

A VILLAIN PARANORMAL ROMANCE

# SINFUL DEMON KING

NIKKI ST. CROWE

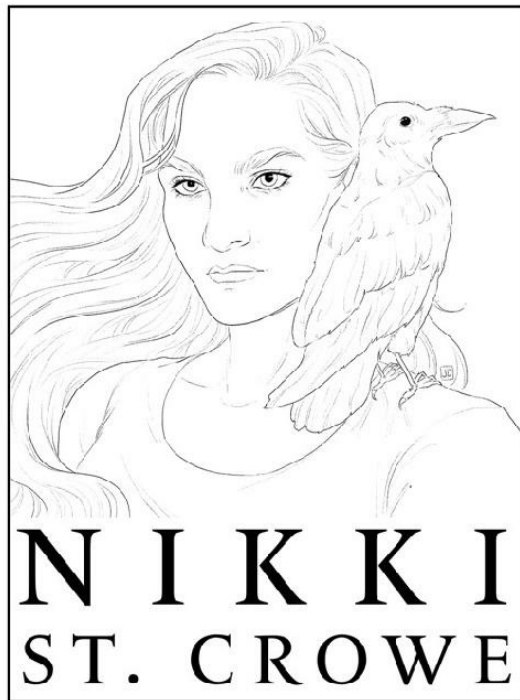
# **SINFUL DEMON KING**

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## WRATH & RAIN BOOK TWO

NIKKI ST. CROWE

BLACKWELL HOUSE LLC



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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Nikki St. Crowe](#)

[About the Author](#)

I'm a fugitive in my own damn country, and I've taken refuge in the villain's castle.

How the hell did I get to this place? Oh right, I apparently possess the Demon King's Hellfire Crown, and now he wants it back.

I sit up in the bed I've been given in Wrath's castle and scrub at my face, groaning into my hand.

There are online Wrath fan clubs and demon devotees chasing sightings of him all around the world. Literally thousands of people who would kill to be where I am, living in a house with the Demon King close by, in possession of the one thing he wants...but those people are idiots.

Living with Wrath is like living with a serpent. It's all fun and games until someone gets bit. And that someone will be me.

My bedroom door bursts open, and Lauren, one of Wrath's demons, barrels inside.

"Can you please knock?" I say, pulling myself up against the mammoth headboard.

Even though it's still dark in my room, I swear I can see her eyes rolling. She crosses the room, grabs the thick velvet drapes and yanks them open.

I grimace as I bring my arm up to shield my eyes. "Was that really necessary?"

She stands in front of the bank of windows, the light blooming around her so she's nothing but a dark silhouette. "It absolutely was."

It takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust. I'm not sure how much sleep Lauren needs as one of the lower-level demons, but she looks ungodly good



for it being so early in the morning.

Her blond hair is neatly plaited in a French braid, the tail hanging over her shoulder. There's fresh makeup on her face, but not a ton. She's been blessed with perfect, fair skin. Is that also a demon thing? Because if so, I'm clearly not one of them. I eat takeout, and the next day my face is like a poppy field—red blooms everywhere.

It's still a mystery, who and what I am to Wrath. He said I have the *animus*, the Hellfire Crown, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out that a normal human shouldn't be able to hold that much power.

Which means...

Nope. Too early in the morning to go down that road. I'll cross that whole you-might-not-be-who-you-think-you-are bridge after some coffee.

"What do you want?" I ask Lauren.

"Wrath told me to wake you up."

"If he told you to eat glue, would you?"

"Yes," she answers without hesitation.

While 'king' is literally in his name, sometimes I forget how easily he commands people and how quickly they jump.

I'm an exception. I think maybe the *only* exception. But that doesn't stop the fiery rage from rearing its head whenever Wrath *tries* to tell me what to do. Or the lust that chases after it.

I don't know what it says about me that I like fighting him every chance I get. And I like seeing what he'll do.

Last time we got into a tit-for-tat, we ended up in his bed.

I get a flash of his hands digging into my hips, of his cock banging into me, and I'm suddenly pulsing with need.

He brings out the worst in me, turns me mindless and horny as fuck.

Lauren scoffs. "Can you not control yourself?"

"Excuse me?"

"Listen, cupcake—"

"What's with all the nicknames?"

"Most supernaturals have better senses than humans. Demons, vampires, shifters."

"Okayyyyy."

"Okayyyy," she sing-songs, parodying me, then bugs out her eyes.

Oh shit. "Nooooo. Are you telling me...*all of you can smell me like Wrath can?*"

“Yes. Every time you get all horny fangirl over the king. So stop being a whore around Wrath.”

I put my hand to my forehead, blood pulsing through my cheeks. “Oh god.”

“You’re welcome.”

That explains what Dane the vampire was referring to when they visited the castle. He asked if they were interrupting something, and at the time I’d been fantasizing about what Wrath could do with his hands on my body.

Fuck.

Wrath then proceeded to stab him with his dark magic, told him to be respectful.

My face warms again, but for a different reason this time. Was the Demon King defending my honor?

Pfftt. Fat chance of that.

“So how do you stop that?” I ask, wrinkling my nose.

“I already told you. Stop being a—”

“I’m not a whore, goddammit.”

Lauren screws up her mouth. “Could have fooled me.”

I grit my teeth, nostrils flaring as I suck in a breath, anger igniting at my sternum.

Lauren takes a step back. “Calm down.” She holds up her hands. “I was only joking.”

The room fills with more than morning light. It’s a pulsating bright orange glow. I catch a glimpse of myself in the tall, gilded mirror across the room and a shiver runs down my spine.

My eyes are glowing.

I dart across the room and paw at my face as my irises ebb from bright, fiery orange back to their normal shade of hazel green. “What is that?”

“The *animus*, I’m guessing,” Lauren says behind me.

“My eyes have never done that.” I turn back to her, and she flinches away. “Why are they suddenly glowing?”

She summons some of her usual bravado and crosses her arms again, long fingers curling around her toned biceps. “Probably because of Wrath. Being around him has likely unlocked the power.”

It’s becoming more and more impossible to deny the truth—I do have some kind of magic, and worse, it’s not mine.

It’s the Demon King’s.

“I don’t want it,” I tell Lauren.

“Good. Because *he* wants it back. And he’s—”

“Going to do whatever he can to get it. I know. I know. But I don’t plan on putting up a fight, okay? My entire life, my temper has always gotten me into trouble. Maybe giving back the crown will take some of the anger with it.”

I don’t entirely understand all of the animus’s characteristics, but it definitely responds to the rage most often. It makes sense that a power literally called *Hellfire Crown* would be tied to rage.

My anger management issues have always been a handicap I desperately wanted to be rid of. I’m more than happy to give it back. If only we can figure out how to do it.

Lauren gives me another onceover before making her way to the door. “The king has instructed that I get you food. Arthur made a quiche. It’s in the fridge. Now you know where to acquire said food so my job is done.”

My stomach growls immediately, as if it’s been waiting for the promise of food before speaking up. A quiche does sound positively divine. And it immediately makes me think of my best friend, Gus, and Collie’s Tea Shop. We usually have breakfast there a few times a week, and quiche is a favorite. And now...

I hope Gus doesn’t hate me. I hope he understands why I left with Wrath.

It was just the night before that I was asked to kill Wrath by none other than the President of the United States. And Gus’s boyfriend, Adam, along with a bunch of other soldiers, were supposed to have my back during the confrontation.

Until we all found out that I was connected to Wrath. When I’m hurt, he’s injured. It’s his only weakness.

I’m his only weakness.

That’s when the soldiers turned on me, trying to kill me to kill Wrath.

I had no other choice but to leave with him, but will Gus understand that? God I hope so.

With Lauren gone, I head into my bedroom’s attached bathroom. Flicking on the overhead light, I peer closely at my eyes again in the vanity mirror.

Wrath’s eyes glow red sometimes.

Now mine do too. A different shade of color, but they glow nonetheless.

What the fuck does that even mean?

“Who are you?” I say to my reflection. It’s like looking at a stranger.

Nothing has changed about my face, and yet...something is different. I don't recognize myself, and yet I oddly feel more like myself at the same time.

There's still a voice of dissent in my head that's trying to come up with every excuse under the sun.

Maybe being around Wrath has warped me. Maybe I've entered some kind of twilight zone. Maybe Wrath is using his power to control me. Lauren said one of the powers the king possesses is the ability to control minds.

The *oculus*, she called it.

I want to believe any one of those reasons, but deep down, I know the truth.

Somehow, somehow I have a piece of Wrath's power flowing through my veins.

"You just have to figure out how you got it," I tell myself. "Then get rid of it."

It's like the flu or a head cold. I'm in the misery right now, but eventually I'll get better.

Eventually.

And speaking of getting better.

I lift the hem of my t-shirt to assess the wound in my stomach, the one that I accidentally inflicted on myself when I stabbed Wrath with a special witch blade.

My skin is still a little tender and flushed red, but the wound has healed. There's no indication that I was sliced open at all.

It really is a miracle. All of it.

I get dressed and then head downstairs. Might as well face the music. Except on my way to the kitchen, after peeking into several of the sitting rooms, I don't spot Wrath anywhere. Disappointment sinks in my gut.

As much as I hate him, I also can't get enough of him. I'm back to being a teenager, doing some minor stalking of her crush, hoping for just a glimpse of him around the corner.

I'm losing my goddamn mind.

It might be fucking complicated, but in simple terms, he's turned me into a horny devil, and I just have to resist him and his allure long enough to disentangle myself from his royal power.

Never thought I'd be making a plan for *that* reality.

I find the kitchen empty and go straight for the industrial fridge. The interior glows with a sterile white-blue light when I open the door. I spot

Arthur's quiche in a red ceramic dish. It's nestled amongst a bowl of fruit, a head of broccoli, and some takeout from Par House.

The quiche is homemade and somewhat fresh, but greasy restaurant leftovers sounds delicious. I'll just quickly see what it is.

When I pop open the Styrofoam lid, I find a few veggie sushi rolls and a spring roll.

"Ewww." I wrinkle my nose at it. I prefer a California roll drenched in soy sauce.

"Planning on stealing my leftovers, *dieva*?"

I yelp and spin around, nearly losing the Styrofoam container.

Wrath stands in the center of the kitchen in nothing but loose black pajama pants.

Oh fuck.

He's a vision of pale morning. Like ice frost on tree leaves. Like hot breath condensing in the winter air.

His black hair is wet and raked back from his forehead. Water droplets still cling to his skin and glisten in the light.

I want to lick them off.

One by fucking one.

"*Dieva*," he says, a hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his fuck-me mouth.

"Huh?" My gaze trails away from the sweeping black lines of his demon mark on his chest, down to the hard line between his hip and pelvis. A shadowed line that goes down, down—

I can see the press of his cock against that soft black material. Can make out the swell of the head, the ridge around it and—

"*Dieva*," he says again, louder this time.

I blink. "Sorry. What?"

"If I'd known you'd turn into a horny little girl at the sight of me shirtless, I would have put on more clothes."

That snaps me awake.

Son of a bitch.

I've never been accused of being horny so many times in one day. But yet here I am, and here it's true.

I set the takeout on the counter. "That is...not what's happening here."

"Oh?" Wrath comes around the kitchen island and advances on me. I take a step back. "You were just staring at my cock."

At the mention of his cock, my gaze sinks again involuntarily.

“Was not.”

He disappears.

The air catches in my throat as I stumble back.

Right into him.

His hands come to my shoulders, and he spins me around, pressing my pelvis into the edge of the counter as his groin presses against the swell of my ass.

I sputter out a breath.

He threads his fingers into my hair and yanks my head back, exposing my throat.

“You’re such a filthy liar,” he says, his mouth at the rapid beat of my heart.

I swallow loudly as his other hand sinks down the curve of my belly, down between my legs, cupping me over my shorts.

I’m in so much trouble. I pretty much challenged him to prove me wrong, and now he’s doing just that.

I groan as he nips at my neck with sharp teeth, causing me to jolt against him. He tightens his hold on me, cock now hard at the seam of my ass.

A very weak, very hopeless rational side of me is faintly calling out, *this is a game! He’s playing you! He needs you complicit!*

But that sweet, sweet summer child has no hope of getting my attention.

Not when the Demon King is slipping his fingers around the hem of my shorts, in past the seam of my panties, and then sends those fingers sliding down my wet folds.

I close my eyes and descend into the madness of the pleasure. He presses closer, the counter digging into my hip bones.

I can’t pretend I don’t like every single part of this.

Especially not when I’m dripping wet, and I know he can smell me.

He yanks my shorts down, taking the panties with it. Is he going to fuck me right here?

Should I try to stop him?

I’m distantly aware that he’s practically lording over me right now, proving just how powerless I am when he turns me to lust, but I can’t seem to care.

He bends me forward onto the counter, pressing my cheek to the cool granite, exposing my ass to him and my wet pussy. A second later, the heat of

his cock nestles into my opening but stops before entering me.

“How about now, *dieva*?” His voice is rough and hoarse. “Horny now?”

“Nope,” I pant out.

“Then I’ll stop.”

“Go for it.”

He growls, his long fingers still tangled in my hair.

Now I’m calling his bluff.

We stay locked there for several seconds, neither one moving, his cock *right there*, throbbing at my opening. It takes everything I have, every ounce of willpower not to arch into him and push back, sink him deeper.

“You drive me mad, *dieva*,” he admits.

His hands go to my hips and a traitorous moan escapes me. The head of his cock swells at my opening.

I shouldn’t be here, mindless for more of him, the fucking Demon King, and yet there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

I chose my side.

There are no heroes here.

“Admit it, *dieva*,” he says. “Put us both out of our misery.” He pushes in deeper, hard as a fucking rock.

“Why won’t you?”

Because the Demon King won’t admit to his weaknesses. Especially not me.

He pulls out, and the heat of his throbbing dick disappears.

“No! Okay. Okay,” I whine, a little breathless, totally mindless. “Fuck me. Okay. I admit it.”

My clit is pulsing, my inner walls clenched up tight. I can’t take it any longer.

I think this might be the only time he takes an order from me.

He drives into me. My hips bang painfully against the counter’s edge, but I don’t fucking care.

The pain and the pleasure make up a sublime duo. I’m soaring. Fucking flying as the head of his cock hits deep inside of me.

“Oh fuck,” I moan, my breath condensing on the counter.

When I feel him grow harder at my words, there’s a burst of power at the center of me. Like kindling finally catching fire. The rush of heat spreads through my entire body, and my head sways like I’m caught in a wave.

I imagine it’s what it feels like being high. Otherworldly. Divine.

Wrath fucks me harder, faster.

I can't help the loud, high-pitched moans that escape me as the pressure and the pleasure build.

I couldn't control myself if I wanted to.

The orgasm comes hard and fast, burning through me like a forest fire.

My skin goes flush, my blood hot in my veins as the flood of pleasure beats through me.

Wrath groans as I try to curl into myself, nerves flickering with sensory overload.

And then his tempo shifts as he lets out a loud, raw groan.

The Demon King comes inside of me.

His hold tightens on my hips as if he's saying *mine*, as if he's proving on some base level that this was his decision, not mine.

For the second time in so many days, I fucked the Demon King.

The realization feels like a crown itself. Like I've conquered some unconquerable land and come out the other side of it a motherfucking victor even though he was the one who initiated it, trying to prove a point.

When he pulls out of me and steps away, I practically melt into a limp doll on the counter, his and my juices leaking out of me, down the backside of my thighs.

Holy shit.

What just happened?

And why do I feel like maniacally laughing?

When my soul returns to my body, and sensation returns to my legs, I step back and shimmy my shorts up.

When I turn to face the Demon King, his eyes are glowing vibrant red.

There's no glory on his face. No cocky grin.

This emotion, foreign as it is, as subtle as it is, almost looks like fear.

His shoulders rise and fall with quick breaths, his pale chest now coated in sweat instead of water from the shower.

"You've healed," he says, ignoring what we've just done.

"Yeah." I nod at his stomach, the flat plane of it, the defined ab muscles. Every line of him is fucking art. "You did too."

He levels his glowing gaze at me, as if there's more he wants to say.

And I want to hear it. God help me, I want more of him. I want all of his deep secrets. All of his inner thoughts. I want more than just his cock and his cum.



“You can have the leftovers,” he says and turns away.

“What?”

“Eat, *dieva*,” he orders and disappears around the corner.

I blink after him for several minutes, trying to make sense of it all.

I splash cold water on my face and hang over the sink as the beads of water drip from the end of my nose.

He makes my head spin. He makes me feel out of control but in the most exciting way. Is this what it feels like to succumb to drugs?

Because I’m starting to worry I need an intervention.

I swipe the water away and take a deep breath and then sit at the kitchen island. I finish off the Demon King’s leftovers, telling myself the entire time it’s because I’m hungry and not because he ordered me to eat.

The veggie sushi and spring roll are better than I expected. Once I'm done eating, I explore more of the castle. Around every corner, I swear I can feel and smell Wrath, but he's never there. I'm beginning to crave that spicy, winter scent of his. Like a cup of hot chai tea on Christmas morning.

It shouldn't be comforting and familiar, but somehow it is.

I find a library eventually and marvel at its sheer size. It might be bigger than the public library in Norton Harbor. There are two levels. The second opens in a loft that's accessible by a winding metal staircase. I go up and down it several times like I'm Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. The scenario fits, I suppose. I'm held prisoner (sort of) by a monster in a castle.

I'm not free to go. And I know he would find me if I ran.

The *animus* connects us in some way, and I have to wonder if my vision of him my first night in Adam's factory was in fact real. If he found his way to me without knowing how to physically come to me because of Eric's witch barrier.

I pull a few leather-bound books from the library shelves and flip through their pages. I smell something sweet and sugary on the pages, but I can't read the language, so I put the books back.

There are no rom-coms here. No self-help books about living your best life.

Pity, I could use some of both right now.

I leave the library and wander down the next hall. When I come to a room that actually looks like a normal room with a sectional couch and a flat screen TV attached to the wall, I expel a contented sigh.

I need normal right now.

Does the Demon King have a subscription to any of the streaming services? Because I could totally go for some Netflix and chill.

I plop on the couch and grab the remote from the heavy iron coffee table. It takes me a second to figure out how to work the system, but I eventually get to live TV and land on a news channel.

“Another mass shooting has been reported,” the news anchor says.

It immediately makes me sick to my stomach. It seems like there’s one every day of the week. When will we ever stop killing each other?

I flip to the next channel and frown at the sight of my face plastered on the screen.

“What the hell?”

The headline reads: *Rain Low in Demon King Confrontation.*

The news anchor comes on, with my picture scaled down on the upper right-hand side of the screen. It’s an image they stole from my mom’s social media, one she took the year before on a hiking trip we went on in the Adirondack Mountains. My hair is windswept, my face pink from too much sun. But I look happy.

The funny thing is, my entire life I couldn’t wait to settle down and actually live in one town longer than a year. But ever since I settled in Norton Harbor, I’ve been hungry for adventure. I’ve been wondering if maybe my mom was right, if maybe I’ll always be perpetually dissatisfied. Always trying to fill an unnamable hole.

“We’re approaching twenty-four hours since Rain Low was reported as missing,” the news anchor says. “But is that what really happened? We go to Ken in the field who might be able to shed more light on the situation.”

The footage flips to Ken—a man in his thirties with black hair and thick glasses that are putting up a valiant effort to take over his face. “Thank you, Melissa. I’m here in Riverside Park on the outside of Norton Harbor where witnesses say just last night, there was a massive showdown between Wrath and our military forces. And if you look behind me, you’ll see part of Riverside Park was destroyed in a rogue fire. Was it Wrath? Or was it Rain? I have an eyewitness here to tell us more.”

Ken steps to the right, and the camera pans with him. An older woman comes onto the screen, graying blonde hair curled back in a poufy up-do. “Mrs. Thompson, tell the viewers what happened last night in the park.”

Mrs. Thompson’s small eyes widen to the size of dewdrops as she leans

toward the microphone. “I was out walking my dog, Mr. Fuzzles, when I heard shouting. Like a dummy, I went toward the sound and—my god.” Her wrinkled hand goes to her chest as she shakes her head. “I saw Rain Low in the park with that devil. At first I thought they were necking—”

“Oh please,” I mutter at the TV.

“But then I saw her go—” she makes a stabbing motion, teeth gritted “—and I don’t know how she did it, but it looked like she actually stabbed him! It was like the devil was in pain, and then all hell broke loose, and there was shouting and yelling and then BOOM.” She makes an explosion with her hands. “There was light and fire, and the park started burning.”

Ken pulls the microphone back to himself. “Did you see what happened to Rain? Or the Demon King?”

Mrs. Thompson shakes her head, and not a single hair moves out of place. “Right after the explosion, there was a bunch of shooting, and I high-tailed it out of there. It’s unfortunate what’s become of this town since the devil moved in. I never had to worry about taking Mr. Fuzzles for his nightly walk!”

Ugh. I flip the channel, feeling a little ill, only to land on a different broadcast with a man and woman behind a news desk.

“Rain Low—hostage or demon sympathizer?” the woman says. “I’ll tell you which—she’s proven she does not care about our country. We have reports that she’s chosen the Demon King over our own soldiers time and time again.”

I lurch off the couch. “That’s not true!”

The man nods. “It’s unfortunate, Bridget, but women in particular are incapable of fighting his dark power.” He turns to the camera and looks directly into the lens. “Men, if you’re out there listening, you gotta protect your wives, your daughters, your sisters, and mothers. The devil is here, ladies and gentlemen, and he’s here to corrupt the women in your lives.”

“As if we’re simpering idiots who can’t control our ovaries,” I say and punch at the OFF button on the remote.

This time, when the rage comes, I notice it right away.

Light shines across the room, and it’s definitely not sunlight.

I scurry over to the glass door of the entertainment center.

There’s literal fire lifting off my shoulders, much like Wrath’s dark mist.

And my eyes are flaring in the glass.

As soon as I lean in close to inspect, the light disappears.

The power is like water through my fingers, there one minute, gone the next.

I stand there watching my reflection as if I might catch some hint, some more proof. What more do I need?

I feel like everything I thought I knew about myself has suddenly evaporated.

I have magic.

I have power.

Why does it make me so fucking terrified?

Raised voices pull me from my reverie. I follow the sound only to find Wrath stalking down the hallway, Arthur, stooped, following behind, trying to keep up.

“They’ve formally requested you return her safely to the president,” Arthur is saying.

“Tell them I formally fucking decline,” Wrath answers.

I meet them at an intersection of hallways. “What’s going on?”

Wrath scowls at me as he stalks past. Now I’m the one hurrying to catch up. He’s well over six feet and towers over all of us. He’s put on clothes since he fucked me earlier and is now clad entirely in black. I can just make out the twining lines of his demon mark peeking out from beneath the collar of his shirt.

I have a sudden urge to run my fingers over it, feel his skin beneath mine, and then have to tamp down a shiver that threatens to shake my shoulders.

Fucking demon.

Arthur says, “General Briggs is demanding your safe delivery back to them.”

I laugh. “That’s rich, considering they tried to kill me.”

