopter as the engine is cut and the rotors stop spinning. We're greeted by another soldier with broad shoulders and close-cropped dark hair. He salutes Adam and Adam salutes back.

"This way," the man says and leads us out of the field to the biggest tent in the center of the cluster. He holds back the door flap for us and ushers us inside. It's quiet and artificially lit, giving it a sharp, sterile feeling.

There's a table in the center, and more tables set up along two walls of the tent where several monitors silently play news footage and surveillance video, though I can't tell what location they're scanning.

Wrath's face flashes on the news with a headline that reads, "*Demon King Breaks Treaty.*"

When the tent flap is closed behind us, Adam and our guide go rigid and salute the room.

I glance between both of them, stuck in the middle like a duck out of her pond. Am I supposed to salute? Also, what are we saluting?

Then a figure at the far table turns around, and I nearly choke on an inhale.

Naomi Wright, President of the United States, is looking at me with interest and warmth. Her dark hair is twisted up and clipped with a tortoise

shell clip. Pearls dot her ears and hang around her neck, but her trademark navy blue blazer is gone and the sleeves of her white blouse are rolled up to the elbows.

There's a moment where I consider bowing to her. I won't bow to Wrath—or at least I won't outside of the bedroom—but I would most definitely bow to the president.

I'm saved from any of the awkward second-guessing by her bright smile. "Rain," she says. "How good to meet you. Come. Sit." She gestures to the chair to her right as she takes the chair at the head of the table.

I walk across the tent and sit down, heart pounding. I lick my lips, clear my throat, and say, "I'm such a big fan of yours. Like you don't even know. In our house, you were practically a god. My mom loves your work from your year of travel. She raves about it all of the time and—"

The president laughs, and the fine lines around her eyes scrunch up as she does. "Well, thank you. That means a lot coming from a Low woman. Your mother is world-renowned. She's a talented lady."

"She might keel over when I tell her you said that."

"I would love to meet her someday."

"You'll be meeting a corpse." I hear the words only after they come out of my mouth. Such an idiot! "I mean...I took that joke too far. I'm sorry. I'm nervous."

The president reaches over and takes my hand in hers. "It's okay. You've got a lot going on these days."

I snort.

Someone brings us both a cup of coffee in mugs with the presidential seal on the side. Steam rises from the dark liquid. I like mine with oatmilk, but I'm not about to get picky in the presence of the president.

"So let's talk, Rain."

"Yes. Of course. Sure, Madame President."

"Please, call me Naomi."

I laugh nervously. I'm on a first name basis with the president and the villain.

How is this my life? Just a few days ago I was taking photographs of a bratty seven-year-old, and now I'm in some secret, remote location with the leader of the free world.

My mom once wrote an article for Click magazine, and she talked about her Disaster series where she photographed landscapes after a natural

disaster. “Anything can change in an instant,” she said. “Everything and anything. And nothing can make you feel so small, the universe so big, *as sudden change.*”

Mom was right. She was so right.

“I know everyone is interested in your connection to the Demon King,” Naomi says.

“I wouldn’t call it a connection.”

She continues on, “But I’m more interested in who you are.”

I turn the coffee mug on the table, staring at the ripples in the liquid. “I’m nobody, really. I don’t know why I escaped that confrontation with Wr—the Demon King. I didn’t do anything to get away. I swear it.”

Naomi smiles, but it’s a closed mouthed smile, and I get the feeling she’s already got her own feelings and theories on this.

“Would you mind meeting a friend of mine?” she asks.

I look around the room. There are at least a dozen people in here. “Sure.”

Naomi gestures with two fingers and the tent flap opens again, letting in stark daylight. A woman walks in. I only catch her silhouette at first and the shiny rings on her left hand. When the tent flap closes again and the contrast in light evens out, I finally get a good look at her face and have to bury a gasp.

There are three scars running from her forehead down the right side of her face. Three even scars that look distinctly like claw marks. They’re healed now, the skin puckered white, but looking at her still makes me want to cringe just imagining the pain she must have gone through while she healed.

“Zievata,” the woman says and gives a slight bow. When she comes back up, her wide, puffy lips are pursed in an expression of mild annoyance like she doesn’t want to be here, like she has much better things to do.

“Rain, this is Sirene,” the president says. “She’s a witch.”

A week ago, I had no idea witches existed, and now I’ve met three in a span of twenty-four hours. I guess when you get pulled into a world of the supernatural, you’re bound to start seeing more of it. Like when you decide you want to buy a red car—suddenly there are red cars everywhere.

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

Sirene nods at me, but stays at the end of the table, one hand wrapped around the other wrist.

“Sirene isn’t just any witch,” Naomi says. “She’s familiar with Wrath.”

I look at her again with new eyes. “Really? In what way?”

Did they sleep together too? She's extremely beautiful with big, bright eyes and a slight build. Much more attractive than I am, if I'm honest. The thought of her with Wrath sends a streak of jealousy through me. I don't want to share space with another woman who has known him that way.

I want to be the only one.

Goddammit. No. That's not what I want. I don't own him. And he doesn't own me.

It's not like we're exclusive boyfriend and girlfriend. Just the thought of that makes me feel stupid and weak.

"I come from Alius," Sirene answers. "A long time ago."

"Whoa. Seriously? So how does it work? How do you get here? Is there really a gate? Some mystical portal between worlds?"

Sirene grumbles low in the back of her throat. She doesn't answer me.

"I've asked Sirene here to see if she can read any magic on you," Naomi says. "It might help inform us of why you're immune to Wrath and why he now wants you."

My heart thumps hard in my chest. Up until this moment, everyone has suggested there might be more to me than first meets the eye. Magic. Special immunity. Even something inherited through my father.

I've been avoiding thinking about it as much as possible and still failed spectacularly at it. There's a nagging feeling in the back of my mind, a shadow that's screaming at me that if I look at it more closely, I'll realize everything I thought I knew about myself is wrong.

Sirene comes over to me and puts her right hand, palm up, on the table. "Give me your hand," she says.

I feel like I'm being shoved down the plank, the cold, choppy water promising my demise.

Everyone is silent and staring at me, including the President of the United States.

If I bolt, will they let me go? Doubtful. I'm like a rogue missile. They're either going to figure out how to guide me or shoot me out of the sky regardless of what I want.

As much as I respect Naomi Wright, I'm starting to worry about my own autonomy now that I'm on everyone's radar.

Whatever answers Sirene gives us, I'm worried about the lasting consequences.

I reach over and slip my hand into hers. Her cold fingers curl around me,

sharp, pointed nails biting into flesh. She pins her green eyes on me and on an intake of breath, they flash brighter with magic.

I jerk, caught off guard, but her grip is strong.

The soldiers around the room tense up, ready for what, I'm not sure. Are they here to protect me or protect against me?

Goosebumps rise on my arms as the air grows charged.

My heart thumps harder as my stomach swims.

What if she finds something? What if...

She pulls away suddenly and drops my hand unceremoniously.

"Well?" Naomi asks.

I'm worried I won't hear Sirene's answer over the pounding of blood in my ears, so I focus on her mouth.

"I didn't sense any magic."

I practically melt into the chair, I'm so damn relieved. "Thank god," I say to the ceiling and then scrub my hands over my face.

It's like I've been running a marathon and have just now crossed the finish line. I can relax. I can stop worrying and wondering.

"Nothing?" Naomi asks, her brow furrowed.

"No. Nothing." The silver rings on Sirene's fingers flash as she pulls her hand back. "The girl is a red herring."

"Hey!" I say, and then, "What?"

"You know, something that is misleading or a distraction."

"It's not like I meant for this to happen."

"The light in the initial video was probably just a camera malfunction," Sirene says and snaps her fingers at one of the men behind her. "Can I have a cup of coffee?"

"So you're telling me" —Naomi leans into the table— "that Wrath's interest in Rain is a mistake? That he's been duped?"

I don't like how they keep insinuating that I'm playing some kind of game. I didn't want this.

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Sirene answers.

A murmur goes through the room as people start whispering to one another.

"Okay," Naomi says, her gaze unfocused. "Okay, so..." She pushes away from the table and starts to pace back and forth in the tent.

I'm not special.

I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This is what I wanted, isn't it?

So why does it feel like I've been gutted? Why does it feel like something has been ripped from my body?

"Madame President," a man in full military uniform says, "we could still use her to our advantage."

"I'm not a chess piece," I say, and Sirene looks at me down the straight line of her nose.

"What are you suggesting, General Briggs?" Naomi asks.

"He's suggesting you use her as bait," Sirene answers.

"That didn't exactly turn out well the last time," I say to Adam, but no one seems to care what my opinion is.

Naomi holds up her hand, as if she's a teacher trying to silence a rowdy student, but this is my life we're talking about.

"He can't be killed," I say. "Using me as bait would be pointless."

"He *can* be killed," Sirene says.

"He...what?" The churning of my stomach turns to knots, and suddenly I'm sick with dread. "How?"

"Magic. And a blade."

I swallow hard. "If you already know that, then you don't need me."

"We can't get close, Ms. Low," General Briggs says. "But perhaps you could."

I lick my lips, but my tongue is suddenly dry, raw. "Are you saying...you want me to kill him?"

Holy shit. They're insane. And I'm in fucking trouble.

"I can't do that."

"That's probably true," Sirene says.

"Rain," Naomi starts, but I no longer care that I'm sitting beside the President of the United States. Not when they're suggesting I risk my own life against Wrath, no less.

"I'm not doing this." I shove the chair back, and several of the soldiers shift, blocking the president from me. Adam comes up behind me and puts a hand on my shoulder, grounding me, reminding me of who I am and where I am.

"It's okay," he says beneath his breath.

Naomi tells the soldiers to stand down and they fall back. "Rain, can we take a walk?"

I look at Adam over my shoulder. "I'll come with you," he says, and

knowing he'll be there, I nod.

The tent flap is pulled open for us and Naomi ducks out first. The air is cool for the middle of the summer, and I wonder if there's rain on the horizon. I'm not even sure where we are, or what state we're in, and even if I did, I haven't checked the weather in a while. I used to check it almost every day to prepare for photo sessions.

So much of my normal life has completely fallen by the wayside. In fact, I still have photos to finish processing from my session before the last.

Naomi leads us away from the tents and down a dirt road. There's a strip of grass and weeds down the center of it, and we keep that between us as we walk.

"You're in an impossible situation, Rain," Naomi says. "And I don't envy you."

Several soldiers follow us, but they keep their distance. Adam is at least ten paces behind us.

"I know what we're asking of you seems not only dangerous, but outlandish, *impossible*."

I fold my arms over my chest. "I'm a photographer, and you're asking me to kill someone."

"Not someone." She tips her head to look at me. "A bad guy. An infiltrator. A *demon*." She laughs to herself. "When I ran for president, I thought I understood our enemies. Terrorism. Foreign dictators. Political opponents. I had no clue what I was getting myself into."

"I suppose it's made worse by the internet turning Wrath into a celebrity."

She slides her hands into the pockets of her navy blue chinos. "I'm not surprised by it. The mundane things, the things that matter like green energy and infrastructure, they aren't pretty."

Pretty like Wrath. Not just pretty—*otherworldly gorgeous. A work of art.*

"Are you worried at all about where he came from? This Alius? Do you know about it? How did you even find Sirene?"

Naomi keeps her gaze trained straight ahead. "I wish I could tell you, but it's classified."

That's another sentence I never thought I'd hear someone utter within earshot.

"Someone that works for Wrath," I start, "she suggested there's more going on. I don't know what, but I got the impression that Wrath might just be the beginning."