Wrath turns down another hallway. “They wouldn’t be trying to kill you if you hadn’t shouted from the top of your lungs that we’re connected.”

“Hey, I was being shot at. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Your lack of preparation and forethought must be legendary.”

He turns into another room. I’m finally starting to recognize some of the rooms within the castle, and this one I think is Wrath’s favorite. It’s the most lived in and smells the most like him. It’s also the room that houses the best bar and the best stock of liquor.

Predictably, Wrath goes to the bourbon and pours himself a glass.

“You’re an asshole,” I say.

“I’ve been called worse.”

“I fucking hate you.”

Back to me, he says, “Is that supposed to hurt my feelings? Do you have any idea of where I come from? What I’ve faced?” He slings back the drink, then slams the glass down again.

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?” I blurt out before I can think better of it.

I really wish I’d thought better of it.

Arthur tenses up and steps aside.

Wrath disappears in a crack of air.

Oh shit.

When he does that, it’s like the dark shape of a great white shark has just disappeared into the depths below you. You might not see him, but you know he’s there, waiting for the perfect moment to attack.

I look to Arthur for help, but he has his head bowed, his hands folded in front of him.

Arthur owes me nothing. He owes Wrath his life. He’s not going to come to my defense.

Wrath reappears in front of me in a swirl of black mist. His eyes are flaring up. I’m learning that the red glow can be an indication of desire and rage. Just like with me.

We are more alike than I want to admit.

The black mist lashes out almost like it’s an entity of its own.

I’m thrown back, slam against the closest wall, then slide down to the floor.

I quickly roll onto all fours and climb to my feet, only for Wrath to be there, taking a fistful of my hair. Instinctively, I grab at his wrist, trying to take some of the pressure off. He gets in close to me, and I hold my breath, regret a bright thing in my vision. “You would cower in the face of my enemies,” he says.

My nostrils flare as my nose fills with his spicy, cool scent. The sensation running through my veins is familiar now. Desire. Excitement. Exhilaration. As if being manhandled by Wrath is some kind of sick foreplay.

I don’t know what to do with this constant push and pull of hate and ecstasy.

I’m close to embracing it. Damn the consequences. Forget about the guilt and the shame.

Because the truth is, I've never felt so damn alive.

I run my tongue over my bottom lip, and Wrath's eyes dart to the movement. His jaw flexes as he grits his teeth.

If Arthur wasn't in the room, I think we might be fucking again on the nearest piece of furniture.

I want to rip his clothes off and ride him until he comes inside of me, until his fingers leave bruises on my skin.

If I'm not careful, Arthur might not even stop me.

*Get it together, Rain.*

With his hand still in my hair, I say, "You have enemies?"

He blinks, lets me go, and shifts away. I quickly fix my hair and scratch at my aching scalp.

Goddammit, I love it when he pulls my hair.

"Why do you think I've been searching for the *animus*?" he says.

I'm not sure if that's a rhetorical question or not, so I say nothing as he returns to the bar and refills his glass. He likes to drink, I'm realizing, but I've never seen him tipsy or drunk. I wonder how much liquor it takes to soak a demon.

I'd very much like to find out.

"I am losing my grip on my throne," he admits.

"Wait...what?"

The liquor sloshes into the glass as he gives another generous pour. Diffused sunlight shines in around him from the nearest window, turning his dark edges hazy.

Him admitting this to me...is this some kind of tactic to earn my sympathy?

I look to Arthur, but his weathered face is turned away from me, his thoughts distant.

"It won't be long," Wrath says, "and I'll lose the throne entirely, and if that happens..." He turns his head, his face now in profile highlighted by that hazy, gorgeous light.

I wish I had my camera.

I wish I could capture him this way, vulnerable, but still dark against the light.

"If that happens?" I prompt.

His shoulders rise and fall with a breath, then he brings the glass to his lips and drinks down the amber liquid.

I almost lean in, waiting for his response when he comes up for air.

What happens?

Who are his enemies? Is one of them this Chaos I heard him and Arthur talking about the other night?

I suppose someone with a name like Chaos, they're predisposed to being an enemy.

But I never get the response because the sound of a bell ding through the house pulls Wrath's attention away.

"That should be Ciri," Arthur says and hurries away.

"Who's that?"

Wrath frowns at me. "Do you ever stop asking questions?"

I grumble in the back of my throat and come up next to him at the bar. "Do you ever not act like an asshole?"

He turns his head, eyeing me. "I would kill lesser men for such insolence."

"Good thing I'm not a man."

He snorts and pours a third round of liquor.

"Are you an alcoholic?"

His dark brow arches sardonically.

I asked another question.

"Can you be an alcoholic with all of—" I gesture at his to-die-for physique "—all of this?"

"If you're asking whether or not I can get drunk, the answer is yes, but not on this." He tips the glass before slinging it back. "This just takes the edge off." He sets the glass aside and puts his hands on the bar top. Hunching over, he closes his eyes, dark lashes fanning over his pale cheeks.

More of the demon mark is exposed as his t-shirt slouches on his broad shoulders.

Everything about him is so deliriously masculine. So fucking hot.

"Do you have edges that need to be taken off?" I joke.

He looks at me through a lock of dark hair that's fallen forward. His eyes brighten and flare red. "When I'm around you, every edge feels like it could cut."

Holy.

Holy good god.

What am I supposed to make of that? Is that a good or bad thing?

*Don't believe a word he says. He's playing you.*



But is he? After we fucked in the kitchen, that look on his face...it was like he was afraid of me. And maybe not because of the power itself, but because of the power I seem to hold over him.

I snatch the glass and give myself a splash of bourbon, then sling it back. The alcohol burns all the way down and warms my belly with a delicious fuzziness.

“That makes two of us,” I say.

The corner of his mouth lifts.

Arthur comes in and announces, “Ciri has arrived.”

Wrath straightens, the amusement and the warmth gone from his face in a blink.

I turn with him and stand by his side, and for the first time, I think it’s exactly where I should be.

CIRI IS a slight woman with wavy black hair and horn-rimmed sunglasses covering her eyes. She’s wearing an elegant pants suit that reminds me of the fifties with its nipped waist and Peter Pan collar.

“Hello, my king,” she says and gets down on her knees when Wrath turns to her.

It must be exhausting having to bow to him every single time you cross paths with him.

I’m glad I don’t have that problem.

“Ciri,” he says. “A queen in her own right.”

“Really?” I blurt out.

Arthur holds out his hand for her, and she kindly takes it, rising to her feet once again. “I’m known in Saint Sabine as the Queen of the Oracles,” she explains.

Saint Sabine is the nearest big city. It’s known by some as the New Orleans of the east coast because of its distinct architecture, its wrought iron balconies, and its eclectic music scene.

“You must be Rain?” Ciri says as she crosses the room on loud, clacking heels.

“Hi.” I give her an awkward wave.

She stops several feet away and curls her hand around her hip as she

assesses me from behind the darkness of her sunglasses.

Is she sensitive to light? I don't think she's a vampire. I didn't get that impression when Wrath spoke of her.

Ciri pulls the glasses away, giving me my answer.

Her eyes are pure white.

For a second I think she must be blind, but then she laughs and says, "Don't worry, child. They won't bite."

I guess she must see my shock.

"Ciri is a traveler," Wrath answers. "She's the one who helped bring me here to your world."

Sirene mentioned a traveler too when I asked her how she got here.

"Travelers control the gates between worlds," Wrath explains.

"Worlds? Plural? There are more?"

"There are infinite worlds," Wrath says drily like it should have been obvious.

"Indeed," Ciri says. "But not all are easy to access, and the traveling magic has been damaged for a very long time. But let's not wander in the weeds. We're here for you today."

"We?" I look around her and spot no one else. "Do you have the *narrow* too?"

"Something like that."

Ciri lifts a hand, two fingers giving a *come-hither* gesture.

A girl in a gauzy white gown appears on Ciri's left, directly in front of me, and she's *floating*.

I yelp, lurch back, and realize that I've retreated behind Wrath.

He looks down at me, cowering behind the line of his shoulder, and some foreign emotion flickers in his eyes. My stomach warms.

"She won't bite either," Ciri says.

I lurch away from Wrath, embarrassed and oddly annoyed by him even though I was the one cowering.

"What is she?"

Her billowy white dress undulates in a phantom wind.

"She's an Oracle. They're spirits from Alius that can see and predict the future," Ciri says. "As a traveler, I can communicate with them regardless of which side of the gate I'm on."

I examine the girl more closely. In any other context, I'd think she was a ghost. Her hair is white and as fine as silk so it lifts and floats easily in her

phantom wind. She has the same colorless eyes as Ciri, and her mouth is set in a grim line.

Does she have a mind of her own? Does she detest being summoned?

I suddenly feel sorry for her.

Ciri utters two words that are foreign to me and the Oracle closes the distance between us. She stops with only a foot of distance between us.

Wrath edges closer to my side.

“What can you tell us about her?” Ciri asks the Oracle.

The Oracle blinks, bright white lashes flitting over pale cheeks. “She is not what you think she is.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

No one answers.

The Oracle gets closer, and her scent fills my nose. It’s like a match struck in a cave. Wet stone and sulphur and darkness. The back of my throat itches and my vision tunnels until everything beyond the Oracle is a blur, like a fingerprint smudged on glass. Every muscle in my body clenches up, and I grit my teeth so hard, my jaw aches.

“Someday,” the Oracle says, “she will rain.”

“Rain!” Wrath is in front of me, concern pinched between his brows. His hands are on either side of me, shaking me.

“What? What’s the matter?”

The Oracle is gone, and Ciri stands behind Wrath, her hand at her chest.

Wrath whirls around, black mist lifting from his shoulders. He is a vision of darkness and rage. “What the fuck did you do to her?”

Ciri flinches back and holds up a hand as if that will keep the raging Demon King at bay. “She was in no danger.”

Within seconds, he’s surrounded by several of the *narrow*. They flank outward like well-trained soldiers.

The shadows swirling around Wrath sharpen into a dozen blades.

“My king,” she says with a shaky tenor to her voice. She starts to sink to her knees.

“Stop!” I shout. The shadow blades freeze mid-air. “I’m all right. See?”

Wrath turns to look at me with those bright red eyes, and even I flinch. His jaw flexes as his gaze sweeps over me, assessing for himself whether or not that’s true.

“I’m okay,” I say quietly.

The *narrow* disappear. The blades retract and Wrath disappears.

Ciri and I brace.

He reappears right in front of Ciri and grabs her by the throat and lifts her off the floor. Her pointed heels scabble for purchase as she fights at his grip.

“I know what you’re doing,” he says.

“My king,” she chokes out.

“You’re playing both sides. I don’t like it.”

“No, I—” Her eyes bug from their sockets. She chokes back a strangled breath and starts again. “Every path has...a...destination.”

“The destination,” Wrath bites out, “is that I will be the victor. I will wear the crown. Not her. Not Chaos. I will. And if you forget that again, you won’t be bowing at my feet, Ciri. You’ll be nothing but bones in the earth. Do we understand one another?”

She nods quickly.

“Wrath!” I say. “Let her go!”

He drops her unceremoniously, and she falls to a heap on the floor. I rush to her side.

“Are you okay?”

The air snaps behind me, and when I check for the Demon King, he’s already gone.

“I’m fine,” Ciri says, but her voice is raw and reedy.

“I’m sorry he did that.”

She rubs at her neck where a bruise is quickly coloring her skin.

“I wasn’t worried, child,” she says with a laugh, but there’s real pain and anguish in it.

I help her up. “You should be.”

“I already know when I will die, and it isn’t here, and it isn’t today.” She clears her throat and smooths back her hair.

“Okayyyy. Well...good then?”

Her gaze darts around the room, then she leans in conspiringly. “What did she tell you? The Oracle?”

It’s all fuzzy in my head. “I don’t know. She just said my name.”

Ciri frowns. “That’s it?”

“Did you guys not hear her?”

“No. And you froze up like you’d been shocked, and your eyes went white.”

“Really?” I guess that explains why Wrath went berserk. “That’s not normal for your Oracles?”

Ciri shakes her head. “They don’t physically interact with people on this side. It drains too much energy from them. *Usually.*” Her thoughts go distant as she considers something.

“What is it?”

“Nothing it’s just...she almost seemed energized by your touch. It’s like...”

“Like what?”

She looks over her shoulder again with her colorless eyes. I see the moment she shuts down and the hard-to-read sophisticated woman returns.

She picks up her sunglasses from where they fell to the floor and slides them back on the wide bridge of her nose. “It will get worse before it gets better,” she says. “Remember that when you think you’d rather die than be where you are.”

“Well that leaves me feeling cozy,” I say. “What about the *animus*? Isn’t that why you’re here? To help me figure out how I got it or why I have it? And how the hell I give it back.”

She levels out her shoulders, straightens her spine. “If you want to know more about how you came to be in this predicament, I’d start by looking at the beginning.”

“Meaning?”

“Your birth.”

Heels clacking on the hardwood, she leaves me.

I stare after her for a long time, trying to figure out what just happened and what it all means.

And why Wrath acted the way he did.

I know he wants his crown back.

And I don’t want it.

But...hearing him say it was his in that way, with a complete disregard for how I’d feel about it irritates me. And when I’m irritated, it makes me want to dig in my heels. Sometimes it’s not about the outcome so much as it is about the fight for me.

That fiery Aries.

But no. It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. Because the crown, the power, it was never mine to begin with.

Ciri is right about one thing—I think I need to have a chat with Sunny Low.

It’s high time I meet my biological father and try to figure out if me being

in possession of the *animus* has anything to do with who my father is.  
Please dear god let him be human.

I go on the hunt for Wrath after Ciri leaves.

That man needs a cell phone, and this castle is too damn big. I shout his name through the hallways after an hour of searching all the nooks and crannies, except it's Lauren's attention I get.

"Stop yelling through the damn house," she says as she leans casually against the doorframe of the room she just slithered from.

"I can't find him."

"He's in the stables."

I make a face at her. "There are stables? With horses?"

She just stares at me blankly, pretty eyes blinking like I'm the stupidest creature she's ever encountered.

"Where would I find the stables?"

She nods in the opposite direction. "Go that way until you come to an exterior door. Go outside and to the right."

"Thank you."

"Whatever."

With a massive roll of her eyes, she heads in the opposite direction.

I follow the hallway until it breaks to the next. Here I look left and right. This hall sits on the backside of the house. Giant arched windows overlook one of many landscaped gardens. I spot an exterior door to the right and hurry through it, coming out on a stone pathway that winds through the garden and then back through the woods.

A couple of gray squirrels chase each other across the ground then scurry up a tree. A chipmunk darts past me on the path, nuts packed in its mouth.

Birds chirp from above.

With everything that's been going on, I haven't been able to fully appreciate this place. Who would have thought I'd find myself living in a fairytale? Except I'm not living a fairytale life with Prince Charming.

I'm filthy fucking the villain instead.

Ten-year-old me would be so disappointed.

I shake my head and keep walking.

Eventually, the path gives way to rolling green grass and I spot the stables in the near distance.

As I walk up to the open bay door, I hear horses whinnying inside. I find Wrath at the front of a stall that houses a massive black horse. The horse is ducking her head out through the half open door, soaking up Wrath's attention.

His pale hand runs down the horse's muzzle, and her eyes turn heavy and half closed.

I know how she feels.

I know how it feels to want to melt beneath his attention.

"You disappeared," I say.

He keeps petting the horse.

"Why did you do that to Ciri?" I come up beside him. "You could have killed her."

His hand goes still on the horse's muzzle and her eyes shoot open. I can almost see her disappointment.

"I'm sorry, *dieva*," he says. "Did I give you the impression that I only meant to scare her? My intentions were to kill her."

I try to ignore the way that admission makes my stomach a little ill.

"Is that a habit of yours? Killing your friends?"

He turns to me. "A king has no friends."

I scan his face for any hint of emotion, but there's none to be had. He is stoic as usual. I want to poke and pick at him and bring down his walls. I don't care what the emotion is, as long as it's something.

"Sirene told me what *dieva* really means," I say and immediately regret it. I'm afraid of where this conversation might go, and what it means to have it. This isn't what I came out here for, and yet, now that I've opened the door, I'm eager to walk in.

"Did she?" His face is still expressionless.

"She said it doesn't mean *little girl*. It's a term that denotes ownership."



He snorts. “Clearly Sirene has been speaking out of turn.”

“Is that not what it means then?”

The horse takes a loud clomping step closer and nudges his shoulder. He reaches out absently to pet her again. He gives in to her so easily, an animal.

I want him to give in to me too.

“*Dieva* means different things to different people,” he answers.

“So what does it mean to you?”

“It’s a promise.”

“What kind of promise?”

“That I protect what’s mine.” A flicker of something appears in his eyes. Not rage. Not anger. But something akin to it. Begrudging loyalty maybe.

I believe what he says, but I don’t think he likes admitting it.

“And am I?” I say quietly. “Am I yours?”

He grits his teeth. A tendril of black mist lifts from his shoulder. It glitters in the diffused light like crushed obsidian.

“No one wants to be mine, *dieva*,” he says, shrouding the earlier emotion in a dark scowl.

“Why not?”

He takes a step toward me. Then another. The black mist suddenly engulfs me, and I backpedal, slamming into the next horse stall.

The only light in the darkness is Wrath’s pale face.

“You wouldn’t survive in the dark,” he says, voice low and menacing.

Somehow this conversation has turned from the theoretical *them* to *me*, and I realize that he always intended it to be about me. Not some stranger. Some random person off the street.

He means *I* wouldn’t want to be his.

I wouldn’t survive his cold, dark heart.

I want to prove him wrong.

Summoning a breath, I lift my shoulders. “I don’t think you have any idea what I’m capable of surviving.”

His dark magic writhes in the air, and it drives out the heady scent of hay and animal, overwhelming me instead with its cool, crisp sweetness.

The darkness shoots out and presses against my throat, forcing my chin up. A surprised yelp punctuates the unnatural silence, and I find it hard to fill my lungs again as the shadows restrict my throat.

Wrath hasn’t moved a muscle, and yet I’m pinned against the wall, fighting for air.

His expression is blank, as if he doesn't care. As if this outcome has no effect on him.

But I fucking know it does.

"Is this all you've got?" I choke out.

There's a pinch of annoyance at the outer corners of his eyes. "You don't want to play this game, *little girl*."

He's probably right.

My inner voice is screaming at me to stop being an idiot.

But—

"Maybe I do," I bite out, the instinct to prove myself to him overriding my good sense.

He laughs through his nose. "You will regret this."

The darkness expands, pulsating outward like the blast from a nuclear bomb. The air crackles as the shadows solidify taking the form of the *narrow*, the six of them.

Oh shit. I forgot about them.

The shadowmen shoot forward, barreling into me. It's like a thousand needles piercing my flesh. Like nettles coursing through my veins.

The scream that rends from my throat is involuntary and pain filled.

The *narrow* grab hold of me and yank me off my feet, throwing me back. I slam into the opposite row of stalls, teeth clacking painfully together as I crumple to the concrete floor.

The coppery tang of blood fills my mouth. Wrath runs his fingers over his own lips, and they come away red with blood. He scowls at it.

"Have you had enough, *dieva*?"

Rolling to all fours, I say, "Is that all you've got?"

Something slams into my side. A rib cracks. Pain shoots through me as I'm tossed back. The shadows blot out the light as I blink blindly upward, waiting for the pain to subside, trying to catch my breath.

I try to sit up, but the shadows press down. It's like a boulder has been set on my chest. An unmovable force.

"How about now?" Wrath's voice is no longer measured and calm. There's pain there and impatience.

A sense of *déjà vu* comes over me. We're playing that game again, that push and pull game where he tempts me and I tempt him but instead of fucking this time, we're fighting.

And I think for us, they're one and the same.

The darkness kicks up again. “Tell me to stop, *dieva*,” he says. I can no longer see him, but I can hear him just as plainly as if he were speaking directly in my ear.

He’s everywhere. Overwhelming me.

He knows exactly what he’s doing.

I might not be king, but I have the crown and part of the Demon King’s magic. That means I can do something about it.

The heat and the power burn quickly this time. I don’t even have to think about it as it roars through me.

One second I can’t breathe with the *narrow* pressing closer, and the next second—bright, fiery light shines through the stable.

The *narrow* let out a primordial roar as the light burns through them, devouring them.

When the light and the darkness dissipate, it’s just me and Wrath again.

It takes me some effort to get up, and I have to use one of the stalls for leverage as I climb to my feet. My side is aching; it’s getting harder to breathe by the second, and there’s still blood in my mouth.

But I’m not about to back down.

Wrath stands in the middle of the aisle, hands hanging casually by his side. There’s no expression on his face. No emotion. He just watches me from his lofty height, silently assessing. Despite our supposed connection, he appears untouched, save for the blood dotting his bottom lip.

“Now what?” I say, a little cocky.

He bows his head.

A flash of triumph lights in my gut. I try to bite back a whoop because I don’t want to be too cocky. Not yet anyway.

But then—

When Wrath looks up again, his eyes are burning brightly.

“Oh *dieva*,” he purrs, “you have so much to learn and far too much to lose.”

He lifts his hand and snaps his fingers, and suddenly, the stable is filled with *narrow*.

Not just the six I usually see him with.

Dozens.

Their dark shapes soak up all the light. The horses whinny and stomp in their stables.

Across the expanse of the stable, in the sea of darkness, Wrath’s pale face

stands out in stark relief. And there's a devilish grin on his sinful mouth.

I've grown too cocky.

All it took was Wrath fucking me to make me forget who and what he is.

He's the villain.

And I'm just prey.

"Take her," Wrath says.

And the tide of dark soldiers charges me.

I have a stupid second of confidence where I think maybe I can take them, and I reach for that now familiar heat of power.

But I'm not fast enough. I'm not trained. I don't know the first thing about winning.

The *norrow* swarm me. My side flares with pain again and I let out a screech.

They take it as an opening, and soon their darkness is surging down my throat, filling my lungs, drowning me in it. There's no air to breathe, and no air to take in. I'm lost in the darkness.

I'm drowning in it.

And Wrath...

I get a flash of him as the *norrow* bury me.

A flash of him walking away.

I wake with a jolt.

Everything is dark.

For a panicked minute, I think I've been possessed and have joined the ranks of Wrath's dark army.

I guess the president was right—Wrath *is* building a weapon.

It's only when I feel the softness of the sheets beneath me, and stretch out my toes beneath the blanket, that I realize where I am. I'm back in my room in Wrath's castle.

And a second later, Wrath's voice rasps from the shadows.

“Did you learn your fucking lesson?”

I startle, not realizing he was there, and then press my hand to my chest. My heart is racing. “You're an asshole,” I mutter for the billionth time and pull myself up against the headboard.

“You keep saying that as if you hope it'll change.” His pale face finds a sliver of moonlight, and a shiver rolls across my shoulders. “They call me ruthless for a reason, *dieva*. I'm not here to be your friend.”

I scrub at my face. I surprisingly feel all right considering the *narrow* consumed me to the point I was knocked unconscious for...what, a few hours? If it's dark beyond the castle, it must have been.

“If we're not meant to be friends, then why do you keep fucking me?” I challenge.

I almost feel the drop in the barometric pressure as soon as the words are out of my mouth. It's like I've just put chum in the water and realized I forgot the fucking shark cage.

Wrath darts across the room, yanks me from the bed and throws me up against the wall. His arm comes across my throat, forcing my head to the side just so I can find a hollow of space to breathe.

He lords over me, a beacon of darkness and rage.

I might have the *animus*, I might burn with the hellfire of it, but Wrath might be my match in temper.

I'm not playing in the little leagues here. I keep forgetting that.

This isn't some guy I met at a bar. Or someone Gus set me up on a blind date with.

He's not even a man.

He's a demon from another world. A king without his crown.

The villain.

A thrill shivers over my scalp as he leans his weight into me, proving just how weak I am next to him, both in strength and in determination.

Because when I find myself in these predicaments with him, my primal bitch wants to bend over for him, bare myself, let him do whatever the hell he wants to me.

"I fuck you, *dieva*," he says, "because you like it."

I swallow, feeling the first sink of pressure to my clit.

I moan and writhe, and he tightens his hold. His mouth comes to the shell of my ear, and with the barest touch of his lips, I'm ignited with desire. I must be going mad. I'm losing my damn mind.

My nipples bud under my shirt. My clit throbs.

"I fuck you, *dieva*," he whispers, "because I can."

He's right. Curse him for being right.

I would let him do just about anything to me.

The breath catches in my throat and I sputter to get it back.

Wrath lets up just a fraction, showing me mercy, and I seize the opportunity.

I shift beneath his hold and kiss him. It takes him by surprise, and he drops his hands.

That's all I need.

I wrap my arms around him, fingernails digging into his scalp.

And then—

He lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist, feeling the dig of his cock at my center.

He might pretend there's nothing between us, that this is all me and my

weak lady desires, but I know he's fucking lying.

I know it by the press of his hard-on.

I know it by the way he can't stop himself either.

His tongue meets mine as the kiss deepens, as the kiss turns hungry and burning.

I moan into him, and he groans back, the sound reverberating through his chest.

He's as mad as I am.

We're both fucking mad.

He turns to the bed and throws me back, then pulls his shirt off over his head. I scurry out of my pants, then my shirt, and he's on me again, growling into me as our mouths collide.

I am lost in the chaos of it, in the mindlessness. There is only my body, the driving need to fuck, to glow with the pleasure of it.

Somehow, my panties are torn off, my bra tossed aside, and Wrath's mouth sinks to my breast, sucks my nipple into his mouth, and bites at the bud.

I cry out into the darkness as his cool, spicy scent fills the room.

He winds his arm around my hips, lifting my pelvis to him. He's naked too, cock hot and throbbing at my opening.

"Fuck me," I pant into the dark.

"I'll fuck you when I'm ready." He nips at my breast again and I jolt beneath him.

I grab a chunk of his hair and yank hard. "Fuck me goddammit."

There's a burning desire so potent at my core, I think I might ignite from the inside out if he doesn't light the match.

He teases at my opening, and I buck beneath him, coaxing him in.

Teeth gnashing at my earlobe, he says, "I am in charge here, *dieva*."

I wrap my legs around his waist and roll him over. "If that's what you need to think."

The head of his cock hits at my clit as I straddle him. I rock against him, and his eyes roll back.

I fucking knew it.

He brings his hands to my hips, forcing me still. But I can feel the throb of him at my slick channel.

I shift forward, and the slide of his dick against my clit is damn near mind-blowing.

“*Dieva*,” he says into the dark.

“Yes?”

His grip on my hips tightens, and he lifts me up just enough to get beneath me.

“I am your king,” he says.

Chest heaving, body buzzing, I answer, “I bow to no one.”

“You bow to me.” His eyes glow red.

I’ve never felt the hollowness at the center of me so acutely.

“Say it.” His hands press harder, fingertips practically bruising bone as the head of his cock swells at my opening.

I’m not sure what I’m giving him by giving in.

What is the cost?

And do I fucking care?

I want to be filled up by him.

The building pressure is so intense, I’m practically crawling out of my skin, flush and quivering, whimpering with the need. Is it me or the *animus* battering down my inhibitions, the crown desperate for its king?

I can say one thing and do another.

I know he’s playing a game. I can play it too.

“Fine,” I say. “You are my king.”

“Good girl,” he says and then shoves his cock inside of me.



He lets me ride him through waves and waves of pleasure. Let's me rock against him, hitting my clit just right every time he slides in and out of me.

I've already given up whatever it was he wanted, so he lets me hold the reins.

We are loud and frenzied in our fucking. Both of us.

Every nerve ending in my body fizzles like a firecracker.

There is nothing other than here, now, and the hard, rough drive of Wrath's cock inside of me.

If I didn't believe in other worlds before, I do now.

Because I feel like I've been transported to some other plane.

When the orgasm comes, it's like a hurricane. Like I've been swept off the earth. Like I am weightless and burning hot, carried off on a gale wind.

As I cry out, Wrath tightens his hold like he's holding on for dear life. He roars loudly, tenses up, drives deep.

I swear I feel the intense heat of his cum filling me up.

Mine, he says.

Mine, I echo.

He'll be dripping out of me later, the proof of the pleasure I milked from the Demon King one drop at a fucking time.

When the wave is over, and I quiver through the aftershocks, I look down at Wrath, coated in sweat, and find his eyes, two burning embers in the dark.

Butterflies arch through my belly.

He lifts me off of him and we collapse onto the bed together.

I'm lost in the delight of it all. Maybe a little drunk on it.

I'm never going to tell him how he makes me feel.

I can't tell him that there's this familiar warmth burning through my chest that feels awfully close to *like*.

I don't like him.

I can't like a villain.

The mattress shifts as Wrath gets up. For a blind, stupid second, I reach out for him as if to keep him there.

Thankfully, his back is to me, and he misses the slipup. I yank my hand back.

I hear the bite of a zipper somewhere in the shadows as he gets dressed.

"I'm starting to wonder if I should carve a notch in my bedpost every time we fall into bed together."

I'm goading him. He knows it. I know it.

He grumbles somewhere by my bathroom.

"I hold the power, *dieva*," he says. "Don't forget that."

I snort at the ceiling. "I have your handy little crown. Don't forget *that*."

"You possess what was stolen from me."

I lean back on my elbows. "It's not like I snuck into your world and stole it for myself. I didn't choose this."

There's silence in the shadows of my room. I have to fight the urge to flick on the bedside lamp.

"I will have the *animus* returned to me," he says finally.

"Obviously," I say before I can think twice about it. I don't know what giving it back entails. How long have I had it? How did I get it? And does it have anything to do with my biological father?

There are still so many questions and too few answers.

"As soon as we can figure out the *how*, then yes, you can have it back. I don't want it," I say oddly wanting to please him.

The Demon King appears by my bedside and towers over me, shirtless, jet-black hair damp from our fucking. His dark demon mark winds around his shoulders, across his chest.

He puts fists on the edge of the bed and hunches toward me. His mouth is inches away. Without thinking, I bite the edge of my lip like I'm staring at a tasty snack I know I shouldn't eat.

In this position, every fiber of muscle in his arms stands out. Thick, corded muscle. Every inch of him is a miracle. A sight to behold.

If I had my camera, would he let me photograph him?

When the crown is his, will I ever see him again?

Maybe I want a memento to remember the wild ride.

“I think you’re lying,” he says quietly. “I think you like the power.”

“Oh? Maybe I’ll prove it to you.”

He waits.

“I think we should go see my mom and figure out how I came to possess the *animus*. Ciri said if we can figure out how I got it, we can figure out how to take it away.”

He thinks this over for a few seconds and then pushes away from the bed. “All right. Where is your mother now?”

“Scotland. Somewhere. Not exactly sure where.”

He crosses his arms over his chest.

“Can you put a shirt on?” I say.

He looks down at himself. “I’m sorry. Am I too distracting?”

I slide out of the bed, still completely naked, and put my hands on my hips, forcing my boobs out. “I don’t know. Am I when I’m like this?”

Gaze hungry, he drinks in the sight of me. I slide two fingers between my legs, and they come away slick with our mixed pleasure. I drag my tongue over the tip of my finger and close my eyes, moaning. “Mmmm. It tastes so good. Maybe I’ll go for another round by myself and—”

His hand is suddenly wrapped around my wrist. My eyes snap open to find him just inches away, his gaze burning into me.

There’s a rumble deep in his throat. He sucks one of my fingers into his mouth, his tongue sliding over the tip. The sensual feel of it causes me to gasp in surprise.

“You possess the Hellfire Crown and yet you still dare to play with fire.” His teeth sharpen along with his face, the monster coming out to play. He bites my finger, piercing flesh, and I hiss in pain as he laps up the blood.

A replica of the bite appears on his finger, an echo of the connection between us. But Wrath ignores it.

“Do not vex me, *dieva*. Or I’ll take the next bite out of your ass.”

“Do you promise?” I challenge because damn if I don’t want to get burned.

He reaches around me and grabs my ass cheek, squeezing hard, then gives me a smack. I yelp as an echoing thrill pulses in my clit.

“Why don’t you bend me over and do that?”

He gives me a cross look. “Get dressed, *dieva*.” He steps away and

retrieves his shirt, slipping it on over his head. “Well go on,” he says when I haven’t moved.

Body buzzing, chest tight, I find my clothes in a ball on the other side of the bed and slip into the bathroom. I quickly dress and catch my reflection in the bathroom mirror before leaving.

Damn. I look like hell. Like I’ve just rolled out of bed hungover and... well, *fucked*.

What exactly did Wrath do to me in the stables? Was it all for show or will there be consequences?

Even though I’m enjoying this intense energy between us, I don’t want to find out somewhere down the road that I was naïve and gullible, especially not when he’s gutting me with his dark magic, trying to carve the *animus* from my bones.

A shiver makes my shoulders shake, and I hunch forward over the counter, inhaling deeply. Gus tried talking me into yoga last year to help me deal with some of the stress of my job, but I barely made it through one class. I don’t like the slow movements. I like speed and intensity.

I can just hear my mom in my head: *All that Aries fire!*

I could really use those breathing techniques right about now though.

I could really use Gus too.

Another pang of guilt and heartbreak comes over me, thinking of my best friend. When this is all over, how will Gus feel about me? Knowing that I ran away with the villain?

I’m stuck in the Demon King’s castle, fucking him around every corner and liking it more than I should. The thought of admitting that to Gus makes me want to vomit.

I just need to figure out how to give Wrath his power, and then we can go our separate ways, and I’ll purge him from my system like an illicit drug.

It might be hell, but I’ll make it through.

And then he’ll be someone else’s problem. Not mine. And I can focus on my own life again.

A dark shadow flits through the bathroom. A second later, Wrath appears behind me, leaning casually against the white tiled walls, arms crossed over his chest. The black mist trailing off of him blurs his sharp lines, making him look as though he’s stepped right out of some divine renaissance art.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, but I can’t tell if he’s asking because he’s concerned or if it’s something else. Can he feel my emotions too? Just how

deep does this connection go?

“Nothing,” I say. “I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

I’m not going to tell him the truth, so I come up with something on the fly.

“If you’re hurt when I’m hurt, why weren’t you knocked unconscious when you sent your demon horde against me?”

“It seems pain is only echoed when blood is spilled.”

“Interesting.”

“Very.”

Wrath could turn the *narrow* on me again and walk away unscathed.

A burr of fear sticks in my chest. At what point will I have gone too far? And as long as I possess the crown, does that line even exist? Would he let me get away with just about anything?

“How do you plan to find your mother?” he asks me. “I have to know a location to travel to it.”

“If I had a phone, I could call her.”

“Where is your phone?”

“Last I saw it, it was at the factory. Hard to say at this point.” I turn the faucet on and splash cold water on my face. When I come back up, water dripping from my nose, I find Wrath staring at me through the mirror.

When he looks at me like that, I can’t help but feel like a wick that’s been lit. Not with a match, but a stick of dynamite. Two ends, both burning, both about to blow.

I take in a settling breath. *Focus, Rain.*

“If we can get to my condo, I have an old phone I could use.”

He nods and pushes away from the wall. “Then we’ll go to your condo.”

“Aren’t you afraid of being seen? I’m sure Naomi has my place watched around the clock.”

He stops a few inches from me. “Hiding will make us appear weak. We’ll carry on as if nothing has changed.”

It must be nice to have no fear. Even before the Demon King arrived on our soil, there were still a thousand and one things to worry about in this world. I might not be as anxious or afraid as some people, but I still have to check my surroundings at night, lock my car doors behind me, and park beneath streetlights.

Now, knowing I possess the *animus*...

Nope. It's not mine, and I don't intend to keep it. No sense using it like a crutch when I've gotten by without it.

I dry my face on a black towel hanging on the rack, then turn to him.

He holds out his hand for me.

"Oh, we're going now?"

"Is there a better time?"

Probably not.

I slide my hand into his, and the second our skin touches, that now familiar jolt courses through me. It's like the crown knows it's found its rightful place.

It's these little touches that sometimes do me in. When it's nothing but skin to skin contact for no other reason than to touch.

Touching is more than fucking.

It's something more intimate.

Hand firmly in his, he tugs me into his side, tucking me protectively beneath the crook of his arm. My body warms. I have to check my reflection just to make sure I'm not glowing. I look normal.

I look...happy.

Does he feel this too? Or is it just me?

Am I falling for the trap of his beauty and his power?

"Ready?" he says.

I glance up at him. There's no indication on his face that he feels anything at all.

I nod because I don't trust my voice.

We just fucked, but his arm around me is about to unravel me.

He tightens his hold and pulls us away.

THE STATE of my condo catches me off guard. I forgot about the fight that ensued last I was here when the Men Against Wrath taped me to a chair and tried to torture information from me about Wrath.

The TV screen is spiderwebbed and the stand is crooked so the TV sits at an angle like it could tip over at the slightest gust of wind. Broken glass crunches beneath Wrath's boots. I'm barefoot, so I skirt the mess, angling for my bedroom door.

There are no bodies here, but old blood is splattered across the walls and dried in puddles on the floor.

It's a grim reminder of who and what Wrath is.

He was the one who saved me from the Men Against Wrath.

He is merciless. Brutal. Violent.

Gloriously powerful.

And right now, he's standing in the middle of the wreckage of my condo, and I can't help but watch the way the moonlight finds his face, paints it in shades of silver and blue.

I hurry to my bedroom, slip on a pair of shoes, then grab my back-up camera. I flick it on and silently send a prayer that the battery still has some juice left in it.

It does, so I dial in the settings I think I'll need based on the lighting conditions and come back out to the living room.

Wrath doesn't notice me pointing the lens at him, and I snap a picture, the click of the shutter pulling his gaze to me.

I snap another.

He scowls at me.

I hit the button again and a breath gets lodged in my throat.

Even through the viewfinder, I know that last shot will be something haunting.

"*Dieva,*" he says with a growl.

I pull the camera back and flip through the images on the screen.

My mom has always talked about the euphoria she feels when she gets *The Shot*. When she's on location and the light is perfect and everything comes together to capture magic through her lens.

I've never felt that.

Photography for me was always just a job. I knew how to operate a camera, how to shoot, how to find the light and get the shot.

But never *The Shot*.

I used to think my mom was exaggerating. Or that I didn't have the talent. Or that something was broken inside of me, that I couldn't connect to the art like she could. Like I couldn't truly see the beauty in the world.

Wrath's face, half highlighted by moonlight, that pinch of exasperation between his eyes, the glint of wetness on his lips, sends a shockwave of excitement through my limbs.

Every portrait photographer I've ever met says that it's the eyes that can

make or break a shot.

Wrath's gaze in the image has caught a pinpoint of light while his irises flare red.

Wrath's eyes are piercing at the best of times, downright volcanic now.

There's a burn of tears in my sinuses.

I'm immediately embarrassed by the reaction, but there's no sense trying to hide it.

I've never felt this way before about my art. I've never gotten The Shot.

Family photography was never my thing, and that's because I never had a subject quite like Wrath. Full of darkness and power. If the eyes are the window to the soul, Wrath's gaze is the window to an abyss.

It's haunting and electric. It's hard to look away from the image.

I immediately want to post it online. Blow it up and hang it over my mantle.

This is the kind of memento that might haunt me for the rest of my life. I can just see a ninety-year-old me in a nursing home clutching a photo of Wrath to my chest, the paper curled along the edges, creased in the middle.

"Dieva," he says again, quieter this time, more of an exasperated warning than anything.

"Sorry." I swallow, lick my lips. "I couldn't help myself. It is my job, after all."

He gives me an indecipherable look.

I set the camera aside and go in search of my old cell phone. I find it in a bin in my closet. When I come back out into the living room, Wrath is holding a pair of World War II binoculars in his hands.

"Those were my great-grandfather's," I say absently while hunting for my phone charger.

"What were they for?" He holds them up in the light.

"Finding and shooting Nazis."

Wrath grumbles. "Chaos."

"What?"

"It was Chaos that started World War II."

"You could say that again."

He sets the binoculars down and plucks a seashell from the shelf. It's one I collected when Mom and I stayed in Florida.

I spot the charger on the kitchen counter and plug my phone in. The screen lights up with the low battery symbol.



As I stand there waiting for it to turn on, my brain finally picks up on what Wrath said, dislodging the conversation I overheard between him and Arthur the other night.

“Hold on a second. Whenever you talk about Chaos, it sounds like you’re talking about a person.”

He turns the shell over in his hand. “Chaos is my brother.”

“Wait...what?!”

He returns the shell to the shelf.

“You have a brother? Named Chaos?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And what?”

There are so many questions running through my head that it’s hard to make sense of where to begin. I run my hand through my hair and pace the room. “You and Arthur were talking about Chaos getting *through* and...you told Ciri that you would wear the crown, not Chaos. So...Chaos is your brother, and he...he’s trying to take your throne?”

Wrath remains as stoic as always, but I can hear the anger and the fear in his voice when he says the one word, confirming my suspicions. “Yes.”

“I don’t understand. Why is he trying to get through? To find the *animus*?”

“Yes.”

“So he...me...oh god.” I have to sit down.

The couch squeaks when I plop onto the cushion and prop my elbows on my knees, hands buried in my hair. This is worse than I thought.

But really...I can’t be surprised, right? Wrath and Lauren and Arthur have hinted that there’s more than Wrath, that he’s been searching for the *animus* because of a threat to his throne, and to our world because of it.

What was it Lauren said to me the first time I was in the castle?

*You don’t even know what you stand to lose or how hard Wrath is working to save this entire world.*

If Chaos started World War II...

“Why?” I say. “Why did your brother start a war here? Why is he trying to take the throne? What does he plan to do if he gets through?”

“Wars are inevitable,” Wrath answers as he flips through one of my self-help books. “My brother and I represent two sides of a coin. I may be ruthless, but I rule with order. Without order, there is chaos. But without

chaos, what is order? Does one exist without the other?"

He puts the book back and comes over to the sofa, hands loose fists by his side. "But I am weak without my crown, and he knows that. He poses a threat to my world and to yours. The more chaos he breeds, regardless of where it is, the stronger he becomes. I just need to hold him in check."

I look up at him. "So that's why you're here. Why you're looking for the *animus*. To save us?"

He turns away. "Do not look for redeeming qualities within me, *dieva*. You will be disappointed with what you find."

Down on the boardwalk outside my building, a group of people laugh and cajole each other. They have no clue that just three floors up, I'm having a life-altering conversation with the Demon King while he riffles through my belongings and mementos.

"You're still trying to stop him," I point out. "And by stopping him, you'll help stop more chaos from entering our world."

The line of his jaw runs parallel to his shoulder as he turns to me. "Chaos is already here."

I frown. "I thought you said he was trying to get through."

"Physically," he says. "But his power has been slithering through the gates for decades. Likely you've felt the rise in the disorder, the sense that a volcano is building, about to erupt."

I have. I can't deny that. The news has been awful. The world is a dumpster fire. The mass shootings. The global disasters ignored by the people in power. The bickering politicians. The non-stop violence, mayhem, and...*chaos*.

"He's been getting through," Wrath says, "because without the *animus*, I grow weak. The weaker I am, the harder it is for me to balance him out. We only work together when we are both in check."

"So how did he get through back in the 40s?"

"It was an oversight on my part. Once Chaos was safely back in Alius, Ciri sealed the gate with my help. Of course, the longer the gate was closed, the harder it was to open again. And I've heard travelers have been hunted on your side. Witches who knew what Chaos had done wanted to make sure he couldn't do it again. With Chaos gone and the gates sealed, your world stabilized again after the 40s, but when I lost the crown...."

He trails off and looks out the window, limned in faint, hazy moonlight.

"You never did tell me who took your crown."

“Chaos did.” He looks at me across the living room, eyes starting to burn in the dim light. “I trusted him, and he betrayed me.”

The Demon King might be ruthless, but I’m coming to realize there are a few things he sees as unbreakable—loyalty and honor. He has his own set of rules, and he controls the throne with them.

They might be cruel rules, and we all might disagree with them, but at least he has them.

“Why didn’t he keep the crown for himself then?”

“At the time, he couldn’t.”

I frown at him. “I don’t understand. I have the crown, and I’m clearly using its power. Why couldn’t he?”

“Now you know why you’ve caught my attention, *dieva*. You are an anomaly. You shouldn’t be able to use the *animus*, let alone contain it. Your first brush with it should have incinerated you.”

That’s an image I don’t want burned into my brain.

“So does that mean by simple elimination that I’m not human?” The question makes my heart thud loudly in my ears.

“If I had to guess, I’d say yes.”

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

It’s not like that should surprise me at this point. I’ll get to the bottom of my lineage, somehow, someday.

“So Chaos took the crown, but he couldn’t use it. What’s the point of it all then?”

“It’s true that in a *typical situation*,” he levels a penetrating look at me, meaning I’m *not* the typical situation, “you need all three powers to master all three. But without the full triad of power, I grow weaker by the day. Chaos might be able to overpower me soon enough and then he’ll take *dominus* and *oculus* from me. And if he gets all three, I will no longer be king.”

A shiver races up my spine. Both at the mention of royalty and at the thought of someone named Chaos ruling anything.

“Do you not get along with your brother?”

Wrath turns away from me as he considers the question. “We got along once.”

“And then he became too power hungry?”

He bows his head and says something low and beneath his breath. Something that sounds like, “Or perhaps I did.”

“What did you say?”

My phone lets out a chime, signaling it's finally charged enough to turn on.

Wrath ignores my question and stares out the window. Figures.

I grab the phone and hit the power button, and the screen flashes. "You talk about the triad of power like they're actual objects. Is that true?"

"When not claimed, they are." He plucks one of my crystals from the bookshelf and holds it out in his hand. It's the large chunk of amethyst I bought at last year's fine arts & crafts fair. The purple stone glitters in the light.

"Each trine of power is no bigger than this stone. They're all black and carved with the old language. There are many legends of how they came to be, but the one I like best is that they were gifted to the first Demon King by our father god."