Naomi nods. “We’ve had to cover a lot of ground in a very short amount of time, but we’re learning, thanks to people like Sirene. Right now we’re working to identify others like her who are magical or who have knowledge. It’s a work in progress, of course, but in the meantime, we need to deal with Wrath before he gets too far ahead of us.”

Deal with him.

Kill him.

I huff out a breath and continue walking. I don’t know how long this dirt road is, but I have half a mind to follow it to the end. Maybe leave my problems behind and see what new life I can find at the other end.

“Is there more you know about Wrath?” I ask. I think she knows I’m looking for an excuse, any excuse to follow through with their request.

I know he’s the villain. I know he’s done bad things, killed people, but even knowing that, the thought of ending him just makes me want to...*break*.

“We think he’s building an army,” Naomi answers. “And he’s planning something big.”

“How do you know?”

“We have surveillance on him,” she answers. “He’s been busy.”

“I don’t think he’s building an army. I mean...” I trail off as a memory jars my train of thought. When I was listening at the bedroom door, Arthur and Wrath said something about soldiers. Something about them being ready within a week.

Oh crap. If Wrath stages a bigger confrontation, if it’s more than just him facing off against the military, he really could take over the country. Put a throne at the White House and make us all bow at his feet.

“Do you know how to find him again?” Naomi asks.

I look across the field as the breeze shifts and the wildflowers sway. That field would make a perfect spot for a family session. Several days ago, I hated my job, and now I long to have the camera back in my hand if only to feel normal again.

I want things to be normal again. I want to stop worrying about magic and demons.

“I don’t think I’d have to go to him,” I answer. “I think he’d come to me.”

“Really?”

I nod. “When I was attacked at my condo, Wrath showed up to save me. And when I stayed at my friend Harper’s, he found me there too. I think he can find me wherever I am. Somehow.”

“I suppose it’s a good thing you’re wearing the harness Sirene made.”

I run a finger under one of the straps. “I suppose so.”

We keep walking.

“So this blade...” I start. “How sure are you that it’ll work?”

“The blade was crafted with Sirene’s help,” Naomi explains. “She assures us it’ll kill Wrath.”

“Easily? Quickly?”

“I believe so, yes. The main thing will be wounding him so he’s weakened. Then my team will come in to mop up.”

Mop up. Like it’s a ketchup spill at a diner.

“What if he figures me out? What if he tries to possess me?” I look over at her. “What if I miss?”

“I have faith you won’t.”

Wrath’s words come back to me. *She stays until I figure out how to use her to my advantage.*

He might not have been plotting my murder, but it wasn’t like he cared what happened to me in the long run.

Wrath is merciless. Powerful. Domineering.

I have no doubt that if the roles were reversed, he’d take me out without a second thought.

For a brief moment, I thought maybe he did care about me in some weird, twisted way, but now I realize his heart is dead—if he has one at all. He’s a monster from another world and he’s on a mission. He was planning to use me however he could, while fucking me to make me pliant. Because he thinks I’m just a weak, mindless girl who worships him. *A dieva.*

The fire reignites in the hollows between my ribs, and I drop my arms, hands tightening into fists.

Wrath wants to use me. The general of the fucking Army wants to use me.

But what do I want?

I don’t want to worry about fanatics chasing me or trying to kill me.

I don’t want to worry about a sinfully sexy demon appearing in my bedroom to—

I want him to be gone. But he’s never going to let me go. He thinks he can use me, and no matter what I say or do, he’s not going to believe that I’m no one special.

Which means, if I want my old life back, I have to fight.

I have to face off with the villain.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay?” Naomi echoes.

I nod. “I’ll do it.”

She comes to a stop and faces me. “Rain, I don’t think you know just how much your country needs you right now, and how grateful it is to have you.”

It feels like a bullshit line. “I just hope I don’t screw it up.”

“Don’t worry.” She reaches over to tenderly squeeze my arm. “We’ll have your back the entire time.”

WE RETURN TO THE CLUSTER OF TENTS BUT GO INSIDE A SECONDARY TENT. This one is mostly empty save for a few chairs, a table, a mirror, and a metal clothing rack. There's a single shirt hanging from it.

Two hard-shell briefcases are open on the table, revealing their contents. It looks like a bunch of surveillance equipment.

Naomi sits in one of the chairs while Sergeant Hansen preps the equipment. Sirene is there too, but she stands beside the mirror, one arm folded over her middle, the other hand curled along her jaw, eyes assessing me.

"We'll put a wire on you," Naomi explains, "so that our team can step in should you need it."

Blood rushes to my cheeks. I hope Wrath keeps it PG. I hope he doesn't mention what we did.

"Sirene?" Naomi prompts.

Sirene waves her hand in the air and mutters something beneath her breath.

"Good?" Naomi asks, and Sirene nods. "You can go ahead and remove the harness, Sergeant Hansen."

He comes around behind me and unclips it, and the harness slides off my arms.

"Is this okay?" I ask before removing it entirely.

"Sirene has put up a shield around us," Naomi says. "So the harness is redundant."

Hansen sets it on the table, then picks up a tiny object from one of the

briefcases. “This is a microphone,” he says and then goes to the hanging shirt. “It’ll be threaded through here.” He opens one of the ruffles along the collar and threads the microphone into place. It’s certainly more discreet than what I pictured.

When he’s done, Hansen pulls the hanger from the shirt and holds it up before me. They all stare at me, waiting.

I guess I’m stripping in front of the President of the United States. No biggie.

I pull my t-shirt off and toss it to the table. Hansen opens the collar for me so I can stick my head through, then my arms. He checks the microphone again before flicking on a device in the briefcase. A screen embedded in the case’s shell lights up.

“Testing one, two, three,” he says, and the screen dances with the audio.

“We good?” Naomi says.

Hansen nods. “We’re good. Here, Rain.” He holds up the harness once again. I guess my Sirene barrier doesn’t travel with me. Pity. The harness is already feeling like a collar.

The president stands and makes her way to the door. “Now let’s go get that blade.”