He tosses the crystal up into the air and catches it again as he walks toward me. "When a demon becomes king, there is a ritual where he takes on the power of the stones and he absorbs them."

"Have demons always ruled your world?"

"Yes. We are the most powerful. Vampires and witches like to argue against it, and they've certainly tried to overthrow us, but they've failed every time."

"How long has the triad existed? How long have there been kings?"

He keeps tossing the crystal and catching it again. "I'm the twelfth king. There have been kings since the beginning of recorded history."

"Did you guys just learn how to write or something? Twelve...that's not a lot."

When he catches the amethyst this time, he stops, fingers curling over its sharp points as he looks at me. "I've been king for over six hundred years."

The room sways. "Six hundred? Are you kidding?"

"I don't *kid*," he says with a sneer, as if the very idea is beneath him.

My voice is shrill when I ask, "Exactly how old are you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Ummm...yes."

"My father died in my two-hundredth year. That's when I became king."

"That makes you...eight hundred years old?"

He doesn't confirm it, but I can see the truth in his eyes.

No wonder we're powerless against him. Not only does he possess the kind of magic that only used to exist in our fiction, but he's older than our

country. By a lot. To him, we must all be idiotic children.

I can't imagine the sheer weight of eight hundred years of living. Or six hundred years of ruling.

"What was your father like?" I ask, wondering if I even want to have this conversation.

It was a lot easier to think of Wrath as nothing more than a villain when he had no past, no family. When my imagination could fill in the blanks, when I could tell myself a story of how the wicked Demon King sprouted from a puddle of black ooze in some dank cave.

He must have the same thought, because the gaze he cuts to me is withering. "We're not doing this, *dieva*."

"Doing what?"

"You're looking for ways to humanize me." He returns the amethyst to the shelf. "And I refuse to give them to you."

I scowl and cross my arms over my chest. "Is that so bad? To want to hope that you're more than what you appear to be?"

"Oh, I am more." In a blink, his face contorts to the monster. The sharp cheekbones, the glowing eyes, the teeth that remind me of a vampire's fangs, the kind of teeth that could sink into flesh and chip away at bone.

In the next blink, he's back to that ethereal, pale beauty as he skirts around the couch, black mist rising in the hazy rays of moonlight.

"Fine," I say. "Then let's talk about Chaos. He stole your crown, hid it away and now..."

"Chaos has more patience than I do. He knew that if he hid the crown from me, the longer I was separated from it, the weaker I would become. He just had to wait. And now..." He sighs and presses his fingers to his eyes.

It's the first time I've seen him portray any kind of apprehension.

"Now, without the *animus*, I fear that if it came to it, Chaos could beat me."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

He seems so unbeatable though. Untouchable.

The fact that he's worried about facing off against his brother has me worried too. And I have the one thing he needs to keep his brother in line, to stop Chaos from starting another world war.

I cross the room and come to stand beside Wrath. His back is to me now, as if that one unguarded moment was too much. I reach down and take his

hand in mine. He doesn't pull away.

"You will get your crown back," I say. "I'll make sure you get it back."

He looks over at me. There's an emotion pinched between his eyes, one I haven't seen before, one that looks incongruous on his sharp, beautiful face.

*Hope.*

"I will hold you to your word, *dieva*," he says quietly. "Don't make promises you don't intend to keep."

"I intend to keep this one."

His mouth turns into a grim line, but he nods once and pulls away.

I immediately miss the line of him next to me, the feel of his hand in mine.

"How do we find your mother then?" he asks.

"That shouldn't be too hard." I return to check my phone and find the screen lit up with an old background photo of me and my mom in a sunflower field.

I navigate to messenger and tap on Mom's name to call her.

It rings and rings and rings.

When she doesn't pick up, I end the call and tap out a message. *Call me as soon as you can.*

I'm just about to darken the screen, when a notification for my social account catches my eye. That's when I remember I messaged Susanna, one of my mom's friends from the fabled camping trip.

I tap to my direct messages and find Susanna's replied.

*So good to hear from you, Rain! I do remember your mom. We haven't spoken in a very long time. I hope she's doing well. I remember Jeffrey, yes. In fact, we had a show together a few years back. He's a sculptor now. Here's the last phone number I had for him. Good luck!*

My stomach drops.

Wrath comes to stand beside me. "What is it?"

"I think...well, I'm just now realizing that this is the phone number for my biological father." I laugh nervously. "A little part of me knew that if I really wanted to meet this man, I could figure out a way to track him down. But once the door is open—"

"It cannot be closed."

"Exactly." I bite at my bottom lip. "What if he's a big douche bag? An asshole? What if he doesn't want to speak to me?"

Wrath's face hardens. "He has no choice in the matter. He will speak."

“We’re not going to threaten my biological father.”

“We will if it gets us what we want.”

“*Wrath.*”

He scowls. “Fine. We will not threaten your father. Does that appease you?”

There’s a flash of warmth in my chest, the good kind. I think I just won something I didn’t realize I needed to win.

He gave in to me!

“Yes, consider me appeased,” I answer and try to bury the smile that wants to plaster itself on my face.

“Don’t get cocky,” he mutters.

“Who me? Never.”

I hear him snort as he saunters away.

My finger hovers over the phone number. I have no idea where Jeffrey lives or what time zone he’s in. He might be sleeping.

Before I can second guess it, I tap at the number and initiate the call.

I put the phone to my ear as it connects on the other end.

Shaking, hand sweating, I pace back and forth in front of the refrigerator. My heart is beating so fast, I can feel it in the back of my throat.

The phone rings once. Then twice. I consider disconnecting and pull the phone away from my ear.

No. I have to do this. I have to figure out how I got dragged into this nonsense.

I have to find out if—*if I’m not human.*

“Hello?”

I think my heart stops beating the second I hear the gravelly voice on the other end of the line.

“Hi,” I blurt and then panic because I didn’t give a second thought to what I actually wanted to say once I got this man on the phone.

There’s silence for a beat, and then Jeffrey says, “Can I help you?”

“Hi. Yes. Sorry.” I close my eyes and take in a deep breath. When I open them again, Wrath is standing in front of me, arms crossed over his chest. His presence is almost like a balm, soothing my nerves.

If I can stand in the same room with the Demon King, then I can have an actual conversation with my biological father.

“Hi,” I say again, “my name is Rain Low, and I think you knew my mother—”

“Sunny,” Jeffrey says. I can almost hear the smile in his voice. “Wow. Yeah. How is she?”

“She’s doing well. In fact...I wanted to talk to you about her, if you had time? There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh.” I can hear him breathing through the phone as he considers my request. I can only imagine what he’s thinking. Sunny Low’s daughter calls him over two decades later after a wild summer romp.

Is he making the connections? Did he ever wonder? Or did he leave Mom that summer and never give their tryst a second thought?

“Sure,” he finally answers. “I can chat now.”

“This would be better in person,” I say and then hold my breath. I know I’m asking a lot of a complete stranger damn near in the middle of the night.

“Now?” he says a little taken back.

“Yes. If it’s not too much trouble.”

He’s quiet a beat, and then, “Hell, I suppose. I’m in the studio. And I don’t sleep much. Do you know where I live? Are you in town or something?”

I look at Wrath. I have the best kind of transportation this side of the multi-verse or whatever. “I can get there pretty quickly if you give me an address.”

He rattles off an address in upstate Vermont in the mountains.

“It’s kinda hard to find if you don’t know where to look,” he says.

“Don’t worry.” Wrath is already surrounded in black mist, ready to carry us away. “I’ll manage it.”

Jeffrey chuckles to himself. “I guess I’ll see you soon then?”

“Definitely.”

We disconnect. I slide my phone in the back pocket of my jeans and then race to the kitchen sink and splash cold water on my face.

I never pined for a father. I knew it could have been cool to know him, considering how much my mom liked him, but I never felt a father-sized hole in my heart.

But now, the very thought of meeting him has me shaking and nauseous.

Bent over the kitchen sink, sucking in several deep breaths, I try to quell the rising tide of nerves when I feel Wrath’s presence behind me.

“I’ll be with you,” he says quietly. “You have no reason to worry.”

“I know. It’s not that. It’s—”

What if I’m not human? What if I’m a demon? I don’t have the demon



mark like Wrath and Lauren and Emery, but maybe it's hidden or—

Everything is changing and shifting beneath me, and I don't know what to hold on to.

Wrath pulls me upright and forces me to face him. "You need answers. I need answers," he says. "The safety of your world might depend on it."

I nod weakly. "I know. I'm fine. I can do this."

His sudden kindness, the way he's gentle with me, has me feeling all sorts of weird things in my belly. Maybe there is a softer side to the Demon King that only a very select few get to see.

Maybe he's not as bad as I thought.

"Show me the address on a map," he says, turning us both to business. Focusing on the tasks will help.

When Wrath has a lock on the location, I duck into my bedroom and shove a few more things in a bag. I want my clothes and my shampoo and toothbrush. Apparently, I'm officially moving in with the Demon King.

I never wanted a roommate, and certainly not a demon one.

At the last second, I wrap my back-up camera into a sweater and shove it to the bottom of the bag, ignoring the look Wrath gives me. There will definitely be more pictures in his near future whether he likes it or not.

He is a haunting subject, one I want to document.

"Ready?" he asks.

"As I'll ever be, I suppose."

He holds out a hand for me, but I ignore it and step into his side. He doesn't hesitate and quickly wraps his arm around me, holding me close.

Now I can breathe easier.

The darkness kicks up around us and carries us off.

Wrath drops us at the end of Jeffrey's driveway.

Whenever we reappear somewhere through the sub-dimension, there's always this sound that reminds me of a superhero's cape snapping in the wind.

But Wrath has no cape, and he's no superhero.

It's dark here. Crickets and other nighttime creatures sound in the night. The moon is waning, making the darkness heavier.

I was never afraid of the dark as a kid, but I was afraid of the dark woods. I had a wild imagination and thought there might be monsters lurking just past the tree line, waiting for the perfect moment to attack.

How ironic is it that I'm now standing in the dark with something, or rather *someone*, worse than the monsters in my childhood imagination? I certainly never dreamed the monster would look like Wrath.

We follow the dirt driveway through dense woods before the landscape opens up to a field and a cabin nestled at the back of the property.

The cabin is dark, but a second outbuilding several yards from it glows brightly.

Jeffrey mentioned he was in his studio.

Wrath is the first to start forward. I hesitate, trying to prepare myself to meet a man that might share half my DNA.

Wrath stops at the top of a gently rolling hill in the field. I can't see his face with the moonlight and the studio glow at his back, but I can hear his voice perfectly.

"Come, *dieva*."

I surge ahead.

The closer we get, the more I can smell marijuana in the air. Piano music filters out into the night.

We come up on the outbuilding where two large windows look in on the studio.

A man with broad shoulders and graying blond hair tied in a bun uses a chisel on a tall marble slab. There's a joint hanging from the corner of his mouth, smoke curling around his squinting eyes.

The marble is slowly taking the shape of a person, and when the man steps to the side to examine some fine detail, I can see the face of what he's sculpting.

It's a Romanesque woman draped in sheer fabric. Somehow, by some magic, Jeffrey has managed to sculpt each fabric crease in the hard stone.

The figure's mouth is open like she's taking a deep breath, and the fabric yawns over her thin lips.

It's absolutely gorgeous. I think this is my favorite thing about art, how something can be created from nothing and make you feel something so potent, it's almost magic.

"Are you ready?" Wrath asks.

"Will you know if he's supernatural?" I ask him.

Wrath looks at the studio and inside at Jeffrey. "I'll know if he's a demon. If he's something else, depending on what it is, I'll smell it on him. Vampires I know the scent of. Witches are harder to parse. Each witch line smells a little different."

"Okay." I lick my lips. "If he's a demon, wouldn't we know if I was?"

Wrath regards me. "You would think, but everything about you, *dieva*, has been unprecedented."

I shiver in the summer heat.

"I guess we should get this over with then." I take a quick, deep breath and knock on the studio door.

Tools clatter to a table inside and then footsteps come near.

When Jeffrey pulls the door open, the weed hits me along with the scent of pine and whiskey.

"You weren't lying," he says to us. "Did you fly here on a helicopter?" He looks from me to Wrath, and his face falls. "Oh. Well...that explains it." Some of the cheerfulness has disappeared from his face. The Demon King will do that to a person.

“I didn’t realize you knew the demon.”

Wrath scowls. I can’t help but note the way he says *demon* like he’s removed from it. Like he isn’t one.

Wrath gives me an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

The relief is nearly palpable.

Jeffrey isn’t a demon.

But that only brings up more questions.

“Come on in,” Jeffrey says and pulls the door back.

The building is air conditioned, and as soon as I step inside, I have to rub my arms to ward off the sudden chill.

Wrath stands beside me, dwarfing both Jeffrey and me.

In his giant castle, with its soaring ceilings, it’s easy to forget just how tall he is. Hell, I’m 5’7” and I feel like a five-footer next to him.

“Welcome to my studio,” Jeffrey says. He’s wearing a denim apron, the front pockets full of tools. Bits of marble are caught in his graying beard. Black framed glasses slouch on his wide nose.

I look for similarities in our faces and see none. The panic sets in.

“This statue you’re working on,” I say as I circle it, “is incredible.”

“Thank you. It’s a commissioned piece. It’ll be shipped out to France middle of next month. Still lots more to do.” He crosses his arms over his chest. “So what can I do for you, Rain? You said you wanted to talk about your mom?”

“Yeah. I’ve heard so much about you from her. When you guys all camped together...it’s one of her best memories I think.”

I sense Wrath circling the room behind me. Jeffrey’s eyes stray from me to him and then back to me.

It’s hard not to track the Demon King when he’s around.

“Your mother is an incredible woman.” Jeffrey picks up a steel flask from his work bench and unscrews the top. He takes a swig, then offers it to me.

“No thanks.”

He caps it and returns it.

“So... there’s no easy way to say this...”

Wrath goes still behind me. Jeffrey’s gaze darts to him again.

“So I’m just going to say it. I think you’re my father.”

Jeffrey’s attention jolts back to me. “What?”

“I’m sorry to spring this on you. I wish my mom would have told you a long time ago. I don’t know why she didn’t. That was her choice, of course.

But now...now things are complicated, and I need to know more about my birth and you...my biological father. I mean...maybe you can shed some light on who you are? Like...maybe—”

“Hold on.” He lifts his hands, his thick brow sunk over his glasses. “You think I’m your father?”

I nod and surge on. “My mom found out she was pregnant with me right after the camping trip, and you were the only person she was with.”

Jeffrey leans against the workbench and puts the heels of his hands on the edge of the counter. “Rain...I—”

“I know this must come as a shock to you.”

“That’s not it.”

“Oh?” I pause, frowning. “Okay. Then what is it?”

Wrath is closer at my back now, hovering like a protector.

“I’m sorry, Rain,” Jeffrey says, “but I can’t have kids.”

My mouth drops open. I blink at the man. My brain stutters to a stop.

“You...*what do you mean?*”

He pushes away from the counter. “I had pediatric leukemia. I’ve been infertile since I was twelve years old.”

I’m hot all over, but numb. I can’t feel my legs.

“I’m sorry,” Jeffrey goes on. “I did care for your mother a great deal, but I knew she wanted kids, and I knew I couldn’t have them. I thought I told her that, but maybe I didn’t. It *was* a whirlwind.”

I backpedal and slam into Wrath. His hands come to my arms, steadying me.

“No,” I say.

“*Dieva,*” Wrath says quietly.

“I...you...I mean...”

Pediatric leukemia? *Infertile?*

“I’m sorry you came all the way out here,” Jeffrey adds. “If I’d known that was the reason—”

I swallow hard and hold back the tears that are now threatening to spill over. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I bothered you,” I manage to get out right before I bolt through the door and out into the night.

I STUMBLE INTO THE WOODS. I'm directionless. The branches tug at my hair.

Tears stream down my face. What the fuck is happening?

I feel like a tree that's been ripped from the ground, roots and all. I have no anchor. Nothing makes sense anymore.

Thunder rumbles overhead and a drop of rain splatters on my forehead.

Stumbling into a clearing, I find Wrath standing in the weak moonlight as thick clouds roll in. Black mist plumes in the air around him. He's a vision of dark beauty, and I'm snotty and sobbing and—

“*Dieva*,” he says again.

“What is happening?” I shout as the rain starts to fall.

He says nothing, and I huff out a breath, hands on my hips.

Suddenly he's beside me, but I don't flinch. I'm used to him disappearing and reappearing with no notice. I'm no longer afraid of the monster at my back and the threat of his dark power.

I'm not sure what that says about me, that I believe myself to be safe in the presence of a demon.

The rain slides down his face, flattens his hair. Somehow, he looks even more gorgeous soaking wet. It makes me ravenous for a meal I didn't realize I needed and wanted.

There's been this gnawing hunger at the center of me for a very long time, one that's only satiated when Wrath is around.

Now that I know the taste of him, I'm not sure I can ever give him up.

“Why me?” I ask him.

“I don't know,” he admits.

“It could have been anyone that got the animus, and yet here I am. Like getting struck by lightning.” I wave vaguely at the now dark sky.

“No,” he says.

“No?”

“Not just anyone.”

I frown at him.

“As I told you, the *animus* would kill most who possessed it the way you do. So no, you're not just anyone. You're the only one who can tame it, apparently.”

*And me*, he doesn't say, but I think we both know it to be true.

No one can stand up to him the way I can.

“What happens after?” I ask. “When we figure out how I got it, what happens after?”

“I take it back.”

“And then?”

The grim line of his mouth tells me all I need to know.

“I am a king,” he finally says. “I have a duty.”

What did I think he’d say? Did I think we’d save the world together and then ride off into the sunset? Maybe retire to the beach and sip margaritas? Maybe he’d stay in Norton Harbor and we’d move into a condo together and pretend to be normal?

The rain picks up. I’m thoroughly soaked now and starting to shiver as the temperature plummets. Wrath frowns at me as thunder cracks closer to the field causing me to flinch.

“Come,” he says and holds out his hand.

“Where are we going?”

“Home.”

Home. As if we belong there together. As if it belongs to us both.

I slip my hand into his as lightning bolts through the sky, sending silver light across the clearing. The beat of electricity crawls down my spine, and the Demon King pulls me into him.

I finally feel like I can breathe. Like I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be.

I was wrong, I realize as Wrath’s shadow magic kicks up around us, somehow defying the driving rain.

Wrath’s castle isn’t home. It isn’t where I want to belong.

It’s right here, tucked into his side, surrounded by his darkness.

Everything is changing and nothing makes sense, but the one constant?

The one constant is Wrath and the familiar feel of him.

How the hell am I ever going to let him go?

We reappear in my bedroom at the castle. Water drips from us onto the rug with a loud plop-plop.

Wrath doesn't let me go right away, and I don't make a move to step back.

I shouldn't like being surrounded by his arms or his scent.

I shouldn't like being the only person who can get this close to him.

I shouldn't, but I do.

I like it very much.

I tilt my head back and look up at him. There's worry in his eyes.

It's an echo of what I feel, like this should be wrong, but it doesn't feel that way.

I'm supposed to hate him, and he does infuriate me but—

Wrath lifts his hand to my face, his pale fingers pulling away a wet strand of hair from my jaw. I shiver beneath his touch. He then lifts the strap of my bag from my shoulder and sets it aside.

There's no storm here, several states away from Vermont, but the air is charged nonetheless.

I rake my teeth over my bottom lip as the tide rises in my gut. I can't get enough of him. I can't stop this endless churning of desire any better than I could stop the night from falling. Does he feel it too?

Or maybe it's just the *animus* for him, power calling to its king.

His hand cups my jaw, the cold pad of his thumb brushing over my wet bottom lip.

I'm ignited in the span of a breath, and though I can't see my reflection, I



can tell by the shift in Wrath's expression that my eyes are glowing.

"*Dieva*," he says, pulling the name out like a prayer.

I'm still wet with his cum from the last time we fucked, but I could always take more.

My heart thumps in my chest. "Yes?"

"Will you really do anything within your power to return the *animus* to me?"

The open plea on his face almost breaks me. It could all be a ploy to win my trust, but I don't think it is. Wrath might be ruthless, but he's always been straightforward.

Giving him the *animus* means I might have to give him up too, but he was never mine to begin with, and neither was the crown.

"Of course," I breathe out. "You have my word."

His eyes are a red mirror of my own, and then he kisses me. Hard and fast. We break to inhale then crash into one another again as he drives me back to the bed, tearing off my wet shirt in one quick pull of his hand.

We bang into the bed post as Wrath's tongue finds mine with a delicious slide of heat. I'm throbbing between my legs and soaking fucking wet. Wrath yanks off his shirt and picks me up with barely any effort, his hands at my ass.

We're locked together like that in sensuous heat when the door to my room bangs open, and Lauren saunters in.

We stop kissing, and Wrath looks over at the intruder around the tangle of my wet hair. "What?" he barks.

"Never thought I'd catch the mighty Demon King with his pants down," Lauren snarks.

The growl that rumbles in Wrath's chest reverberates through me. He sets me down carefully and then disappears in the next breath. Reappearing behind Lauren, he's shrouded in darkness and fury. Two *norrow* jolt around him, grab Lauren by the arms and slam her to the floor.

She barks out a yelp as her face is smashed against the wood.

Wrath descends on her, his knee pressed between her shoulder blades.

When he speaks, his voice is like the blade of a knife drawing over stone. "I grow tired of your insolence."

She wiggles beneath him as the *norrow* disappear to whatever limbo they live in when Wrath isn't using them as weapons. "You're risking everything," she says, breath fanning over the hardwood floor. "And for

what? Some whore?”

I fold my arms over my chest and scowl. “I’m allowed to embrace my sexuality,” I argue, though truth be told, I’m kind of a whore for Wrath. Not going to lie. I don’t know where it’s coming from or why, but when he puts his hands on me, I’m pretty much mindless, nothing but buzzing lady parts.

“The *dieva* is right,” Wrath says. “In fact, I like when she embraces her power.”

“You do?”

He rises to his feet and yanks Lauren upright by her hair. He guides her over to me. “Bow to her,” he tells her.

“What?” Lauren and I say in unison.

“You have a decision to make,” Wrath tells Lauren. “You either die or you bow. You have five seconds.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” she says.

“One.” Wrath lets her go and she stumbles forward.

Lauren scowls. “I’m not bowing to her.”

“Two.”

“Wrath,” I try, “this really isn’t necessary.”

“Three.”

Lauren rights her shirt and smooths back her hair. “She’s no one. Nothing! Without the *animus*, she’s just—”

Wrath levels her with a glowing red glare. The darkness builds around him, the edges sharpening into blades. “Four.”

“All right! Fine!” She sinks to her knees in front of me. “Happy now?”

“Now stay there.”

“What?”

“You get up when she tells you to get up.”

“Um…” I look at him over the top of Lauren’s head and mouth, “What are you doing?”

“She needs to know her place,” is his answer. “And you need to know yours.”

His words hit me like a bomb. Is he saying...that I even *have* a place? The crown was stolen, my power borrowed from him. I have no place.