AS WE CROSS THE CLEARING, I CATCH A SHIFT OF SHADOWS OUT OF THE corner of my eye.

My heart leaps to my throat, and I let out a strangled cry.

Everyone is immediately on alert.

“What is it?” one of the soldiers asks as he trains his gun on the surrounding woods.

“I...” I swallow the lump rising in my throat. There’s nothing there. “Sorry. I thought I saw shadows.”

“Scan the perimeter,” the guy says, and the soldiers fan out.

“Sorry,” I say to the president. “I’m just—”

“Where are you, *dieva*?”

His voice comes to me like a fever dream.

I dance to the side as if he’s behind me. There’s no one there.

“Rain?” the president says.

There's an itch between my shoulder blades, right where my birthmark lies.

"When I find you, *dieva*," Wrath says, "I'm going to make you pay for this."

"Fuck," I say and leap to the side again.

"What's happening?" Naomi asks.

Sirene steps in front of me and snaps her fingers in my face. "Focus."

"What? I'm trying...I keep hearing him."

"Has he found her location?" Naomi asks as her secret service agents tighten in around her.

"I don't think so," Sirene answers, narrowing her eyes, "but I think there's a connection open between them."

"How?" I ask, voice shaking.

Sirene purses her mouth. She doesn't answer.

That might explain why I saw Wrath in the factory my first night there. He came to me then too, but was nowhere to be found after.

"He's trying to find me," I decide, and Sirene nods.

I rake my teeth over my lip as the soldiers return to us. "All clear," one of them says.

"Let's get this going," I say. "The sooner he's gone..."

"The sooner he's gone the better," Naomi finishes. "Come."



WE GO TO THE TENT THAT'S OPEN ON THREE SIDES. ADAM IS THERE WITH THE general and another man that is vaguely familiar. They're standing around a table.

When we approach, they step back, and I get a better look at the third man. He's sun-kissed, hair coiffed, and body toned. His black suit probably cost more than my condo, and when he smiles at me, it's like looking into the sun.

It takes me another second to pinpoint him. It's Harper's dad, Niles Caldwell.

"Rain," he says and offers me his hand. We shake. His grip is firm and energetic. "It's nice to see you again. I wish it was under different circumstances."

“Likewise,” I answer, because it’s the polite thing to do. I’ve never liked Mr. Caldwell, even though I barely know him. He’s just always rubbed me the wrong way. “I didn’t think I’d be seeing you here.”

He slides his hands into the pockets of his expensive trousers. “I’ve been by Naomi’s side since this demon infiltrated our country.” His expression darkens. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“Take a look at this, Rain,” Adam says and nods at the table.

I find another rectangular hard-shell case open in the center with a blade nestled in thick, gray foam inside. The dagger isn’t as big as I thought it’d be. More of a steak knife.

“This is it?” I ask.

General Briggs nods and gently pulls the weapon from its foam nest. The blade is made of some kind of metal that’s nearly black so even as he turns it this way and that, the blade barely shines in the light.

“You’ll wear a sheath on your forearm,” Briggs says, “so it’ll be easy to access the weapon when you’re close enough to the demon.”

My stomach churns just thinking about it. “What if he finds the blade before I get to it?”

“Don’t let him touch you,” Briggs says, leveling his hooded gaze at me, as if he’s insinuating that I’m some simpering woman who can barely control herself around Wrath.

Well, I did end up in his bed.

But no. That was a lapse in judgment.

“Give me your arm,” Briggs says.

I hold it out and shove up the sleeve of the borrowed blouse. Briggs straps a black nylon sheath to my forearm, then slides the blade carefully inside. When he tugs the sleeve back down, the blade and the sheath all but disappear.

Clearly they chose this blouse for this reason, to hide all of the things we’ll use against Wrath.

Why do I suddenly feel a thread of shame? Like I’m betraying him?

I don’t like it. Maybe he really has messed with my head, like some kind of twisted Stockholm Syndrome.

“Now what?” I ask.

“Now you wait while we prepare and get into position.” Briggs gives a quick nod to Hansen, who hurries away. “Care to join us?” he says to Adam.

“If you’ll have me,” Adam answers.

“We can always use more men like you, Sergeant Stone. Suit up.”

Adam starts moving away, but I grab him by the arm. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

He eyes Briggs and Naomi over my shoulder, almost like he’s waiting for permission. He must get it, because he says, “Of course,” and leads me away from the tent, but not far enough away that we’re out of sight.

My birthmark itches again, and Wrath’s voice sounds in my head. “Oh the things I’ll do to you, *dieva*.”

Son of a bitch.

Hands on his hips, Adam says, “What’s up?” as I fidget in front of him, trying to shove away the demon in my head.

“Can you like...I don’t know...talk me off the ledge? Because I’m sorta starting to freak out, and usually it’s Gus that I go to when I need someone, and he’s clearly not here and—”

Adam smiles, and I see the light of it in his eyes. “Gus is good at alleviating stress and anxiety.”

“I wish he was here right now. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“It’s just...I didn’t sign up for this, you know? I’m no killer.”

“But Wrath is.” All of the joy is gone from Adam’s face. The soldier with a mission is back and he has a really good point.

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Adam puts his hands on my shoulders and gives me a light squeeze. “You can do this, Rain.” For someone usually so detached and emotionless, the conviction in Adam’s voice almost catches me off guard. He believes in me. Adam, badass soldier, leader of a demon resistance, believes in me.

So why don’t I believe in myself?

“I’ll be there if you need help,” Adam goes on. “So will Sergeant Hansen and several other well qualified soldiers.”

“Adam,” I say, almost like a whine.

“Yes?” he says.

There are so many things I want to say but don’t know how.

I slept with Wrath. He saved me. Multiple times. I feel an odd sort of connection with him.

And this...this doesn’t feel right, but I don’t know why and I don’t know how to stop it, and even if I admitted any of that, Adam would never look at me the same again, and while we’re not exactly best friends, I want his

respect.

Adam is a good guy. I see that now. And my best friend is lucky to have him.

I just want this to be over so everything can go back to normal.

“Rain?” Adam says, frowning.

“It’s nothing. Just nerves, ya know?”

He gives me a quick nod but the frown stays. “How about some practical advice.”

“I’d love some.”

He takes my hand and guides it to the bottom of his rib cage. “Feel this?”

“Yeah.”

“When you’re ready to take the shot, aim up from here. Up beneath the rib cage and straight through the heart. Okay? It’s unlikely you can get through the ribs, so don’t stab *at* the heart.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

He pulls away. “You’ve got this, Rain. You’re about to save the world.”

I snort. “You better throw me a party. I want karaoke and party hats.”

He laughs as he jogs away, leaving me alone beside the tents, a magical dagger strapped to my forearm, and a whole lot of doubt churning in my gut.



I SPEND THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON PACING AROUND THE FIELD. I DON’T know how long it takes to get a team of soldiers ready, but apparently several hours because by the time we pile into several black SUVs, the daylight is fading beneath the tree line.

We take the dirt road out of the hidden location and bump along. The president, along with Senator Caldwell, has already been whisked away on the helicopter, with plans to listen in on the audio from some remote location.

My heart won’t stop hammering in my chest.

My knee jiggles as we drive, and I can’t stop tugging at the sleeve of my blouse.

Sirene sits next to me. Adam is in the passenger seat with Sergeant Hansen behind the wheel. This is all happening so fast.

“So,” I say to Sirene, trying to fill the awkward silence, “you’re from that other world? *Alius?*”

She turns to look at me but says nothing.

I bury a shiver. Sirene makes me squeamish. She's intimidating as hell. Is it a witch thing? Maybe knowing they can do magic makes them scarier? Kat was intimidating too, but not like this.

"How long have you been here?" I try instead.

"A long time," Sirene answers.

"How did you get here?"

"A traveler."

"What's that?"

"A person who travels."

I grimace, feeling Sirene's weariness chafing. I may be stubborn, and sometimes yes, a bit standoffish, but generally speaking, I'm a likeable person. And Sirene clearly does not like me.

"How long have you been working for the government?"

"A long time," she says again.

"Ooookay," I say. "Do they not teach you conversation skills in Alius?"

She looks at me again, and I swear her eyes flash. "In my world, they teach you worthwhile skills, like how to cut out tongues of pretty little girls."

I snort. "*Dieva.*"

She goes rigid beside me. "What did you say?"

"*Dieva*? Am I pronouncing that wrong?"

"Where did you hear that?"

She turns in her seat, back pressed against the car door, eyes narrowed.

"It's what Wrath calls me. Why? He said it means 'little girl.'"

"That's not what it means."

I sense Adam and Hansen's interest piquing.

"Okay, so what does it mean?"

She inhales through her nose, nostrils flaring before she answers, "It's a term that denotes ownership over something."

I grumble. "He was lying to me? Of course he was. I shouldn't be surprised. What a prick." I shake my head and brush it off, but Sirene is still staring at me. "What?"

"I don't think you understand, *little girl.*"

"Okay, then *make* me understand."

"In Alius, calling *dieva* means you've claimed someone as yours. It is an unbreakable oath. It means that when a person has called *dieva*, they will do anything in their power to protect what is theirs."

Adam shifts in his seat, tilting his head our way.

“In Alius, lesser men have gone to war over *dieva*,” Sirene says.

“Lesser men?”

“In all of my years, I have never seen Wrath or any of the royal line call *dieva*.” There’s a flash of emotion on her face, something that looks an awful lot like jealousy. “They’ve never wanted something that badly.”

A shiver races down my spine, and I swallow hard around a lump quickly growing in my throat. There are firecrackers in my veins and fizz in my lungs.

Wrath has claimed me as *his*.

The fizzing warmth sinks between my legs, and I get a flash of Wrath fucking me, of him filling me up, of him taking a fistful of my hair—

I clench my teeth as I hear the echo of his voice in my head. *Oh dieva, this changes everything.*

IT TAKES US NEARLY TWO HOURS TO RETURN TO NORTON HARBOR BY CAR, and by then, it's well after dark. As usual, Norton is lit up and partying despite the fact that it's a Sunday night. Hansen skirts around downtown Norton and starts heading south. We finally pull over along the curb on the edge of town. There are no houses way out here, only fields and woods.

"Here?" I ask.

The whole point of this is to face off with Wrath, but this feels like the wrong place for it.

"You'll get out and walk from here," Hansen instructs. "Head toward Riverside Park."

Riverside Park. I almost laugh. It was just a few days ago that I was doing a family session there, chasing Josiah the demon child.

Now I'm facing off with a bigger demon.

"So when I get to Riverside, then what?"

Hansen eyes me in the rearview mirror. "Go to the fountain and start walking south and take off your harness. Be sure to toss it into the bushes, somewhere out of sight. We'll retrieve it later. Once the harness is off, keep walking. We'll track you as you progress through the park. Depending on how long it takes the demon to come to you, if you make it to the end of Riverside, circle back, but don't go north of the fountain. Understood?"

I nod. "And when he comes?"

"Say whatever you need to say to get close," Hansen says.

"Then use the dagger the way I showed you," Adam adds.

He says it like it'll be easy.

“Okay. So...should I get out now?”

They’re all looking at me, half their faces highlighted by the soft amber glow of the dashboard, the other half hidden in shadow.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Adam says.

I give one quick nod, inhale deeply, and then open the door.

The sooner I get this over with, the sooner I can go back to my normal life. Whatever that is now.



RIVERSIDE IS USUALLY DEAD THIS TIME OF NIGHT. MOST TOURISTS STICK TO downtown and Harbor Day Park alongside the lake. Riverside is for kids and picnics and family photo sessions. It has the most gorgeous fields that border federal land on the south side of the park. I’ve done countless photo sessions here.