And yet the idea is intoxicating, even if it is temporary.

But I think there’s more to it. I think this is some kind of test, and I know I want to pass it.

I’m still shirtless in just my bra and soaking wet jeans, but I straighten my

shoulders and spine and walk a slow circle around Lauren feeling mightier than I have any right to be.

“Why do you hate me so much?” I ask.

She snorts.

I look at Wrath. “Could I ask you to kill her?”

Wrath clasps his hands behind his back. “Yes.”

I don’t plan on it, but it’s good to know what my options are. I’m no villain, after all, but I do think Lauren has been hating on me for stupid reasons.

“Answer the question,” I say.

Lauren inhales. “He can’t keep his hands off you. For months, people have fawned all over him, and he’s barely batted an eye, and now you come along and he’s losing his damn mind.”

Well shit. They say pride is a dangerous emotion, but damn if it doesn’t feel good.

I look across the room at Wrath. There’s nothing on his face to hint at how he feels about this accusation being thrown in his face, but the fact that he isn’t denying it makes me feel like a goddamn legend.

“What do you care?” I ask Lauren. “Because it’s sounding an awful lot like jealousy.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Aren’t you?”

Wrath slowly circles her, and her attention immediately wanders to him. She can deny the jealousy up and down, but the way she tracks him whenever he’s in the room tells me all I need to know.

I don’t blame her really. Until I got here, she had him all to herself. And whether or not she wanted him in her bed is irrelevant. I’ve clearly disrupted whatever it was she had before. It’s why she’s willing to risk his anger when she speaks against him. She’s hoping she can talk sense into him. She wants him to return to what he was before me.

“You’ll cost him something,” she says to me. “I don’t know what it is yet, but it won’t be anything good.”

When I catch Wrath’s eye again, he’s staring at me in that distant yet penetrating way he has. Does he think Lauren might be right? Is he worried?

“Get up,” I tell her.

Mouth pursed tightly, she climbs to her feet and waits.

“Go.” I give her a tip of my chin.

“I did come here with a purpose other than to be made into a doormat,” she says.

Wrath stands in front of me now. “Go on.”

“Arthur is hearing word that the government is looking to make a declaration against you. Because of *her*. They think you’re perverting her or something.”

Well, she certainly wasn’t wrong about me mucking things up. Clearly my being with Wrath locked away in his castle is stirring up some shit that wasn’t in the Save the World plan.

Wrath looks at me over his shoulder. “*Dieva*, how would you like to go on a date with me?”

“What?” I say with a nervous laugh because I’m not entirely sure he isn’t joking.

“Let’s show them how little we fear them.” He starts for the door. “Let’s show them where you stand. Lauren, book Par House tomorrow night for eight.”

“Wait! I didn’t pack for a date night.” I only tossed leggings and t-shirts into my bag.

He stops at the door and considers something, then, “I’ll request Kat take you shopping tomorrow. She can shield you so you’re safe when I’m not with you. Will that suffice?”

The Demon King is letting me go shopping with a witch for a date night?

He’s making it harder and harder to hate him.

“Yeah, that will be fine.”

He gives me a nod. “I’ll set it up then. Goodnight, *dieva*.”

“Goodnight.”

When he’s gone, Lauren turns to me and narrows her eyes. “I bet you like him parading you around.”

“I’m not a Mardi Gras float.”

She looks me up and down. I’m still in my black lace bra, hair soaking wet. “Could have fooled me.” Then she turns on her heel and marches out the door.

Kat and Emery pick me up the next day a little after noon. I had thought it would only be Kat, so Emery is a welcome surprise. The first time we met, Wrath stabbed one of her friends, but she was still warm and kind to me. In fact, she helped talk me off the ledge and had been the first one to suggest I look into my birth.

“Hey!” Emery climbs out of the black SUV and wraps me in a hug. “I didn’t think we’d get to see you again so soon. How are you?”

“I’ve been better. I’ve been worse.”

Kat comes around the SUV to join us in the driveway. “You look better. You’re practically glowing. New skin care or something else?” She arches an eyebrow and gives me a devilish grin.

I get the distinct impression that while Kat isn’t Wrath’s biggest fan, she wouldn’t judge me in the least for sleeping with him.

I think Kat might be the type of person to take what she wants and needs, regardless of the opinion of others.

I dodge answering because I’m not about to dish on my demon sex life just yet. “Thank you guys for agreeing to take me out. I think I need this more than I realized.”

“We’re happy to provide a day of normalcy,” Emery says. “When you’re dragged into the supernatural world, those days become fewer. But they are needed. Don’t forget that.”

Kat puts her hands on my shoulders. “I’m tasked with shielding you so you won’t be recognized. Are you ready? It won’t hurt.”

“Sure. Go for it.”

Something sweet blooms on the back of my tongue and perfumes the air around us. Kat's eyes glow bright green as my face warms, and the warmth spreads over my body.

"There," she says. "That should do."

"Kat always amazes me," Emery says, eyeing me.

"That's it? I don't feel any different."

"Check your reflection." Emery nods at the driver's side mirror.

I duck down and see someone that looks like me, but only vaguely. My nose is sharper, my lips thinner. All of my freckles are gone, but my skin is still fair, my eyes still hazel.

"Wow." I paw at my face. "It's like an alternate reality version of me."

"I've also given you a bit of a personal shield," Kat explains. "We shouldn't have any trouble."

"It's like being invisible without being invisible." I smile up at her. "You could sell this. It's amazing."

"Ahh." She huffs out a breath. "Too much work. Too much trouble. Come on. Wrath has only given us two hours and we have a lot of ground to cover."

Kat climbs into the backseat of the SUV.

"I can ride in back," I say.

"Don't be silly." Kat folds her long legs in behind the driver's seat. "I like feeling like I'm being chauffeured around. Emery will attest to that."

"She does."

"See?" Kat's bright red lips spread into a grin. "Now get in. Chop chop."

EMERY DRIVES and takes us to one of the upscale shops in Norton Harbor. It's a place I've entered only once with Harper. The only thing I could have afforded at the time was a pair of underwear. And I'm not the type of girl to shell out fifty bucks for panties.

"Here?" I say and wrinkle my nose as Emery lets the SUV parallel park itself.

"What's wrong with Ocean and Glass?" Kat asks from the backseat.

"The price tags?"

Kat waves away my concerns. "Wrath is paying. He didn't give us a

limit.”

“Are you serious?”

“It pays to fuck rich men,” Kat says and Emery bursts out laughing.

“You laugh but you know it’s true too.”

The SUV expertly gets us into a spot, and Emery shuts the engine off.

“I’m not going to lie. The money is a perk.”

“Rhys is the richest man on the eastern seaboard,” Kat explains. “Emery still hates taking his money, but he has plenty to give out. Trust me.”

I grumble to myself. “I’m suddenly feeling like a hooker.”

“Hookers only fuck for the money.” Kat sits forward between the seats.

“Are you only fucking Wrath for the money?” She lifts a brow at me as if she already knows the answer.

“Is there a right answer to that question?”

“Both answers are the right answer. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Inside Ocean and Glass, we’re greeted immediately by a saleswoman dressed in a sleek black pants suit. Her curly hair is pulled tightly into a ponytail, and the poufy tail bobs back and forth as she makes her way toward us on stilettos. She beams when she sees Kat.

“Hey Kat! Lovely to see you! It’s been a while.”

“It has,” Kat agrees. “Apologies, Shauna. It’s been wild the last few months.”

“No need to apologize. I’m glad to see you now. What can I assist you with today?”

Kat motions to me. “We’re here to outfit our friend for a date night.”

“Ahhh.” Shauna claps her hands together. “My favorite occasion to dress for. Is it formal? Casual?”

I look to Kat because I honestly don’t know. Did Wrath give her instructions? We’re going to Par House, which straddles the line between casual and upscale hipster.

“Let’s say casual sleek,” Kat decides.

“I didn’t even know that was a style,” I mumble to Emery.

She smiles over at me and then whispers, “Kat is several hundred years old. She knows all of the styles. *Literally.*”

I look at Kat with new interest. She doesn’t look a day over twenty-six. Everything about her is flawless. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that she’s several hundred years old. I should stop being surprised by anything I learn about the supernatural world.

Shauna shows us to the fitting room and then with Kat's help, gathers several outfits for me to try. I start with a pants suit much like Shauna's, but I don't have her long, lithe form and I end up looking like a licorice stick that's been soaking in a puddle for too long.

Next, I try a bright red dress that is too big in the waist. Then another dress that droops on my boobs.

I try on so many outfits, it makes my head spin. "Tell me again why I can't just show up in my leggings and a t-shirt?"

"Think of this as a sort of coming out party," Kat says, her arms crossed over her chest, eyes assessing me in an emerald green dress with a long skirt. "The whole world will be watching you. You best look the part."

I check out my ass in the mirror. I've always liked my butt. It's nice and plump. "I get that, but what exactly is my part?"

Emery holds out a black dress to me. It's made of faux leather that is buttery soft between my fingers. "The part of a queen."

I give a very unladylike snort but disappear back into the dressing room.

The leather dress fits perfectly, the soft inner layer skimming my hips, nipping in at the waist. I turn around for a mirror check and damn near whistle at the sight of my ass covered in leather.

"This is the one," I say.

"Well show us," Kat demands.

I come out, and the girls' eyes get big as they scan the look.

"You're right. This is the one." Kat claps once. "Now accessories. Shauna, what do you have for statement jewelry?"

Shauna and Kat disappear to the front of the store just as Emery's phone rings. Rhys's face appears on the screen, and Emery smiles down at it. "I'm gonna step out to take this."

"Sure. Of course."

I wander back out to the main floor to check out their shoe collection. I find two girls huddled together, staring at one of their phones.

The audio is down low, but I can make out screaming and then a loud OOOHHHH! from a crowd.

It sounds familiar somehow. I get a little closer.

"Can you *even*?" the dark-haired girl says to her friend.

The clip starts over. "No," the shorter girl answers. "I would die."

"He's so fucking hot."

My ears start to burn with realization. I think I know who they're



referring to and what clip they're watching.

"I don't mean to be nosy," I say.

The girls look up.

"Is that Wrath?"

The dark-haired girl grins. "It's from a few nights ago when he saved Rain from falling to her death."

Hearing the girl refer to me catches me off guard until I remember I'm disguised with magic. They don't know who I am.

The shorter girl has the phone in her hand, so she turns it around to show me the clip that's on a repeating loop. The video starts with a girl laughing at the phone's camera, then there's shouting from above.

Wrath's deep voice cuts through the night as he shouts, "Nooo!"

Then he's suddenly standing on the sidewalk, people shrieking and darting from him as his shadowy magic writhes in the air like ink. His eyes are burning red.

"Holy shit," someone says near the phone, and then the camera pans up just as I'm shoved over the railing.

My stomach drops as if I'm experiencing the plummet all over again.

Wrath holds out his arms. The dark-haired girl shrieks in front of me, clearly ready for the climax of the scene. "It's so fucking hot!" she whispers as Wrath catches me.

It's over within seconds.

It didn't feel like that when it was happening.

"See what I mean?" the dark-haired girl says, her eyes bright. "Rain has got to be the luckiest girl on this planet."

I practically snort. The only reason that clip exists is because the Men Against Wrath tortured, beat me, and then tried to kill me. In my own damn house.

The shorter girl nods. "I'd take Rain's place in a heartbeat."

"Why would you say that?"

They both give me a blank stare.

"What if he's horrible to her behind closed doors?"

The dark-haired girl takes the phone and freezes the video on Wrath. "Look at his face." She turns the phone around. "He's desperate to save her."

A lump forms in my throat.

When I was shoved over the railing by Ryder, the leader of MAW, all I could see was the night sky above.

All I could think was: I'm going to die.

I had no way of knowing what Wrath was doing or what he looked like.

Until now.

Because he does look desperate. He looks panicked and afraid.

He had no idea at the time that I had the *animus*, so it couldn't have been only the connection or the power.

"Rain!" Kat calls.

The girls look from Kat to the phone then back to me. They frown in unison.

I hurry into the back. I'm not prepared to have a conversation with two strangers about what it's actually like being with the Demon King.

I'm beginning to think maybe I've had it wrong this entire time.

Maybe the Demon King isn't as black and white as I first thought.

Kat, Emery, and I finish our shopping with a half hour to spare, so we stop for a cup of coffee. I try really hard to be present for the conversation—I could learn a lot from these two women about the supernatural world—but my brain is now stuck on a loop of the video clip and the look on Wrath’s face as he watched me plummet over the railing.

Emery and Kat drop me off at Wrath’s house in the afternoon with a promise to get together again soon. Before they leave, Kat removes her spell and my face returns to normal.

It’s almost a relief.

I don’t cross paths with anyone inside the castle as I make my way to my bedroom. I take an extra long hot shower, then doze off for a while, then pace my room, then take another hot shower.

My stomach is full of butterflies.

The Demon King is taking me on a date, and I can’t fucking wait, and it terrifies me.

When I’m finally dressed, my hair dry and left wavy, my makeup on, I make my way downstairs.

Wrath is waiting for me in the sitting room I’ve decided to call the Bourbon Room, since I always find him drinking there.

Tonight it’s no different. There’s a tumbler of bourbon in his hand, but when he turns to me as I enter the room, he sets the liquor aside and drinks in the sight of me instead.

The expression on his face is not unlike the expression I saw in the video. It’s an expression that looks an awful lot like desperation.

His nostrils flare and he licks his lips.

“You look nice,” I say, trying to cut the tension.

A tailored black coat hugs his body the way I wish I could. The material skims the swell of his biceps, the hard line of his shoulders. A stiff, pointed collar stands like a shield around his neck. He’s got on a V-neck black t-shirt tucked into black jeans with a black leather belt around his waist.

A few sweeping lines of his demon mark peek out of the V-neck.

His hair is still damp, but he’s combed it back and set it with a pomade that has a slight sheen to it beneath the ceiling lights.

My fingers itch for my camera.

I want to immortalize him. He’s too much. Too much beauty to look at all at once.

I want to hold the vision of him in my hands so I can savor every detail.

“You look lovely as well,” he says, his voice a little husky, a little thick.

I fidget with the long necklace Kat picked out for me. The chain is delicate gold with a sharp spiked charm hanging from it. “I’m not really a dress kind of girl.”

“Oh *dieva*,” he says, “I disagree.”

My belly warms, and I can feel an echoing heat flaring in my cheeks. “So we’re going to Par House, right?”

He nods. “My favorite place this side of the sub-dimension.”

“Oh?” I raise a brow. “Did you just make a joke?”

He smiles. It’s the first genuine smile I think I’ve seen on him since we met. It’s openly happy. No snark or arrogance behind it.

“I can find levity from time to time.”

“I like it when you surprise me.”

“Challenge accepted.” He holds out his elbow for me, and I gladly step into him.

The darkness sweeps in around us. The next instant, we’re in the alley behind Par House where it all began, where we first officially met. Twinkle lights glow against the night sky.

Wrath goes to the metal door on the back of the restaurant and pulls it open. Instantly, we’re greeted with the familiar clatter of the innards of a restaurant. Dishes clanking against each other, waitstaff yelling at the kitchen staff, the sizzle of food and the pop of frying oil.

I step inside into the hallway that runs parallel to the kitchen just as a waitress comes bustling out. She’s got two plates in hand and rocks back on

her feet just moments before smashing into me.

Anger is the first emotion on her face, and then she sees Wrath behind me. “Oh! Wrath! Didn’t see you there.”

“Good evening, Rosa,” he says. “My table ready?”

“Of course. Always.” She smiles awkwardly beneath the fringe of dark bangs as big hoop earrings swing from her ears. “Seat yourself,” she says and picks up her pace. “I’ll be back around to take your order in just a second.”

Wrath’s hand goes to the small of my back and guides me down the hall the way Rosa disappeared. I’ve been to Par House a handful of times before. They’re well-known around town for their sushi and tempura with their house miso sauce. My stomach growls with anticipation.

The second we step out of the hallway and into the main restaurant, several people turn to us, and it doesn’t take long for the awareness to spread through the room.

Thankfully, the Demon King has been here many times before, and most of the people at the Par seem totally accustomed to looking up from their platter of fried vegetables to see the Demon King walk in.

Hand still on my back, Wrath guides me to a booth in the far corner. He gestures for me to slide in, so I do. He takes the seat on the opposite side, the one that faces the door.

The soft golden light coming from the pendant that hangs above our table softens some of the hard lines of Wrath’s face.

If I didn’t know who he was, I might be tricked into thinking he was just a guy on a date with a girl.

There are already menus on the table, so I flip one open even though I’m pretty sure I already know what I want. “What are you ordering?” I ask.

“Veggie sushi,” Wrath answers.

I recall the leftovers in the fridge. “Do you eat anything else?”

“I like order, remember? It also means I’m not typically a risk-taker. Besides, I like the veggie sushi here.”

“Do you not like fish?”

“I believe in your world I am what you would call a vegetarian.”

My eyes widen. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“The mighty Demon King doesn’t eat meat? Is it like an ethical choice or something?”

Though I sense people whispering around us and watching every move

Wrath makes, his attention is firmly on me.

“Still trying to find redeeming qualities, are you *dieva*?”

“I’ve always liked the villains who brake for deer.”

He laughs and the sound is so unaccustomed, I nearly wet my new black lace panties with glee.

“Meat makes it harder for me to travel through the sub-dimension. It weighs me down.”

“Womp womp. I like my version better.”

He smiles at me across the table.

Rosa quickly appears with a tablet in hand, a stylus poised over the screen. “What can I get for you guys?” Her attention lingers on me, and I have to wonder if the Demon King has ever dined at the Par with a woman.

I’m totally going to ask him now.

Wrath folds his hands on the table. “I’ll have the usual.”

She smiles and nods and taps in the order on her tablet. “And Rain?” She glances up at me.

So she knows who I am. Does everyone here know? Being adjacent to the Demon King has thrust me into the spotlight I suppose.

“I’ll have a lavender margarita and an order of the perogies.”

“Good choices all around.” She makes note of my order. “The drinks shouldn’t take long. I’ll have the kitchen put your order at the top.”

“Thank you, Rosa.” Wrath rests against the booth and spreads an arm over the back. I catch Rosa watching him.

A burr of jealousy is firmly lodged in my chest.

Fucking hell.

“Thanks, Rosa,” I hear myself saying, clearly dismissing her.

Wrath shoots me a look. Rosa nods, smiles, and scurries away.

“Jealousy does not become you,” Wrath comments.

“And gloating doesn’t become you, Demon King.”

He laughs.

Damn if I don’t love the sound of it.

The streaming radio switches to an upbeat pop song and it immediately makes me feel giddy.

“So.” I fold my hands on the table.

“So.” His irises are their normal stormy gray, no hint of a red glow in sight, but his eyes are glinting just the same.

Is the Demon King in a good mood?

“When’s the last time you were on a proper date?” I ask.

He tilts his head, giving me a look that says he knows exactly what I’m doing.

And to my surprise, he lets me do it.

“A very long time,” he answers.

“How long are we talking? A decade? A century? Two centuries?”

He sighs and looks away. “Nearly six hundred years.”

Rosa returns with our drinks. Wrath has ordered a tumbler of what looks like scotch or bourbon. My margarita is a shade of pale lavender with sugar crusted on the rim.

“Your order should be out soon.” Another table waves her down, pulling her away.

“Six hundred years, huh? And here I thought my track record was growing stale. Who was the lucky girl?” I take a tentative sip of my margarita. Oh it’s damn good.

“She was my betrothed.”

I nearly spit out my drink and catch it at the last second, clamping my hand over my mouth. The Demon King was engaged? That territorial flare returns.

Wrath frowns.

Are my eyes glowing?

An older man at the table over from us bugs out his eyes at me, so I’m guessing that’s a yes. I quickly look away.

“*Dieva*,” he warns.

“Sorry. You just caught me off guard.”

He sips at his drink.

“You have to elaborate,” I say. “What happened to the woman you were supposed to marry?”

“I killed her.”

“You *what*?” Good thing I wasn’t drinking again. “Why?”

“She betrayed me, and as king, I cannot abide by that. I needed to send a message to those under my rule, and those who had contrived to overthrow me with her help.”

It takes me several seconds to digest this information. There’s so much to unpack here, but the one question running through my head is one I can’t stop myself from blurting out.

“Did you love her?”

Wrath's gaze flicks up to mine. There's a heaviness on his face, an invisible wound that has never healed. "Yes."

He was betrothed to a woman he loved, and she tried to help overthrow him.

I don't want to feel sorry and yet...I do. I really fucking do.

He must see it on my face. "Don't," he says.

"Don't what?"

"Do not pity me."

"I don't."

"Lies."

With a sigh, I fall back against the booth and turn my drink in my hand. Condensation is starting to collect on the glass, and it runs down to meet my fingers.

"Is everyone always trying to take your power from you?" I ask.

"Many have tried, yes."

Has anyone ever seen him as anything other than an adversary? Someone to beat in order to steal what he possessed?

I can't help it—I do pity him. First his soon-to-be wife betrayed him, and then his brother.

It just proves my earlier suspicion—loyalty and trust are paramount for him because so few have proven to have both.

I make myself a vow right then and there to never break my promises to him. I'm not going to be like those people. I'm not going to break his heart.

Rosa arrives with our food not long after, and I immediately dig in. I didn't realize how hungry I was, and diving into Wrath's past has made me ravenous. I'm not delicate about devouring my food either, but Wrath eats his sushi with chopsticks like he's some kind of civilized human being or something.

Somehow, we settle into companionable conversation, and Wrath tells me about his favorite meal as a child (lentils and fresh vegetables yuck) and I describe Mom's homemade lasagna in great detail. I haven't had it in months.

When Rosa checks in on us and I lift my glass to indicate another margarita, Wrath snatches the glass from my hand and says, "No, Rosa. Water only."

"What? Why?" I whine. "Those are really good margaritas."

"And you're very drunk," he points out.

"Am not."



He frowns at me with the kind of exasperation that should only be reserved for petulant children.

“Fine,” I say with a groan.

“Being inebriated is a liability,” he says. “And we’re not in the position to be reckless.”

“We. Is there a ‘we’?”

The question snuck out on me, but it’s too late to take it back.

The furrow between his brows deepens, and when he frowns like that, eyes narrowing, his slate gray eyes look like knives that could cut.

I inhale and lick my lips, wishing I could return the words to my mouth and hide them behind my teeth.

Because I want there to be a *we*. I’m falling hard and fast, and it doesn’t make any fucking sense, but here I am and there he is looking at me like I just dragged a tornado inside his house and let it loose.

“*Dieva*,” he says, voice low and throaty.

“It’s okay,” I start, but his attention cuts away from me to the front of Par House, and his frown sharpens to a razor. Immediately he’s shrouded in black magic, and my skin erupts in goosebumps.

I turn in my booth just in time to see several dark figures hurry through the restaurant, all dressed in tactical gear. And they’re coming right for us.

Wrath goes still while my heart lurches to my throat.

“What do we do?” I whisper across the table.

“We do nothing,” he says, his eyes still on the soldiers.

“Are you kidding me?” I reach across the table and take his hand. His gaze strays to our connection for a split second. “Take us out of here!”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He yanks his hand back.

The wait staff disappears into the kitchen, and the diners lurch away from their tables and file out the door. So when the soldiers surround our booth in a neat semi-circle, it’s just us and them.

“Ms. Low,” the man at the front says, his voice muffled through his face mask, “step away from the booth slowly. We’re here to take you home.”

“I’m sorry?” I say. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Ms. Low, we’re under orders from the United States Government to get you to safety.”

“I’m not in danger.”

“Ms. Low,” he starts.

“No.” I stand from the booth, and all of the soldiers go on alert, barrels pointed right at me. “You all tried to kill me. I’m not any safer with you than I am with him.” I nod vaguely at Wrath who still sits in the booth as if we’re not under threat. He’s as vulnerable as I am. I’m sure these soldiers know that if they kill me, they kill Wrath.

“We’re not leaving here until you’re under our custody,” the man says, changing tactics.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Then I guess you’re not leaving.”

The man says into his headpiece, “Permission to move?”

That’s probably not a good sign.

“Soldier,” Wrath says, “you have three seconds to leave this place.”

The soldier’s eyes flick to Wrath as the darkness kicks up around us. The *narrow* are coming. I can feel them like a spider along my spine.

Old me would be panicking at the impending danger, but there’s a little voice rising in volume in the forefront of my mind and it’s saying: fuck this.

Power roars through me in a blinding crescendo. Several glass sconces pop and shatter on the wall. Plastic condiment bottles melt to nothing. The wood frames of the booths catch fire and burn. And I am filled with an elation so pure, I’d almost think I’d left my body.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I say, and when a hand closes around mine, and I look over at Wrath, I realize I have to peer *down* at him.

Because I’m floating again.

The rest of the soldiers fall back, eyes wide behind the shields of their thick helmets.

“It’s all right, *dieva*,” Wrath says as he squeezes my hand.

Whatever magic holds me in midair quickly fades, and I plummet back down. Wrath catches me around the waist, lessening the impact when I meet the floor again.

I don’t know how I did that, but now is not the time for questions. I want the soldiers to think I knew exactly what I was doing. They don’t want me safely returned. They want to use me.

Wrath takes me by the hand again and pulls me toward the rear entrance. But before we leave, he calls out to the soldiers. “Do not forget you were warned. You have Ms. Low to thank for your lives. I would not have been so merciless.”

WHEN WE BURST out the back door, I hang my head and shout at the sky, “That was amazing!”

I’m drunk on power and lavender margaritas, and I don’t know why I ever wanted to return to my normal life.

This is fucking amazing.

I turn a circle around Wrath, head a little swimmy, as he starts down the alley where we first met.

“Don’t get cocky,” he admonishes.

“I’ll do whatever I want. And also, every time you say that word I think about your dick.”

“Filthy mouth for a filthy girl.”

I smile big. “And when you talk like that, I’m immediately horny and wet.”

“I’m aware.”

“Oh?” I quirk a brow. “So why don’t you do something about it?”

“Are you trying to manipulate me into fucking you?” There’s a flash of amusement in his eyes.

“Yes. Is it working?”

He snatches my wrist and yanks me into him. I’ve been spinning since we came outside, and I stumble on my feet until he steadies me. His nostrils are flaring, his jaw flexing as he grits his teeth.

I grab him by the cock and find him hard. His eyes slip closed as he growls low in his throat. “I see,” I say up to him, “that the answer is yes.”

When he opens his eyes next, they’re glowing red, and it makes me even wetter.

We’re both drunk on power and something else that I think we’re both afraid to name.

“Will you bow to me this time?” I say, and I know he knows exactly what I’m asking for.

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls us away from the alley. We reappear with a snap of air on a rooftop deck at the castle.

The wind whips across the open space, but the air is warm and humid.

Wrath lets me go once the world stops swaying and takes a step back. “Take your clothes off,” he orders, his irises still molten red.

Oh fuck me.

I don't hesitate.

I unzip the dress and pull it down around my waist. My hair cascades down my back. I shimmy my hips to pull the dress off the rest of the way, and Wrath's gaze is on me the entire time, though he doesn't move an inch.

The bra is easy to unhook, and I let the straps slip from my shoulders and hold it to my chest with my arm. "Was that a yes?" I ask. "I want to hear you say it."

"I know you do."

God, he knows just what to say to get the better of me.

I let the bra go. My nipples bud.

Wrath takes in a deep breath.

I hook my fingers into the waist of my panties, wiggle my hips and slowly slip them off. Naked, exposed, I rock back my shoulders, one hand on my hip. I've always been a little soft around the hips, not particularly narrow at my waist. There was a time I was self-conscious about it, but not anymore.

And besides, the way Wrath devours the sight of me, eyes flaring brighter in the darkness, makes me feel like I might be the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

There's a brief flash of satisfaction in my chest, and then Wrath disappears, and my clit immediately throbs at the thought of him coming for me.

When he reappears, he's inches away, and his dark magic surrounds us, perfuming the air with spice and heat. He walks me back to the railing, and the cold stone on my ass tears a hiss from my throat.

Overhead, a few bats swoop at the air while an owl hoots in the distance. The Demon King slowly drops to his knees in front of me. I inhale sharply, a fluttery feeling overwhelming my lungs.

"Is this what you wanted, *dieva*?" he asks as he nudges my knees apart. A few minutes ago, I thought the night was warm, but now that I'm naked and beneath the weighty attention of the Demon King, I'm chilled and quivering.

"Yes," I breathe out.

His touch is delicate as his fingertips trail up my sensitive inner thigh inching closer and closer to my wet center.

The anticipation drives me wild. I'm shaking, panting, and when he reaches my wet slit, he slides his fingers over me.

I exhale with pleasure and writhe against the stone, waiting for him to reach my swollen bud.

When he leans in, I tense up, so damn ready for his mouth to be on me.

But he decides to torture me instead and sends a jet of warm air over my needy clit.

I moan at the sensation and try to arch into him, but he's not letting me get away with it. Not yet.

"You smell so good, *dieva*," he says, sending butterflies tearing across my stomach.

"I bet I taste just as sweet," I challenge and reach out for his head as if I really think I can push the Demon King's face into my mound.

He easily dodges me and smacks my hand away. "You wanted me on my knees. Now that I'm here, let me do as I please."

I whine. I can't help it. I'm wound up tight, every nerve pulsing for release.

"You're torturing me," I mutter.

He slides two fingers closer to my opening and I widen my stance for him.

"Every second I'm in the same room with you is torture, *dieva*."

"That can't be true," I say.

"I don't lie," he points out and then he pushes two fingers inside of me and sucks my clit into his mouth.

Knees going weak, I collapse against the stone railing.

"You taste so fucking good." He laps me up, drinks me down. His tongue is absolute bliss on my pussy. I won't survive this. I won't survive him.

I'm already trembling at the knees and restless. Like my skin is too tight, my nerves too volatile.

Like I could burn into the night.

Wrath fucks me slow and steady with his fingers.

I pant and tangle my fingers in his dark hair.

"You are amazing," I say and mean it even though it's insane and wrong.

He makes me feel so fucking good.

My breath quickens as the point of his tongue flicks at my clit and the pressure builds at my core.

"I'm already close," I say because I don't want to reach this crescendo without him.

He slows his rhythm, and I tense up, trying to hold the orgasm at bay.

Not yet. Not yet.

"Wrath."

He pulls away but keeps his fingers inside of me. My juices coat his mouth, and he runs his tongue over his bottom lip, savoring it, his eyes burning bright red.

“I want that cock inside of me.”

He stands in front of me, fingers still buried to the knuckles in my pussy. “Do you now?”

“Yes.”

I shiver at a cool breeze and Wrath’s darkness slithers over my tight nipples, driving away some of the ache.

“Wrath. Don’t make me wait.”

“Try that again.”

Eyes heavy, I try to focus on his face. What does he want from me?

And then I know.

“My king.” I suck in a heavy breath. “Will you please fuck me?”

His eyes glow brighter. “Good girl.”

I fumble at his belt. When I get it undone, I slide my hand inside his pants and squeeze at his hard-on through his boxer briefs. His eyes roll back in his head as he hisses through gnashed teeth.

“That’s what I thought,” I say.

He growls and when he opens his eyes again, they glint like embers.

“I don’t know what to do with you,” he says.

“What do you mean?” I’m frenzied. “Fuck me. That’s what you do with me.”

He grabs me by the wrist to stop me. “You make me feel out of control, *dieva*.”

I go still beneath his gaze. His confession is a jolt of electricity to my chest, and my heart pounds beneath my ribs.

I’m breathless and empowered and so fucking ravenous for him.

“Me too,” I admit.

We stare at each other in the night, and some unspoken vow is made right then and there.

Whatever this is, it’s messy and savage, and it doesn’t make sense, but fuck if it doesn’t feel so damn right.

We both make the decision at the exact same moment to give in to it.

Our mouths crash into one another, needy and feral. His tongue finds mine easily, and slides over me, filling my mouth with my own taste. I drag my hands through his hair as he tears off the rest of his clothes, his cock thick

and heavy between us.

I grab hold of his shaft and he groans loudly against my lips.

“You’re so fucking hard,” I pant out.

“You make me so fucking hard.” He drives me back against the railing and hooks a hand around my thigh, lifting my leg for him.

The throbbing head of his cock finds my opening, forcing a carnal gasp from my throat. “You’re dripping wet.”

He’s right. I can feel it coating my inner thighs.

“Stop torturing me.” I kiss him again. “Fuck me.”

With a deep inhale, he shoves inside of me, and I cry out as he fills me up. I wrap my arms around him, holding on for dear life as he fucks me hard and fast and almost angrily, like he’s pissed it feels so good.

Sweat glistens on his chest, muscle and bone twining as he works at me.

The pressure builds and builds, and as I reach the peak, as Wrath’s cock throbs inside of me, it’s almost like I can feel him reaching that pinnacle too. As if we’re joined fully, completely, connected in every imaginable way.

“Don’t hold back, *dieva*,” Wrath says through gritted teeth. “I want to hear you come loudly and without restraint.”

I will gladly give it to him.

He pinches my nipple between thumb and forefinger sending a delicious flare of pain through me.

“Go on.” He pinches harder, then shifts forward, putting weight on my pelvis, causing friction to build between us.

“Fuck, yes...just like that.”

He keeps the pace, driving into me, and then—

Firelight flares across the rooftop as the wave hits me all at once, rolling, crashing through me.

I hang my head back and cry out at the darkened sky, every ounce of pure satisfaction pours through me and then out of me as my body convulses beneath him.

Wrath drives deeper, spilling into me, his answering gasp sounding at my ear, a hot pant of breath sliding like a delicious flame down the curve of my neck.

When he collapses against me, sweaty and spent, I can’t help but delight in the Demon King being absolutely satiated by me. I had no idea sex could be so empowering.

We stay like that, locked together for several long seconds as the

aftershocks of the orgasm shiver through me.

When Wrath finally straightens and pulls out of me, he remains close and wraps his arms around my waist. The dark mist of his power follows and soon I'm enveloped by him and his magic.

There's a snap of air and a tugging at my sternum as his power carries us from the roof to his bedroom.

"Come," he tells me, but this time the command is only meant to pull me into his bed. I climb in without hesitation and make room for him. He slides in next to me and draws me into his chest.

Resting my ear against him, I listen to the steady thud of his heart as his fingers trail absently over the soft flesh of my hip.

"What's Alius like?"

His intake of breath is a little raspy, a little tired. "It's a lot like this world, just with more magic."

"Are there s'mores?"

He laughs, the sound reverberating through his chest. "No. We don't have marshmallows."

"Tragedy. How big is it? Your world?"

"Similar in size as well."

"Do you rule as king of one country or—"

"I rule the world."

I can't help but sink into that realization, let my mind wander over what that must be like. I knew he was a king, but to rule an entire world?

"How do you manage all that? If the world is the same size, how do you rule over all of it without losing territory to revolts or whatever?"

"Well, we've grown beyond the medieval era."

I can hear the laughter in his voice.

"I'm being serious."

"All right." His hand comes up and plays with my hair. I don't know if he realizes he's doing it, but I try not to make any sudden movements so he doesn't stop. "Several demon princes help me maintain control, along with the lords. I'm usually on good standing with the vampires as well, and I've given several titles in exchange for their loyalty."

"This place sounds like the mafia but with supernatural creatures."

He laughs again. I love the sound of it. It's a rich, deep sound that reminds me of a crackling fire.

"The mafia has its place and for what it does, it does it well," he points



out.

“I suppose.” We grow quiet, but he keeps stroking my hair, and the soft caress of his long fingers is making me sleepier by the second. “Do you miss Alius?”

“When I’m alone, yes. I miss it very much.”

“And when you’re not alone?”

“Depends on who I’m with.”

I sense our dance around the things left unsaid. I want to ask him—what about when you’re with me?—but I’m too tired to summon the courage. And the Demon King is too stubborn to admit to having a weakness for anyone.

But the way he shifts and pulls me closer, the way he tilts his head into me and takes in a deep breath of my scent tells me all I need to know.

I think we’re falling for one another. Me, Rain Low, a nobody photographer from a little tourist town and the Demon King who rules an entire world.

I don’t want to look too closely at it. I don’t want to poke at it, at the fragile shell of it.

I’m too afraid it’ll break.

When I wake in the morning, I find the bed empty beside me, but I can still smell Wrath. I can smell him on the sheets and on my skin.

Toes curled, I stretch beneath the covers and smile at the high ceiling as sunlight lengthens across it. There's a weird feeling fluttering in my chest and in my belly. If I didn't know any better, I'd almost think I was falling in lo—

“Good, you're awake.”

I yelp and tug the sheet close to my chest until I realize it's Wrath standing at the end of the bed somehow looking hot as hell in the early morning hours. His black hair is damp and raked back. He's wearing fresh black jeans and a black t-shirt. I don't know how someone can do only one color at all times and still look like he stepped from a dark divine dream.

“Do you ever sleep?” I ask with a grumble.

“Rarely,” he admits. “Demons don't need sleep like mortals do, and especially not the royal line.”

I let out a humph and then collapse back against the bed. “Must be nice to be a demon king. I guess we can cross demon off my list of possibilities then because I love my sleep.” I close my eyes. “Wake me in an hour.”

“Absolutely not. Get up. Your phone has been making a noise.”

I blink at the ceiling again. “My mom!” I lurch from the bed only to realize I'm still naked, and my clothes are on the roof.

Wrath's eyes ignite at the sight of me, but he quickly tamps it down. Apparently when the Demon King is on a mission, he's serious about it and nothing will get in his way.

He disappears then reappears with my bag from my room. “Here. Get

dressed and come down. I've had Arthur prepare coffee for you."

I groan with delight just thinking about it. "I think I love you."

His face goes cold and blank. "*Dieva*," he warns.

"It's a figure of speech. I still hate you, don't worry." Except thinking about last night, about his gentle touch as I drifted off to sleep has me doubting everything.

"I'll be down in a minute," I say.

With a snap of air, he's gone.

I sigh at the empty spot he just inhabited and then scrub at my face. I hadn't intended for those three little words to mean anything at the moment.

Shaking it off, I get dressed and clean up as best I can in the attached bathroom then make my way downstairs. I take the main hall to the Bourbon Room and find Wrath outlined in sharp daylight in front of one of the gigantic windows. This room has become the main gathering room for us, but I also wonder if I can find him wherever he is just like he can find me.

Sometimes, when I think about him, there's a noticeable thrum at the center of me as if we're connected by some invisible string.

"Good morning, Rain," Arthur says at the coffee bar.

"Good morning, Arthur." I join him as he fills a white mug with coffee that's so dark, it might rival Wrath's magic.

"How do you like your coffee?" he asks.

"Do you have oatmilk creamer?"

Arthur frowns. "No, I'm sorry. Lauren likes almond milk and—"

"Add oatmilk to the shopping list, Arthur." Wrath's voice cuts in like a blade.

"Of course. I'll get some right away." Arthur pulls his phone from his back pocket and makes a note in it.

I watch Wrath, trying to catch his eye. He just chastised me for joking about having feelings for him, and now he's altering the grocery list for me? The Demon King is making sure I have my coffee creamer on hand.

I can't figure out this man.

I can't wrap my head around this life I find myself inhabiting.

"Almond milk will do for now," I answer.

Arthur nods and retrieves the carton from the mini fridge. There's also honey on the bar and a jar of sugar along with several bottles of flavored syrup.

I can't imagine the Demon King takes his coffee any special way. This

must be for Arthur and Lauren.

And speaking of which—

“Where is Lauren, anyway?”

Arthur cuts his gaze to me and widens his eyes in the universal expression for *shut the fuck up*. He does that a lot.

Wrath is still at the window. “She’s run off like a petulant child.”

“Oh. What happened?”

Arthur gives a little shake of his head.

Sorry, Arthur, I’m nosy. I really want to know.

“She and I are having a disagreement,” is what Wrath says.

“What sort of disagreement?”

Arthur nearly keels over. I suppose when you’ve been living with the Demon King for months you know better than the oblivious photographer when to keep your mouth shut.

But also, I’m immune to Wrath. For the most part, anyway.

“She doesn’t like that I’m fucking you,” Wrath answers.

My face pinks immediately, and when I look at Arthur next, his head is bowed, his gaze downcast. Arthur was trying to save me some embarrassment.

Could this man be any kinder?

But also...I’m in deep on this one now, and I’m not ready to backtrack.

“Do you not make it a habit of fucking random girls?”

Wrath’s eyes shift to me.

He’s been adored by over half the female population since he arrived here. I’ve seen the crowds outside Par House and the Demon Devotees in Norton Harbor just clamoring for a sighting of him.

If he wanted to fuck any of them, he could, at anytime, anywhere.

Women have practically been throwing themselves at him since he got here. Men too.

My guess is he could fuck someone in the middle of Par House, and no one would bat an eye.

So has he?

Have there been others besides me?

He comes over, towers over me, blocking the sunlight behind him in all his dark glory. “Are you jealous, *dieva*?” he asks.

There’s a noticeable edge of smug pride in his voice.

Fucking hell.

Well yeah, I am.

It came out of nowhere, and I don't like it, but those are the facts.

Fat chance of me admitting to it though.

"Just wondering if I should be worried about STDs is all. We haven't used protection. I mean...I have an IUD, so hopefully I won't be inseminated with demon spawn." I laugh nervously, realizing I've galivanted myself into a conversation I didn't mean to have with the Demon King.

I clamp my mouth shut as he peers down at me.

"I carry no disease," he says almost like he's offended by the very notion. "I'm immortal, after all. And don't worry, *dieva*. I only impregnate those I mean to."

The way he says this, I can tell he's trying to poke at my jealousy, rile me up.

And it's working, goddammit.

"Does that mean you *have* impregnated someone before? Probably an innocent virgin in Alius, I assume?"

He narrows his eyes. "I wouldn't subject an innocent virgin to such misdeeds."

"What does that mean?"

He takes a step closer and hunches forward, bringing his stormy ocean eyes level with mine. "Impregnating someone with demon royalty is rough, brutal fucking. Not many could handle it."

My nipples are immediately peaking under my shirt. I didn't put on a bra, and the Demon King's gaze sinks to them before flicking back to my face.

I could handle it.

That's what I want to say.

Forget the demon spawn. I just want the brutal fucking.

His nostrils flare, irises bleeding to the bright red glow.

I rake my teeth over my bottom lip as I sense a very clear wetness spreading between my legs. I'm throbbing now, and Wrath's jaw is flexing as he takes another step toward me.

And then Arthur clears his throat.

And I realize he's still standing there, coffee cup in hand.

Wrath turns away, and I take the coffee and scurry over to one of the couches. I don't know what it is about Wrath that makes me lose my ever-loving mind around him.

"Arthur," Wrath says as he rifles through some papers on his desk, "give

Rain her phone.”

“Right.” Arthur grabs my phone from one of many cabinets around the room. “Here you go.”

When I brighten the screen, I find a few alerts for my social accounts and then a message from Mom. I tap into it to read.

*Baby, you’re not going to believe this! I just saw Tatiana on TV with the president!!!! With my hero Naomi!!! Call your mother back!*

“Wait...what?”

Arthur and Wrath turn to me.

“What is it?” Wrath asks.

“My mom...there’s this woman who used to be her best friend. Her name was Tatiana. She was on that camping trip? Mom just said she saw her on the news with the president.”

Suspicion immediately comes to Wrath’s face. “Which channel?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say.”

“Arthur,” Wrath says.

Arthur is already moving across the room. He pulls back the double doors on a tall cabinet to reveal a flat screen TV hung inside. Retrieving the remote from a drawer, he flicks on the TV and quickly finds a recent news broadcast.

The banner across the bottom reads: *Madame President discusses latest Demon King strategy.*

But it’s not the broadcast that matters.

It’s not the words coming out of Naomi’s mouth that send a chill through my body, one that sinks bone deep.

Standing just behind her, and to her left, is a woman I immediately recognize from my last meeting with the president.

But I don’t know the woman as Tatiana.

I know her as the witch, Sirene.

Sirene who came from Alius, who created a blade that could kill Wrath.

“Oh shit,” I breathe out.

“Is that the woman your mother knows?” Wrath asks. “From the summer she was impregnated with you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

Shit shit.

This can’t be good.

Anger pinches between Wrath’s dark brow. “Fucking Sirene,” he mutters.

“What does this mean? Maybe my mom is mistaken—”

“We need to see your mother.” Wrath stalks over to me.

“Now? I haven’t even had my coffee.”

“Now, *dieva*.”

“All right fine.” I gulp down three glugs of coffee and wince at the burn, then tap out a quick message to my mom though I hesitate on what to say.

Should I go with the truth? *Hey Mom, I’m about to pop up in your kitchen halfway across the world with a Demon King in tow. Don’t panic!*

Instead, I go with: *Wrath and I need to see you. Can you send me your address?*

The three dots immediately dance in the message screen as she types.

The address pops up a second later.

Then: *How are you getting here? And you’re coming with him?*

There are no italics within the messaging app, but I can definitely tell she’s thinking with italics when she says *him*.

The Demon King.

I’m taking the Demon King home to my mother.

No big deal. Right?

IT TAKES US less than a second to reach Scotland. We stand in an emerald green field, surrounded by rolling hills on one side and a lake on the other. There’s a little white cabin in front of us with a red tin roof and a red front door.

“I guess this is it.”

The air is wet and chilled. I didn’t come dressed for Scottish weather.

We walk up to the front door, and I rap on the nicked wood with my knuckles. Mom pulls the door open before I even finish knocking. She’s harried and wide-eyed, several wispy strands of hair fluttering around her face.

“Rainy baby!” She looks from me to the Demon King then back to me. “He’s real. I can’t believe he’s real.”

“Oh he’s definitely real.”

“I mean...I’ve seen you on TV,” she says to him with a nervous trill of laughter. “But to see you in person, my god.” She waves her hand up and down, gesturing at the length and breadth of him. “I mean...baby. Have you

looked at him?”