I enter the park by the row of sculpted hedges and make my way to the fountain, heart racing the entire way. Even though I’m still wearing the harness, I feel exposed, vulnerable, and if I’m honest, excited.

Not because I’m supposed to stab Wrath, but because—

He claimed me.

I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about that. Probably not like I’m on cloud nine.

Probably not like I’ve been given a crown.

But...it probably just means he sees me as property to do with as he pleases. I should have asked Sirene for more details, but I was already embarrassed by the topic in front of Adam. I don’t want him thinking I’ve jumped ship.

Have I?

My hands shake at my sides as the fountain comes into sight. There’s a lamppost just beyond it casting a halo of light. Spray from the water glitters in the air.

It’s getting harder to breathe, my heart is beating so fast.

When the plain cement footpath gives way to the designed cobblestone of the fountain pad, my hands turn slick with sweat. The government wouldn’t send me into the middle of a fight with a defunct weapon, would they?

This has to work.

And the thought of it working makes me want to vomit.
If I manage to pierce his flesh, send the blade to his heart...
He'll be gone.

I nearly sob thinking about it.

Once I pass the fountain and head south as instructed, I pull my arms out of the harness and twist it around, unclipping it. When I hit the next footpath and the foliage crowds in around me, I toss the harness to the underbrush.

Blood rushes to my ears. My heart is beating so hard, I can feel it in my tongue.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

What am I going to say if he shows up?

Oh the things I'll do to you, dieva.

I ran from him—again. Is he going to be pissed? Maybe I'll—

The hair lifts on the nape of my neck. I get the distinct feeling a spider is crawling over my back.

I still in the middle of the footpath.

He's here.

The Demon King has come for me.

“WHY DO YOU KEEP RUNNING FROM ME, *DIEVA*?”

As soon as his quiet, smoky voice finds me in the semi-darkness, goosebumps pop on my skin and a shiver rolls down my spine.

But there’s a surge of adrenaline, too, that leaves me a little giddy.

Being around Wrath is like being caught in canyon rapids. It’s a rush of exhilaration and fear. And maybe like with white water rafting, being with Wrath is like toeing the very thin line between living and dying.

“You keep giving me reasons to run,” I say, my back still to him.

My heart is thudding in my chest and in my head. If I turn around now, he’s going to see my hands shaking.

Will he be able to make out the shape of the dagger strapped to my forearm?

The air snaps and I suck in a breath, knowing what’s coming.

Wrath reappears in front of me shrouded in black mist. “What reason did you have this time?” he asks with a thread of sarcasm, as if no reason could ever be good enough.

“You’ve been using me.” If I latch on to that, embrace the anger, then I can do what I need to do.

If I become the rage, maybe I can ignore the desire.

“How so, *dieva*?” He takes a step. “You seemed happy to be in my bed.”

Fucking hell. Everyone on the comm system now knows I screwed the Demon King. Embarrassment flares in my cheeks. Thank god for the darkness.

Does Wrath know they’re listening? I have the distinct feeling he just

moved a chess piece on the game board, a move that has blocked me in.

I decide dodging is better than confronting it. “What are you even doing here? What do you want with me?”

“Come with me, and I’ll tell you.”

I snort. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” I put as much conviction in my voice as I can, just so Adam and the rest of the team know I’m serious.

I haven’t fallen for the dark power of the Demon King.

I’m not under his spell.

Wrath takes another step, and a ray of moonlight illuminates half his face. Every time I look at him, his beauty catches me off guard. Every. Single. Time.

Focus.

“Why side with them?” he asks.

The way he lifts his chin makes me think he knows Adam and Sergeant Hansen and the rest are somewhere in the surrounding woods.

“Why side with you?”

He comes closer still. There’s now three feet between us. He’s close enough to touch if I reached out with my hand, but maybe not close enough to stab through the heart.

“I don’t care about your power,” I say, trying to distract him.

“You think this is about power?”

“Isn’t it?”

He takes a step to the left, keeping the same distance between us. His head is bowed, the moonlight rimming him in silver. “No, *dieva*,” he says. “This is a tale as old as time.”

I lick my lips. “What do you mean?”

“It’s a story of revenge.”

“I don’t understand.” He’s circling me now, and I follow his movements. I don’t want him at my back.

“And I don’t trust you enough to tell you,” he answers.

That catches me off guard. I’m a trustworthy person, goddammit. I don’t tell secrets. I don’t stab people in the back.

Well...except for Wrath apparently. Maybe he’s not so far off.

“I thought you were looking for something?” I ask.

“I am.”

“And have you found it?”

He stops, and I stop with him. He lifts his head and looks over at me

through a lock of hair that's fallen over his forehead. "I think I have, yes."

I get the distinct impression he means me.

"I don't have magic," I blurt. "I'm not who you think I am."

He frowns.

"Sirene tested me," I say.

His expression darkens, and his eyes dart to the woods. "You saw Sirene? Is she here?"

So she wasn't lying about knowing Wrath.

"Why would she be here?" I ask.

Wrath turns back to me, eyes narrowed. "You've brought friends with you, *dieva*. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

A breath stutters up my throat as the darkness kicks up around him like a storm cloud blotting out the moonlight.

The night goes silent and still like a jungle when a predator stalks through.

All of the men and women that are part of Naomi's team might be highly trained soldiers, but I think they know, whether consciously or subconsciously, that here, now, next to the Demon King, they are very clearly prey.

I backpedal when the darkness takes on the shape of men.

The *narrow*.

The shadows solidify, and the enslaved soldiers dart across the field like specters from a nightmare.

Grown men, trained to kill, scream in the night.

Bullets fly and the gunfire flashes in the dark.

Wrath charges me, his face shifting to the sharp monster he hides beneath that beauty. And when his eyes flare red with a predatory glow, I can't help but scream.

WHEN IT WAS JUST ME AND WRATH, IT WAS EASY TO FORGET ABOUT THE monsters he controlled, about the dark magic he possessed, and the monster he can become.