I snort. I’ve done more than look, Mom.

She folds her hands over her chest. “He’s a work of art.”

“Don’t tell him that, Mom. It’ll go straight to his head.”

Wrath scowls at me and I give him a smirk.

“Well come in from the rain.” Mom laughs at her own joke. My name has always been a source of endless puns.

I step inside the cozy cabin, but Wrath has to duck into the doorway. In the castle, he’s just taller than me. In the cabin, he’s unnaturally big.

We come in on a small kitchen with a worn table in the middle. Mom’s things are piled on top of it. Cameras and lenses and photography magazines. She has a few sheets of proofs of the Scottish landscapes jammed in between some contracts and bills.

It reminds me of my childhood, this cozy chaotic space that smells like my mother, like patchouli and lemongrass.

The deep sense of missing her hits me out of nowhere and tears sting in my sinuses. Without thinking, without considering what it might look like to the Demon King, I wrap my mom in a hug. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, baby.” She rubs my back the way moms do.

I linger in her arms longer than I normally do, and it’s her that ends the hug. “Okay,” she says, “please update me on everything because I’ve been hearing all sorts of things that have been freaking me out. There was a woman on the news saying you were in the middle of an altercation with—” she waves at Wrath again “—him, and there was a fire and he kidnapped you? I knew you’d already been with him though, so that likely wasn’t true and you know how the news can be.” She rolls her eyes.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine,” I say bypassing the truth. I *was* in an altercation. I stabbed Wrath. And then the park burned. But I don’t want to get stuck in the weeds here. There will be plenty of time to explain it all to my mom later. After I’ve figured out the mess that has become my life.

“Tell me about Tatiana,” I say.

“Oh!” She claps her hands together, and several silver bangles slide down her forearm, clattering together just above her peony tattoo. “Can you even believe it? After all these years? I had half thought she was dead. She would reach out from time to time to see how you were doing and—”

“Wait...she did?” Wrath edges closer to me.

“I mean...it was just an email here and there,” Mom clarifies.



I pull out my phone and search the internet for recent coverage of the press conference. It's easy to find an image of Sirene. "Is this Tatiana?" I ask.

Mom nods. "She hasn't aged a day. I don't know how she managed it."

I look over my shoulder at Wrath. There's an unfamiliar expression on his face.

Worry, maybe.

"Mom," I say, "tell us everything about Tatiana. From the first moment you met her, to the last word you spoke to her."

"What—*everything*?"

"Yes, everything."

When she frowns, it brings out the deep wrinkles around her eyes. "Well, all right. But this requires a pot of tea. Wrath...Mr. Demon King, is that what I should call you? Do you drink tea?"

I snort. "Yeah right—"

"Yes," he answers.

"You do?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" he says frowning at me.

Mom clutches at my arm. "His voice is even better in person. Like crushed velvet on your skin."

"Mom!"

"What? Oh don't look at me like that. I've photographed rock stars, for Pete's sake! Naked!"

"Mom!"

She screws up her mouth like I've massively disappointed her. Forget that I've been spending the last several days with a villain.

"The naked body is the purest form of art," she says.

"I agree," Wrath says.

"Oh my god. I can't believe this is happening." When I scowl at him, he remains expressionless, but I know he's doing this just to get beneath my skin.

"I'll put a pot on," Mom says. "Baby, you want coffee instead?"

"Yeah. I'll make it."

Mom busies herself pulling out tea bags from the cupboard. I grab the coffee pot to fill it at the tap. The faucet's pressure is low, and the water trickles out. As I stand there waiting, my mother muttering to herself at the cupboard, tea bags in hand, I look over at Wrath still standing near the table.

It's always just been my mom and me, and we're so familiar with

inhabiting the same space that the silence is always comfortable and our movements around a room natural and fluid. We are a well-oiled machine, Mom and me. Wrath is a dark cloud in the bright cottage kitchen with Sunny and Rain.

It's so ridiculous that I almost burst out laughing.

Instead, I smile at the Demon King when he catches my eye, and for the briefest of seconds, I think I see the corner of his mouth twitch like he wants to return it.

There is nothing I like more than seeing his stoic, kingly demeanor crack.

When the pot is full, I get the coffee maker ready after finding a bag of ground coffee in the cupboard above. When the machine hisses to life, I drop into a chair at the rickety table. "Sit," I tell Wrath.

The hint of a smile is gone from his face now, and when I give him an order, he curls his upper lip at me. He parts his mouth as if to correct me of my insolence, but then Sunny Low is turning to him, and the ruthlessness is immediately buried.

"Have you tried Henley & Sons tea, Mr. Demon King?"

Leave it to Sunny Low to dismantle the overbearing power of the Demon King by asking him about tea blends and calling him Mister.

"Wrath," he corrects her. "And no, I haven't."

"Well, you'll love it. They're master tea blenders, Henley and his sons. I once went on assignment in Sri Lanka during a harvest. Changed my outlook on teas. It's still harvested by hand, did you know that?"

"I did not."

Oh this is a delight.

And the fact that Wrath is entertaining my mother by being civil has my chest warming in a very funny way.

The coffee pot gurgles and lets out a puff of steam. Mom gets the kettle on and starts rooting around in another cupboard. "Oh, baby, I have to tell you what I recently tried out. It's the next best thing."

"Mom."

"What?"

"Let's talk about Tatiana."

She stops looking for whatever this next best thing is and turns to me. The bangles on her arm slide back down to her wrist. "Okay. Sure. Sorry. It's just been a while since we've been together. We need to catch up!"

"I know. And we will. But maybe when you come home?"

She heaves a sigh. “Fine.” She takes the chair next to me then glances at Wrath. “Come join us Wrath! People hovering make me nervous. Sit.”

He takes the chair on my left side, and the old wood creaks beneath the weight of all that muscle and sinew.

Mom readjusts the flowy fabric of her brightly colored ruana. “So... Tatiana...I’m not even sure where to start.”

Over the years, I’ve heard many, many stories about that fabled camping trip and sometimes the details changed as the edges of the memories blurred over the years. I’m hazy on the facts.

“How did you meet Tatiana?”

“Well...” Mom’s gaze goes far away as she digs up the memories. “We had already been hiking for a few days when we ran into her on the trail. She had no bag, no provisions. She said she’d been out there with a friend, and they got separated, but she didn’t seem scared. I always thought that was brave of her to be out in the wilderness with no supplies and be totally calm about it.”

Mom laughs to herself. “But that was Tatiana for you. She was afraid of nothing.”

The kettle starts to steam on the stove.

“Anyway, we brought her into the group. We insisted. She stayed in my tent with me, and we became fast friends. She was an odd one, but you know I love odd people, baby. The odder the better.”

“It’s true,” I tell Wrath. “We once spent a weekend with a troop of circus performers. If you want to have some interesting conversations, find yourself a bearded lady.”

Mom laughs loudly. She has one of those big, bold laughs.

“Please,” Wrath says, “go on.”

I’m not sure if he’s eager to hear the rest of the story or if he’s trying to avoid a tangent into circus culture.

Mom continues. “I’m not sure there’s too much more to tell. Tatiana was with us for the rest of the trip, and then we shared an apartment together for a while after. In fact, she’s half the reason I was sane enough to get through the surprise of finding out I was pregnant with Rain.

“I had wanted children, but in a vague, far-off kind of way, you know?” She looks at Wrath and nods her head, prompting him. He doesn’t respond, but Sunny Low isn’t affected by a one-sided conversation. “Anyway, she was with me all through the rest of the pregnancy and for several weeks after I

had Rain. She moved eventually, said she had other things to tend to. But she'd call out of the blue in the beginning and say, 'Is she raining yet?' That was our joke and—"

The chair squeaks loudly as Wrath sits forward. "What did you say?"

"Oh...it was our joke? That's where I got Rain's name, from Tatiana. 'She'll rain,' she used to say. I suspected Rain might be an Aries while I was pregnant, and an Aries can go one of two ways—absolute rage or crying because she doesn't get her way. So yes, she rained all right." She leans back against the chair, laughing to herself.

Wrath looks like he wants to murder something, and my heart thuds harder beneath my ribs.

"What is it?" I ask him.

"It's not *rain*," he says with a bite to his words. "It's reign. As in 'rule.'"

"What do you mean? My name? It's Rain, as in from the sky and—"

"Perhaps that's what your mother intended, but it's not what Sirene was referring to."

Mom frowns. "Who's Sirene?"

The tea kettle lets out a low whistle and she gets up to remove it from the burner.

"We think Tatiana might actually be a witch named Sirene," I tell Mom.

She clicks off the stove. "Witch, huh? Well." She sets the kettle on a cork trivet. "I guess I'm not surprised. I've met plenty of witches in my day. I never really doubted they were who they said they were."

"Did Tatiana ever say she was a witch?" I ask.

"No. Never."

Wrath shifts, and the chair complains again. "Did she ever do anything out of the ordinary? Anything that might have looked like magic?"

"No, I'd remember that."

"Did you have sex with another man during that time?" Wrath asks.

"Hey!" I reach across the table and whack him on the arm. "Not cool."

He glares at me. If I were anyone else, I'd probably be a puddle of meat on the floor right about now.

"Rainy!" Mom scolds me. "We don't hit people."

Oh if she only knew.

Mom pours boiling water into two teacups. "To answer your question, no, I wasn't with anyone else. I would have told Rain if I had been. There's nothing wrong with not knowing the father of your baby. We're all sluts in

our own way.” She laughs again to herself.

“God, Mom.” I scrub at my face. She’s always had zero filter, and I got used to it a long time ago, but this is different. This is in front of the Demon King. I don’t want him unfairly judging her.

But when I look across the table at him, his gaze is far away.

“What are you thinking?” I don’t like that look on his face.

Just as the earl grey starts perfuming the air, Wrath rises from his chair and makes his way for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To find Sirene.”

“Have you gone mad?”

“I believe so, yes. Every single day I think so.” He gives me a pointed look from the door. “Ms. Low,” he says, hand on the door handle, “I appreciate your hospitality. I wish I could stay for tea, but we really must be going.”

“Is everything okay?” Mom asks.

“It’s...complicated,” I say because what else am I going to do? Things *are* complicated. There’s so much I want to tell her, and so much I keep back. I don’t want to worry her. I’ll deal with this myself.

“Someday soon we should chat about Jeffrey,” I say as Wrath pulls the door open, and a cool rainy mist flies in around him. “I think you should reach out to him again.”

“Did you talk to him?” Mom asks, the excitement thinning her voice. “Did you tell him?”

I give her a quick hug. “It’s a long story.” It’s not. It’s a short one. But it might destroy her, and I don’t have time to pick up her pieces. Not when I’m holding on to mine for dear life.

“Baby, should I come home?” She brushes a lock of hair away from my face and tucks it behind my ear. “I can come home early.”

“No. I’ll be fine.” I nod at the impressively tall demon. “I have the best bodyguard this side of the sub-dimension.”

He sends a withering glare my way, causing me to smirk at him.

“All right.” Mom squeezes my arm. “I have another two weeks here and then I’ll be home.”

“Sounds good.” I kiss her cheek and then follow Wrath out the door. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, baby.”

Wrath and I head out into the mist. He stalks across the emerald green field, his clothing shimmering with glistening drops of rain.

“Where are you going?”

He doesn't answer, and I have to quicken my pace to keep up with his long stride.

“Wrath!”

He looks at me over the line of his shoulder. “Something foul is afoot.”

“Okay, Edgar Allan Poe.”

The line of his dark brow sinks in annoyance.

“Talk to me.”

He stops at the top of a knoll. “Do you remember your promise to me?”

“Which one?”

“*Dieva.*” He growls out the word, frustration pinched at the corners of his eyes.

I sigh. “The crown. That I'd happily give it to you.”

“Yes.”

“What about it?”

He looks away from me, toward the lake. Droplets of rain cling to his eyelashes and coat his mouth in a sheen. Something is bothering him, but I don't know what, and all I can think is I want to reassure him, take away his worry.

I want it so badly, it makes my chest ache.

“Wrath?”

He blinks, swipes the rain from his face, and pulls me to him. “We need to see Sirene.”

“I think that's a—”

He pulls us away from Scotland and deposits us back in the castle in the Bourbon Room. The sensation of traveling through the sub-dimension is just a shiver now, like a kiss of air. It's no longer the same jarring, spinning discomfort from my first time.

“—that's a bad idea,” I finish as he lets me go. “Do you even know how to find her? I mean...she's working for the president and—”

“It won't be hard. Be ready.” Then he's gone.

I sigh and drop into one of the leather side chairs.

I don't know what he's thinking, but I suspect he has a theory, and it leaves my gut all knotted up.

Something is wrong.

I just don't know what.

As I wait for Wrath, I fill up on some of Arthur's quiche and scroll through my phone. I had turned off notifications the day before, so when I check my social accounts, I find a kajillion hearts and comments and messages.

My social accounts have swelled in size. I now have millions of followers.

"Well shit," I mutter to the screen.

I worked so damn hard on my social media presence before all of this only to get absolutely nowhere. Now I'm famous for fucking the Demon King. Figures.

Now if only I had time to capitalize on this new fame. What would I do with it? Start a merch store? I can just see the t-shirts now.

*I fucked the Demon King, and all I got was this lousy t-shirt.*

Coffee cups that say, Villain Fucker and Proud.

*Keep Calm and Fuck a Villain.*

Okay, I might actually buy that coffee cup.

Since I don't have anything better to do while I wait, I decide to take a quick peek at the comments and then fall down a rabbit hole.

There is so much fan art of Wrath and me.

One artist whose style is dark and slick has digitally painted us in an embrace, skeins of dark mist wrapping around us.

And the way Wrath's looking at me in the painting...

*Holy shiz, one person comments, can I be this girl pls?*

Someone has tagged me in a comment: *@RainLow how big is the demon D? Asking for a friend.*



These people wouldn't know what to do with Wrath in bed. Hell, I still don't. But gods do I enjoy it.

I go to the next comment. *If I were Rain Low, I'd be making that demon king my daddy.*

I snort and nearly tap a like for that one. If I called Wrath Daddy, he'd probably wring my neck.

But it'd be fun to see the look on his face right before I take my last breath.

I keep scrolling through my notifications then pop over to my messages. I find similar things in my inbox and then, several swipes down, I see Gus's name.

A flash of panic tightens in my chest. What if he's messaging to yell at me?

There is a lot of shame and guilt festering for the decisions I've made, and the one person I don't want to think less of me is my best friend.

I tap his name.

*Babe, he wrote, Adam told me what happened. Fuck the president. Fuck her soldiers. I'm so sorry you're going through this. We found your phone here, so I don't know if you'll get this message, but if you do, please let me know you're all right. XOXO*

Tears are welling in my eyes by the time I get to the end of the message.

He isn't mad at me.

I think deep down I knew he wouldn't be, but the very small possibility had me avoiding even looking.

I quickly tap to reply.

*I'm okay, I write. Just confused. So much has happened. I can't wait to tell you about it.*

I hit send.

Within seconds, the three dots appear as Gus types back. I can't help but hold the phone tighter, smiling at it like a fucking goon.

I miss him so much.

*THANK GOD, is his first response. Where are you?*

*The Demon King's dark den.*

*Shit really?*

*Well, I might be exaggerating. It's actually bougie as hell.*

*Not surprised. He isn't hurting you, is he?*

Sweet, sweet Gus. I could kiss him. *No, I say. I'm good. Really. How's*

Adam? The team?

Adam is good. Babe, he's gutted about what happened. And he's worried about you.

I smile again as a rogue tear slips out of the corner of my eye. I swipe it away. Adam really is a keeper. I feel bad for not giving him a chance before all this.

It sucks, I tell Gus. *I can't believe they were going to shoot me just to kill Wrath.*

*It's fucked up. So...you really are connected to him?*

*Apparently.*

And so much more.

With my plate clean, I set it in the sink and pace to the window. Wrath has been gone all day, and I haven't seen Arthur or Lauren either, but I still get the distinct impression I'm being watched. It makes me wonder where the *norrow* go when they're not here. Can they just hang around without you knowing they're there?

I've been meaning to ask Wrath, but I'm not so sure he'd tell me.

*What are you going to do?* Gus asks.

I look out the window as I consider how to respond. We have a plan. Figure out how I got the *animus* so I can give it back. But every time I think about it, it leaves me feeling hollow and wrecked.

I tell Gus as close to the truth as I can get: *I honestly don't know.*

*"Dieva."*

The sound of Wrath's voice in the room sends a shiver down my spine and butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

Every time he returns to me, it's a goddamn relief.

I imagine this is what a woman felt hundreds of years ago when her husband's ship appeared on the horizon.

I shouldn't feel this way.

Not about the villain. I shouldn't be so damn giddy that he's here.

"Hi," I say.

"Who are you talking to?" He nods at the phone clutched in my hand. There's an edge of suspicion on his face.

"Gus."

"I see." His expression softens just a fraction.

"Why?"

The hardness returns. "Because you are skilled in making bad decisions."

I blow out an exasperated breath. “Yes, and one is standing right in front of me.”

“Funny, you weren’t saying that last night.”

My face pinks. Goddamn him. I flash back to him plowing me and immediately feel an answering tingle between my legs. The corner of his mouth ticks up.

I level my shoulders. “Do I have to remind you of which one of us was on their knees?”

The distaste that comes across his face is like a golden ray of sunlight to me. I love it when I can get beneath his skin.

“On my knees, perhaps,” he says, “but devouring what was mine.”

A breath gets stuck in my throat. I’m not sure if he’s referring to me or the *animus*, or if there’s no distinction at this point, but I secretly like him calling me his.

I want to be his. But I don’t want him to know that.

“You keep telling yourself that,” I challenge.

He disappears.

Crap.

I back toward the wall because if he gets behind me—

Too late.

His hand wraps around the back of my neck, fingers punishing as he whirls me around and slams me against the wall.

“As long as you hold the *animus*,” he says, “you *are* mine.”

“Am I?” I wiggle beneath him. His groin presses against my ass. There’s no mistaking the hardness of his dick, and there’s no denying that every single step we take in this dance makes me fucking wet.

Wrath’s voice sends a shiver down my spine. “Why do you insist on provoking me?”

“Because I like seeing what you’ll do.”

“Liar. You do it because you like it when I dominate you. It makes your refusal to bow even more ludicrous.”

He’s got a good point.

“Are you kink shaming a girl?” I say. “That’s not very nice, Daddy.”

I’m so going to get burned for that one.

He spins me around. There’s fire in his eyes. “You like to play games, *dieva*, but you don’t know the rules.”

My heart is thudding in my ears, and I can’t seem to catch my breath.

“I don’t need to know the rules when I’m favored to win.” Now I’m just talking bullshit, but the bite that comes to his teeth, the flare of his red eyes sends a delicious flash down my belly right between my legs.

He’s right. I do like being dominated by him. I don’t know why. My entire life, I’ve been in control of every single thing. I have never, ever given up control.

Until Wrath.

It’s almost liberating in some fucked up way.

The darkness kicks up around him, blotting out the daylight. Two thick skeins rise like ribbons, undulating in the air. They arch out then snatch me by the wrists, effectively bolting me to the wall.

Wrath steps back.

My clit is buzzing now, and I’m so wet, I can feel it dripping into my panties.

“Get on your knees,” he says.

Um. No.

We have a long standoff with nothing but our eyes.

The darkness exerts pressure on my wrists, forcing me down. There’s no option to fight it. I’m on my knees within seconds.

Wrath stalks toward me.

I could probably get out of this if I put up some effort. And I think Wrath knows it too. I don’t control this wild power at the center of me, but it’s never let me down when I absolutely needed it.

But right now...it doesn’t come calling, because I don’t want it to.

My chest is heavy with excitement. My pussy is throbbing. Fuck if this isn’t getting me off. He knows it. I know it. He and I keep giving in to one another in so many fucked up ways. We’re falling down the rabbit hole together with no care as to what we’ll find at the bottom.

Wrath unbuttons his pants. When the zipper slides down, it reveals a very clear bulge in his black boxer briefs.

He crouches in front of me and pushes the hair away from my face. “The little girl wants to play games. Maybe *Daddy*—” he says the word on a husky rasp “—should teach you a lesson.”

Oh fuck.

Okay apparently I like this Daddy play because I’m buzzing now.

Wrath straightens and dips a hand inside his boxers, pulling out the heavy weight of his cock. He strokes it once, twice as he steps closer.

“You’re always running off that mouth of yours,” he says. “Why not put it to good use?”

I look up at him as the darkness ribbons around us.

“Open up, *dieva*.”

I rake my teeth over my bottom lip.

“Go on.”

I know the instant my own eyes flare with hellfire. It rims him in fiery light.

I am the candle in his dark night.

He drags the head of his cock over my lips and then stabs at my mouth.

I finally give in and open my lips for him and he shoves inside of me.

The second my tongue glides over the underside of his shaft, he’s groaning low in his chest.

He slides out, back in and puts his hand on the wall above me to keep himself upright.

He’s so big, so fucking hard I have to breathe through my nose so I don’t choke on him.

The head of his dick swells at the back of my throat when he pumps into me, and it doesn’t take long for pre-cum to coat my tongue.

He works at my mouth, lost in the pleasure of it, of me.

He pulls at my hair, angling my mouth to him as he grows harder, harder, fucks my mouth faster, faster.

Tears stream down my face as we lock eyes. His burning bright red, mine bright with hellfire.

He growls, the rumble deep in his chest as his cock throbs and hits the back of my throat.

“Fuck, *dieva*,” he says on a reedy breath and then the darkness plumes around us as he spills his pleasure down my throat.

He groans, pumps again, and I swallow it back, every drop of him.

His come tastes like night. Sweet and coppery.

He exhales loudly, one hand still buried in my hair, the other holding him upright.

When he finally pulls out of me, his gaze locked on my swollen, red mouth, I think he realizes he made a mistake. He meant to teach me a lesson, but all he did was prove how lost he is in me.

A scowl comes to his gorgeous face, and then the dark shackles yank me to my feet as he steps into me and yanks off my pants, my panties. “Wrap

your legs around me,” he orders, so I do.

He shoves inside of me so hard, a bite of pain flashes through me before the pleasure of being filled up chases it away.

The darkness retracts from my wrists and Wrath’s red gaze meets mine. “Hold on to me, *dieva*,” he says and fucks me against the wall. I’m already dripping wet, wound up tight.

I’m ready to go in a second as the friction builds between us, rubbing against my swollen clit.

“Fuck,” I moan out. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

He pinches my nipple through my shirt, and I hiss, wishing it were off. But there’s no time for that. I’m flying close to the sun now.

“Come for me, *dieva*.” As the darkness twines around us, he pinches harder, sending a jolt of pain through my breast. “Let me feel that pussy clench around my cock.”

His words stoke the pressure and soon I’m riding the wave, the bright sensation blinking through my nerves, causing me to arch, to jolt, to flinch through the orgasm.

When the wave crests over the other side, I collapse against the wall, eyes closed.

“Look at me.”

I open back up to him and find his gaze penetrating, searching for something on my face.

I don’t know what he’s looking for or if he finds it, but suddenly he’s kissing me.