He manipulated me into believing maybe he wasn't as bad as I first thought.

I grew complacent, lulled by the beauty and the power.

But now as he bears down on me, I can't deny it any longer.

Wrath is the villain.

And I am his enemy.

The darkness sharpens around him as I reach for the blade hidden in my sleeve. The hilt is easy to find beneath the gauzy material, and I wrap my hand around it, sliding it from its sheath. The black metal barely glints. It's a weapon as dark as Wrath.

More gunfire sounds from the woods, and I have a split second to wonder about stray bullets when Wrath slams into me.

The darkness swallows me up.

I can't let him win.

Tightening my hold on the blade, I angle it between us and shove up beneath his rib cage just like Adam taught me.

Wrath roars as something hot and wet runs down my arm, soaking the material of my borrowed blouse.

There's a moment of triumph—the blade worked, I did what no one else could do—and then—

Blinding white pain.

Pain that lances through me like a thousand needles burns at my nerve endings like a wick lit by a match.

I scream.

I scream and scream and scream.

Wrath grabs hold of me because I'm falling, falling—

“Rain!” he shouts. His darkness caresses my skin and the pain ebbs to something manageable.

Tears blur my vision as I look up at him. “What’s happening?” I pant. I can’t catch my breath. I can’t seem to fill my lungs and everything aches.

“I don’t know,” he answers, his arm held tight beneath his ribs. He’s still bleeding, but the knife is gone.

I hear movement in the brush, and then several glowing red dots appear on Wrath’s chest.

“Fire!” someone yells.

Wrath grits his teeth and the air snaps as he disappears. Bullets *pop-pop* through the night.

“Wait!” I scurry up but keep my head down. “Stop!”

Pop.

A bullet hits me in the shoulder, throwing me back. Blood soaks through my shirt.

I’ve been shot. Fuck, I’ve been shot!

I clutch at the wound as if I can keep the blood from gushing out of me. The pain comes several seconds later and throbs through my shoulder and down across my chest. I have to grit my teeth from crying out.

Wrath reappears next to me, paler than normal and coughing up blood.

Holy shit.

There’s a matching bullet wound in his shoulder.

I look down at my torso at where the initial pain radiated from and see blood slowly staining my shirt. I quickly yank the hem back to reveal a gaping stab wound right beneath my rib cage.

Holy fucking shit.

“Stop shooting!” I yell as Wrath collapses on me. “I’m wounded! We’re somehow connected!”

The soldiers go quiet.

My breath wheezes out past wet lips as Wrath’s weight falls on me.

“Rain,” he says, voice hoarse.

“No,” I say to him. “Don’t *Rain* me. You’re the bad guy here!”

“Rain,” he says again, teeth clenched now as he wraps his bloody hand around my wrist.

“What?”

A dozen red dots appear on my chest.

Fuck.

“Get down,” Wrath grits out.

Oh god. This can’t be happening.

“Please!” I cry out.

“Stop firing!” Adam yells.

But Adam doesn’t control this team, and no one listens to his order.

The *pop-pop* of bullets fills the night.

I’m the enemy now.

They think I’m the enemy.

I’m going to die. I’m going to die standing next to the Demon King, and the entire world is going to think I was somehow his accomplice, and Gus and my mom—

No.

No. Fuck that.

How dare they turn on me!

I’m seething. Filled with fire. Boiling with rage.

I may not be a heroine, but I’m not the villain’s pawn either.

A sharp breeze cuts through the field and a roaring sound fills my head.

My hair flies around my face.

Bright red light flashes in the night and fire kicks up, eating away at the grass, spreading out like a ripple in a lake, consuming everything in front of it. Voices shout as the soldiers run.

Smoke plumes in the air, embers raining down around us.

And it isn’t until Wrath shouts my name that I realize...

I’m floating.

Panic cuts through me, and I scabble at the air. Wrath grabs hold of my arm and yanks me down into his grip.

“We have to go,” he yells as the roar of the fire builds, flames licking up the surrounding tree trunks.

“But—”

“Rain,” he says, pinning me with his gaze, “they will kill you.”

The reality of it finally seeps in and tears burn in my eyes. “No,” I say.

“Yes.”

He's right. He's fucking right.

They were going to kill me before the fire, before Wrath...was that Wrath? I've never seen him use that power before and—

What is happening? My head is pounding and I'm so cold, I'm shivering.

"Come with me," Wrath says as he grits his teeth. There's violence painted across his face in splatters of blood and murder in his eyes. "*Dieva.*"

I look around the clearing. It's only a matter of time until they put the fire out, until someone gets a shot lined up and...they want Wrath dead. And all they have to do to take him out now is kill me.

They wanted to find his weakness, and now they've got it.

My world shifts, and I lose my balance. Wrath winds an arm around my waist.

"Come with me," he says again.

The way he looks at me, it's with panic and hope and fear and *desire*.

No one has been able to get to him until now.

No one other than me has been able to get beneath his skin.

And I think he's afraid. But more than that, I think he's a little bit captivated too.

It's in this moment that I realize I've become an enigma to him, just as much as he is for me.

In some weird, twisted way, we're equals.

And now I can't walk away. I can't run away.

But still...he's giving me a choice.

And I already know what the answer is.

"Okay."

The Demon King tightens his hold on me as the air cracks open and he pulls us away.

WE CRASH TO THE GROUND IN THE ALLEY WHERE WE FIRST MET.

Everything is coming full circle, apparently.

“What’s wrong?” I ask when Wrath falls to his knees. “We have to get back to your house. We’ll be spotted here.”

It’s only a matter of time until someone recognizes Wrath, or hell, me, and word spreads. I have no doubt Naomi and her team can get more soldiers here within minutes.

“I can’t,” Wrath grits out. Pain is etched around his eyes.

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve been stabbed, *dieva*,” he says sharply. “And shot, apparently.”

“Well, so have I. Apparently. But you don’t see me collapsing to the ground.”

He looks up at me, eyes narrowed, face sharpening. The monster is throbbing in the bright red of his irises, but the blackness that usually trails off of him is growing paler by the second.

Something is very, very wrong.

Is he dying? Because of me?

I can’t let that happen. I can’t look at the reasons too closely either, otherwise I might scream or cry.

“Can you get us to my building?” I ask and get my shoulder beneath him so I can help get him to his feet.

“Yes.”

Before I even have time to prepare, he pulls us away again. We collapse

into the hallway outside my condo. “Come on.” We stumble down the hallway to the door marked 404. I knock loudly. “Mrs. Mulhang! It’s Rain. I need your help.”

Wrath leans against the doorframe, blood still dripping from his wounds. He’s not looking good.

“Mrs. Mulhang!”

The door yanks open. “What is—oh. Rain?” Her eyes dart from me to Wrath before she slides her glasses on. “Oh dear.” A silky green kimono robe is tied tight around her petite frame. Her hair is mussed like she just crawled out of bed. What time is it anyway? I don’t even know.

“I need your car,” I say quickly.

“My car? But—”

“Please, Mrs. Mulhang.”

She cups her hand around her mouth, and whispers, “That’s the Demon King.”

“*I know.*”

Wrath grumbles, his arm held tightly over his midsection.

“I need your car. Please. I’ll owe you big time.”

She frowns at me but nods. “Give me a second.” I watch her shuffle down the hallway to a ceramic dish that sits on the hall table. She plucks the key fob from it and brings it back. “Here. There are two wool blankets in the trunk. Put them over the seats. I don’t want blood stains on my leather.”

“Of course.” I’m so relieved I want to kiss the woman. “You have no idea how much this means to me.”

She frowns. “I hope you know what you’re getting into, dear.”

I look over at Wrath hunched against the door, and the sight of him vulnerable, bleeding, dependent on me...it makes me want to burn down the world to save him.

We leave Mrs. Mulhang and take the elevator down to the garage. I send up a silent prayer, hoping we don’t run into anyone. When we get down to the garage, we find it blissfully empty and quiet.

I spread out the blankets on both bucket seats and then get Wrath into the passenger seat. I hurry around to the driver’s side. My own pain is just a dull ache now, and my wounds have stopped bleeding, so I guess that’s a good sign.

“Hold on,” I tell him as I tear out of the parking garage.

I DON'T KNOW HOW IT WORKS, BUT I FIND THE CASTLE EASILY AND PULL down the winding driveway, going much faster than I should.

When I come around in front of the house, gravel sprays behind my tires. I slam on the brakes, slide to the left, and finally come to a stop.

"You are a horrible driver, *dieva*," Wrath mutters, slumped over in the passenger seat.

"Shut up. I got you home in one piece, didn't I?"

"Debatable."

As I come around to the passenger side, Arthur runs from the house. "What happened?" he asks and shoots me an accusatory look. Shame festers in my gut.

With Arthur's help, Wrath climbs from the Audi. "Where's Lauren?"

As if summoned, Lauren appears in the doorway. "What the hell happened to you?"

"I'll fill you in while you heal me," he says.

They can do that?

"And her?" Lauren gestures to me with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Wrath looks at me over his shoulder. There's still blood splattered across his face.

"Looks like Rain has been keeping secrets from us."

"Excuse me?" I say.

"She has the *animus*," he says, and Arthur and Lauren look at me wide-eyed.

"The what?"

They ignore me.

Lauren makes a face like she just smelled something rancid. “How did she manage that?”

“I don’t know,” Wrath answers as Arthur helps him up the stairs.

“What the hell is this *animus* anyway?” I ask.

Hands on her hips, Lauren says, “The *animus* is a part of the trine of the Demon King’s power. It was stolen from Wrath a long time ago and he wants it back.”

“What?” I shout. “I don’t have power. A witch tested me. She didn’t find anything.”

“Sirene was lying,” Wrath says.

“Why would she do that?”

“Because Sirene wants the *animus* for herself.” He groans as Arthur gets him in the door.

“Why?”

“When a royal demon is given the title of king, he inherits the Triad of Power,” Lauren explains.

“Okay.”

She lifts a finger. “One, the *oculus*. The ability to control minds.”

“Has he been controlling me this entire time?”

Wrath snorts. “Would that make you feel better about what we did, *dieva*?”

“Two,” Lauren goes on, “the *dominus*. The ability to hold dominion over other demons. And lastly, the *animus*.”

“Which does what?”

“Think of it like this,” she says. “The *oculus* is the king’s scepter. The *dominus* is the king’s throne.” She narrows her eyes at me. “And the *animus*, that’s the king’s crown. It’s called the Hellfire Crown.”

I suddenly feel a little woozy. “Why?” I suspect I already know the answer.

“Because it burns whatever it touches.”

No. No. I don’t buy that. That sounds absolutely insane. Me, in possession of the Demon King’s crown?

I don’t believe—

The light.

The fire.

The heat at my center.

The constant, familiar rage.

The way I immediately reach for the heat, the urge to burn.

That's been with me since birth.

The fiery Aries, my mom always said.

No. Please, for the love of god.

"I'm sure you can put two and two together," Lauren goes on. "Wrath came here for his crown, and he'll do whatever it takes to get it back."

I'm so fucking screwed.



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING RUTHLESS DEMON KING! I HOPE YOU enjoyed Wrath and Rain as much as I enjoy writing them. Every single second they're on the page is an absolute delight.

If you want to find out what happens when Rain finds herself on the villain's side, pre-order [Sinful Demon King: Book 2](#) now so you don't miss out!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NIKKI ST. CROWE has been writing for as long as she can remember. Her first book, written in the 4th grade, was about a magical mansion full of treasure. While she still loves writing about magic, she's ditched the treasure for something better: villains, monsters, and anti-heroes, and the women who make them wild.

These days, when Nikki isn't writing or daydreaming about villains, she can either be found on the beach or at home with her husband and daughter.

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