It’s a slow, sensual kiss, his tongue sliding over mine as he exhales through his nose, long and low, almost a sigh.

I hold him tighter and drink in that heady wintertime scent of him.

I don’t want to let him go.

I don’t want him to leave.

When he breaks the kiss, he rests his forehead against mine, and we breathe hard against one another.

We’re drowning.

We both know it.

And I’m not sure if either of us knows how to swim in these choppy waves.

I don’t know what happens if we stop fighting it and let the water rush in.

Tears burn in my eyes. I’m in trouble. So much fucking trouble.

We stay locked together much longer than we should, so when he pulls out of me, our juices have turned sticky.

I'll have a mess to clean up later.

Wrath steps away, tucking his cock back in his pants. "Don't call me daddy ever again."

I make a sound. It comes out like *PAH*. "I will not make that promise."

He grumbles in the back of his throat. "You drive me mad, *dieva*."

"I know." I give him an innocent smile, and he rolls his eyes.

After fetching my clothes, I dress and follow him out of the kitchen and to the Bourbon Room. At the bar, he pours drinks for two. He slings his back, sweat still gleaming on his collarbone along the lines of his demon mark where his shirt is pulled away from his body.

I think the most telling thing about our relationship is that we can do what we just did and then fall back into a comfortable existence as if what we did was totally normal.

That's how I know we're drowning.

How I know we're losing air.

"Did you find Sirene?" I ask and sip from the bourbon.

"I did." He pours another.

"And?"

He downs his second round and winces at the burn. "I need to know the truth, but I'm afraid I'm not ready to hear it."

"What does that mean?"

Worry comes to the creases around his eyes. He's not looking at me. His gaze is far away, his thoughts even farther.

"Wrath."

"Don't forget the promise you made to me."

I lick my lips. The bourbon has driven away the taste of Wrath and I almost mourn it.

"I won't," I say quietly.

His shoulders rise as he takes in a deep breath. He still won't look at me.

"Wrath?"

"Come." He holds out his hand, blinking out of his reverie.

"Okay. I guess we're doing this?"

He's silent, guarded. It makes my stomach knot up.

The worry from earlier returns. Something is wrong. Something is troubling him, and he won't tell me what.

I sling back the last of the liquor and cough at the heat. Then I slip my hand into his and let him carry us away.



When we reappear outside of what looks like a miniature version of Westminster Abbey, I know we've arrived at Sirene's.

The gothic stone house is very much her style, I think, even though I don't know her well. Smoke spirals from the chimney, and several birds chirp from the tangled vines of an old wisteria bush that is clinging to the stone archway around one of the entrances.

"Now what?" I say to Wrath, but I don't get his answer before one of the heavy wooden doors creaks open and Sirene steps out.

Several blades are strapped to her waist on a black leather belt. Tall black boots probably hide more. Right now, she is the perfect vision of a warrior witch from another world, a fairytale land.

Hands loosely balled at her sides, she steps out from beneath the shadows of the wisteria. "Took you long enough," she says to Wrath.

"As if I'd waste my time searching for you," is his reply.

"And yet here you are."

I swear I hear his teeth crack, he's scowling so hard.

It occurs to me that there's a long history here between these two that I don't understand, the details of which I'll never fully know.

Were they together?

The very thought makes me sick to my stomach.

I'm turning into a jealous, possessive bitch over the Demon King, and I don't know what that means.

I wish I could blame it on his dark magic, his mind control capabilities, but I know that's not it.

That's not it at all.

"Well go on," Sirene says and crosses her arms over her chest. "We all know why you're here."

But now that we are, Wrath is silent. I can't tell if he's contemplating his words or trying to decide how he'll gut Sirene.

I step in front of him. "We're here about the *animus*."

"Yes," she says.

"And my mom."

She tilts her head, her braid sliding over her shoulder. "How is Sunny anyway?"

"So you did know her."

"I think you know the answer to that."

I take another step. "You were there when I was born?"

"Mewling fat little baby you were."

"The *animus*...how did I get it?"

"Ask your boyfriend," she challenges.

The air cracks and darkness swoops in. Sirene is suddenly surrounded by the *norrows*, six of them in all. She doesn't flinch.

I hold up my hand to Wrath, asking him to wait.

She's baiting us. I need to know the answers as much as he does.

"I want *you* to tell me, Sirene," I say. "Or should I say Tatiana?"

She flinches at the name my mother knew her by. Did she want to be that person? Does the name mean something else to her?

I guess we're all trying to be something we're not, taking refuge behind the masks that hide who we really are.

Sirene steps forward, and the *norrows* echo her movements, stalking her like prey. She's not the least bit bothered by it.

"Chaos stole the *animus* from Wrath," she says, "but he was never powerful enough to hold on to it, so he gave it to me for safe keeping."

Sirene comes to a stop in the middle of the dirt driveway. "I knew a traveler on the other side powerful enough to get me through to your world. I thought I'd just shove the *animus* in some dark hole, even though it was an awfully risky plan. What if some idiot happened upon it? What if *this* idiot —" she nods at Wrath "—found his way here and reclaimed it?"

The *norrows*' edges blur, plunging into dark mist.

Heart thudding in my ears, I say, "Tell me what you did with it."

She smiles. "While searching for said dark hole, I stumbled upon your

mother and her camping party.”

My mouth is suddenly dry.

“An idea started to form.”

I sense Wrath coming up behind me.

“Did you tell her the fables of the Demon King’s power?” she says to Wrath. “Where they originated?”

“He told me of the father god.”

Her gaze cuts back to me. “Yes, but did he tell you the whole story?”

I glance at him over my shoulder. His face is unreadable, his eyes locked on Sirene.

“No,” I say to her. “I don’t think he did.”

“They say the *animus* was carved from the dark heart of the father god, that it was the *animus* that truly held his dark magic.”

I frown at her. “Okay, so? I don’t know what this has to do with me.”

She smirks at me. “Power of that magnitude can do a great many things.”

I can smell Wrath now, his dark winter scent wrapping around me as he comes closer.

“Power of that magnitude,” Sirene goes on, “could create life.”

It’s as if the world goes still, and all I can hear is the loud thumping of my heart and the roaring rush of blood in my veins.

My stomach drops. I backpedal and stumble into Wrath, and he grabs me by the shoulders, keeps me upright.

My voice wobbles. “What does that mean?”

“It means...” Sirene says, her mouth curving into a devilish grin, “you don’t *have* the *animus*. You *are* the *animus*.”

The air crystalizes in my throat. I can’t breathe. Wrath’s grip on me tightens as my knees give out.

No. This...no. *No*.

“You’re lying,” I choke out.

“Am I?” Sirene’s eyes dart to Wrath behind me. “I’m pretty sure he knew before he brought you here.”

I look back at him, but his gaze is on the witch. “Did you?”

When he looks down at me, there’s a pinch of something foreign between his brows. Something that looks like regret.

He *did* know.

That’s why he’s been acting so distant.

“But...how...how do I give it back to him?”

“You’re not listening,” Sirene says. “You can’t give it back. There is nothing to *give*.”

I find renewed strength in my legs and straighten and yank out of Wrath’s grip. I look between him and Sirene. “What does this mean? Tell me right now. How do we fix this?” Cold sweat breaks out across my forehead. “How does he get the power back to defeat Chaos?”

“Go on.” Sirene cocks out a hip and curls her hand around it. “I’m sure you can figure it out, Demon King. Tell her what she’ll have to do.”

I look to Wrath. There’s a hardness to his expression now.

“Tell me,” I say.

“You’d bind yourself to me in blood and oath.”

“Forever and always,” Sirene adds. “No backsies. No cancellations. No loopholes. Bound to him for however long you live and breathe. I’m sure the *animus* will just love that.”

Fear burns in my chest. My vision tunnels. It’s like I’m trapped, the world narrowing around me.

Bound to him forever? With no control over my own life?

No one has ever told me what to do. Not even my own mother.

If I bound myself to the Demon King, I would always be subject to his control. Even with the *animus*, I’m not more powerful than he is.

I’m hot all over and numb and shaking and—

“I can’t do this,” I say. I look to Wrath, pleading. “Please. I can’t do that.”

“He can’t make you,” Sirene says. “A blood bond has to be consensual.”

There’s a brief flash of relief in my chest, until I realize who and what I’m dealing with.

The Demon King isn’t the type to take no for an answer.

He came here with a mission. He’s not just going to give up.

“Please,” I say again.

He takes a step toward me, and I flinch away.

Sirene’s trill of laughter sends the birds flying from the wisteria in a flap of wings.

“I can’t do this,” I tell him.

He grabs me by the arm and yanks me into his side. To Sirene he says, “Do you understand what you’ve done?”

“Of course I do.” The amusement is gone from her face now, and the scar puckers around her eye as she narrows her gaze. “Your time is coming to an end, Demon King. Tick-tock.”

There's a snap of air as he pulls us away from Sirene's stone house. When we reappear at the castle, he drops me unceremoniously on the couch.

Something is breaking between us.

"I'm not binding myself to you," I say.

He goes to the bar and pours himself a drink and adds a drop of something from an amber vial tucked in one of the bar's drawers. He tips his head back, pours the drink down his throat. When he swallows it back, he hisses and bows, hands flat on the bar top.

Sirene might have said he can't make me bind myself to him, but I know him well enough by now to recognize he is ruthless, merciless, and clever enough to find a way around the rules.

I go to him. "Wrath."

"What would you have me do?" He's still bowed, his gaze downcast, dark hair hanging over his forehead.

"There must be some other way."

"You think I haven't thought about that?" When he turns to me, his face has sharpened, hinting at the monster.

"How long have you known?"

He sighs and runs a hand back through his hair. "I started to suspect after we visited Jeffrey. Even if he would have been a demon, it wouldn't have made sense that you, a halfling, could hold the *animus*."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I worried how you would react. Much as you are now."

"I'm not binding myself to you."

"You made me a promise," he throws back at me. "Or did you forget?"

"That was before I knew! There has to be some other—"

Without warning, the monster surges to the surface, his face contracting to the sharp demon that lurks beneath. "There is no other way!"

Goosebumps erupt on my skin. "Don't do that."

"The *animus* is mine by right."

"I'm not property to be owned."

"You *are* mine, *dieva!*"

"I am not yours!"

I bump into the sofa and Wrath presses closer. The sharp lines of the monster has faded, but his eyes are still crimson. "I might need your permission," he says, his voice low, "but there are plenty of ways for me to get it."

His hand circles my wrist. “I’m asking nicely, *dieva*. It will be the only time I do.”

My gut knots as tears sting my eyes. I can’t bind myself to him. This is all...everything is happening so fucking fast.

I have a life.

I *had* a life before him.

He’s asking me to bow to him. Forever.

Taking his side in a fight against the government is one thing—they were trying to kill me—but aligning myself with him for the rest of my life? That’s not fair.

I can’t. I won’t.

The power answers my call and roars through me like a forest fire blazing through dry kindling.

Wrath hisses and drops my wrist as smoke curls from his hand. His skin is charred around the fingertips for a brief second before his body heals itself.

“*Dieva*.” His voice is edged in warning.

“I will not bind myself to you.”

The scowl disappears from his face as he takes in a deep, settling breath, nostrils flaring. His expression is cold, eyes distant.

“That’s an unfortunate position to take,” he says, “for a little girl who has so much to lose.”

Dread snuffs out the rage. “Don’t you dare—”

The air snaps and he’s gone.

“Wrath!”

The tears are immediately welling in my eyes as the panic takes hold. “Shit. Shit. Where’s my phone? Wrath!”

I finally find it and tap on my mom’s name. “Hey baby,” she answers. “Everything all right?”

“Is Wrath there with you?”

“What? No. Why?”

There’s nothing I can say or do to help keep her safe. There is no lock that can keep him out other than something witch-made, and my mom is all the way on the other side of the world.

“Just...run if you see him.”

“What? Baby—”

I end the call and tap at Gus’s name. The phone rings and rings and rings.

I pace the room, hand at my forehead, heat burning through my veins.

What am I supposed to do? What *can* I do?

“Pick up. Pick up.”

The phone stops ringing, and I hear an intake of breath on the other end.

“Gus?”

“Do you think you can reach him before I snap his neck?”

Fuck.

“Don’t do this,” I say.

“You gave me your word.”

“I didn’t know—”

“I don’t fucking care.”

“*Please.*”

The line cuts out.

“Fuck!” I run from the room and down the hall and out into the driveway.

The Mustang is parked near the garage, and I yank open the door, slide in behind the wheel, and punch at the ignition button. The engine roars to life.

I hit the gas and tear down the driveway and barrel into the street.

With a squeal of tires, I point the car toward Norton Harbor and Collie’s Tea Shop. Back where it all began.

The Mustang comes to a screeching halt outside Collie's when I slam on the brakes. It's a miracle I didn't get pulled over. It's a miracle I didn't wrap the car around a tree in my rush to get here.

I'm too slow compared to Wrath. I can't just come and go as I please and I've wasted so much time driving here.

I hope I'm not too late.

*Please, Gus, be okay.*

I yank open the heavy door and charge inside.

When the door slams shut behind me, I wince.

Even though it's the middle of the afternoon, there's no one inside save for Gus and the Demon King.

The music is off. The steamers silent.

It is eerily still.

Gus is sitting at one of the round tables by the front counter. There are no bruises on his skin, no blood marring his face. He's unharmed—for now.

Wrath stands just behind him and to the left. "Sit, dieva," he orders.

I'm so keyed up, my heart is practically thumping on the back of my tongue.

I scan the shop, trying to find us an exit, a weapon, anything.

But this is the Demon King I'm dealing with.

Unless Gus has a witch blade hiding in one of the tin canisters on the counter, we're out of luck.

"Sit, *dieva*," Wrath says again, this time with more venom.

I sit at the table across from Gus.



“I’m sorry,” I say to my best friend.

“It’s okay,” he says back.

It breaks my heart knowing he means it. Even though his life is literally hanging in the balance, he doesn’t blame me.

Sometimes I think I don’t deserve Gus. I should have warned him. He should have stayed behind Eric’s witch barrier until this whole thing blew over.

I should have done more to protect him.

One by one, the *narrow* take shape around us until Collie’s Tea Shop is overwhelmed with their primordial scent.

Gus doesn’t flinch, but I notice the way his hand shakes on the table.

“Rain has something that belongs to me,” Wrath tells Gus. “Or rather, she is exactly what I need.”

Gus’s gaze is questioning, but how the hell can I explain this? How can I make him understand what’s at stake?

“If you want to live, I suggest you convince her to do what needs to be done.”

“And what’s that?” Gus asks.

“He needs me to bind myself to him,” I answer.

Gus snorts. “I’m not going to talk my best friend into doing that.”

One of the *narrow* darts across the room and slams into Gus. The chair teeters back and he slams to the floor.

I leap out of my chair, but Wrath is suddenly behind me, hand on my shoulder, forcing me to sit back down.

“How could you do this?” I say up to him, tears blurring my vision.

The fear is visceral, the panic sharp.

This is no longer a game.

Wrath bends down, his mouth at the sensitive flesh of my ear. “You’ve forgotten who I am, *dieva*.”

I scowl. “I’ll never make that mistake again.”

Gus’s hand appears on the table as he uses it to leverage himself back up. Blood is dripping from his nose when he stands upright, and he swipes it away with the back of his other hand.

“Are you all right?” I ask.

“I’m okay.” He gives me a weak smile and rights his chair.

“Gus, I—”

“Do what you have to do, all right?”

A tear streams down my face. It's getting harder and harder to breathe. The rage has abandoned me, leaving only despair in its place. I can't do anything with that.

The last few days, I allowed myself to fall under Wrath's spell. I allowed myself to believe that I was somehow special, that I could escape his violence and his cruelty.

I wanted to believe that I could make him different than he was.

And now I'm suffering the consequences of it.

"I've been patient, *dieva*," he says as he paces the shop. "I've allowed you to get away with far more than anyone else." He cuts his gaze to me. "I've been merciful. I require only one thing of you in return. It's a simple thing, really."

"It's the rest of my life," I say. "There's nothing simple about that."

"Your life was never yours to begin with," he points out. "You have *always* been *mine*."

The thrill that runs through me when he says those words makes me want to vomit.

What twisted reality have I stumbled into that when the villain calls me his, I want it to be true?

But I'm not his in the way I imagined. He sees me as nothing more than a tool, something to be used to wield more power.

I stand up from the table and ball my hands into fists at my side. This probably won't end well, but I have to go down swinging if I go down at all.

I will *not* go down on my knees.

I can do this.

If I'm really to believe that I am the *animus*, then I have to believe that I *am* the power.

It's not like water that runs through my fingers. It's the blood in my veins, the marrow in my bones, the breath in my lungs.

The reality of it feels too big and yet...when I reach for the power now, it comes with no effort at all, dawning like a sunrise.

It was never tethered to the rage. The rage and the anger and the frustration were just the easiest doors for me to open until I could learn the power is my strength.

The fiery Aries like my mom always said.

Strong and determined and so fucking done with this.

Golden light bursts through the room.

The *narrow* shriek and burn into embers.

“I will not bind myself to you,” I tell Wrath. “You will not force me to make this decision.”

There is no one else in this whole fucking planet who can stand against him...except for me.

His features sharpen into the monster.

“You will regret this,” he says.

And then the air snaps, and he’s gone.

I whirl around. I can feel him, but I can’t see him and then—

He slams into me. I fly through the air and crash into the piano. The keys let out a discordant twang.

I’m up again, just in time to duck as Wrath swings at me. I’m in over my head in a fistfight, but if I can summon the fire—

Wrath backhands me. I slam to the floor, the air knocked out of me. He appears above me and takes a fistful of my shirt, yanking me to my feet as I gasp for oxygen.

“How about now, *dieva*?” he asks, an echo of his earlier words when he was fucking me against the kitchen counter.

My how far we’ve come.

“Fuck you,” I choke out.

He narrows his eyes. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I catch sight of Gus just beyond the line of Wrath’s shoulder. There’s a cast iron skillet in his hand and it’s cocked back like a baseball bat.

“I think you’d like it more than I would,” I argue just to keep Wrath talking as Gus edges closer.

His face contorts, his mouth twisting into a menacing grin.

Several tendrils of dark magic lift from his back, sharpen into spears.

One shoots out with a clear target in mind.

“No!” Fire burns through my hands. Wrath lets me go, smoke curling from his body.

It’s not enough time to stop the dark spear from impaling Gus.

“No! Gus!” I catch him as he falls, blood eating away at the white of his shirt. “Fuck. Gus.”

His eyes are wide, panic dilating his pupils.

“It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.”

There’s too much blood. I don’t know where he was hit or how bad it is.

I have to get him out of here. I have to—

Several skeins of dark magic rise around us.  
I have to get us out of here. I have to go. I have to get Gus to safety and—  
There's a rushing in my head, a pressure in my veins and in my bones,  
then a tearing snap and—  
Blackness. A surge of wind. A sudden jolt.  
When I open my eyes, Gus and I are on the concrete floor of the cafeteria  
at the factory.  
My stomach knots as my vision sways.  
Gus coughs. "Rain," he croaks. "What...how—"  
I lurch to my feet. My hands are slick and red with his blood.  
I'm vibrating. My veins are fire. I can't see straight.  
"Fuck," I pant out as my stomach revolts.  
"Rain!"  
My vision tunnels as my stomach empties and I gasp against the forceful  
retching.  
I think...I think I just traveled through the sub-dimension.  
Holy shit.  
"Rain!"  
I can't breathe. I can't breathe. Everything hurts, and I can't see straight  
and—  
"Rain!"  
The darkness swallows me up.

I wake nestled into Gus's side, his heart thumping beneath my ear. His scent—the sweetness of his cologne and the earthiness of tea—hits me next and immediately makes me feel like I'm home.

There's a lamp lit in the far corner of the unfamiliar room, and beneath the arch of its glow is Adam.

His eyes meet mine.

I come to awareness quickly and forcefully. I sit up and look down at Gus, scanning his body. He's paler than normal, but he's breathing fine and there's tape and gauze on his naked shoulder.

"Is he—" I start.

"He'll be fine," Adam answers. "He got hit in the shoulder. Sanjay and Eric patched him up."

I brush one of his stray curls away from his face. I didn't lose him, but the fact that I could have makes me want to scream and rage.

How could he? How could Wrath do this?

I disentangle myself from Gus's side and climb over him slowly so as not to wake him.

Adam sits forward as I cross the room. He props his elbows on his knees and folds his hands together.

"Hi," I say, voice low.

"Hi."

There's a mismatched wingback chair sitting kitty corner from him, so I take it and tuck my legs beneath me.

We sit in silence for a beat and then both start talking at once.

“So listen,” I say.

“Rain, I have—”

We laugh and trail off.

Adam starts again. “I have to apologize for what happened out in the field. Rain...” He takes a deep breath and runs his hand over his buzzed hair. “You never should have been the target. I’m sorry that you were and that your country put you in the position of choosing between them and your life.”

I shrug and try to play it down because I’m just thankful to be here, and grateful to have him. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is.”

I rest my head against the curved wing of the chair. The navy-blue upholstery smells like my grandmother’s house, and it immediately makes me think of Christmas and sugar cookies and silver garland.

A wave of emotion comes over me, and I close my eyes against the bite of tears. “I was worried you’d hate me,” I tell Adam.

“Why would you think that?”

I snort and wave my hand in the air. “You know, I chose the villain.”

Adam shakes his head. “I served in two tours. You think those terrorist assholes saw me as the hero?”

“Well, no but—”

“I wouldn’t side with the terrorists, don’t get me wrong. But sometimes... the things our country does to get the job done...you wouldn’t look at us as the heroes. There’s always two sides to a story.”

It hurts how much I believe that. “You are wise and far too kind, Adam.”

He laughs and rubs his hands together, the dry skin rasping in the quiet. “If my mama heard you say that.” He whistles. “‘Boy, get your head out of your ass!’ That was her favorite saying. In fairness, I did have a couple of years in my teens when I was being a dipshit because I didn’t want to admit I was gay.”

“We’re all dipshits as teenagers,” Gus says as he stretches on the bed and then dissolves into a trail of curse words as pain etches into his features.

“Hey, take it easy!” Adam hurries over to him.

“I’m fine.” Gus sits up and grimaces again.

“You are not fine. You were stabbed.”

“You stab me almost every night with that dick.”

I burst out laughing. Adam sighs and rolls his eyes.

God I love these two.

With Adam's help, Gus comes over and Adam deposits him in the chair.

"How are you?" Gus asks as Adam wraps one of the throw blankets around his shoulders.

"I'm...okay."

"That was badass what you did." Gus rests his head against the back of the chair and Adam, standing beside him, absently runs his fingers through Gus's unruly curls. "That was some next level voodoo shit you pulled off."

"I don't even know *how* I did it."

"If you're connected to the demon," Adam says, "does that mean you also have his abilities? That might explain it."

They don't know about the *animus*. Should I tell them? I know I can trust Adam and Gus, but I don't want to endanger them any more than I have.

"I seem to have some magic, yes."

"My mother would need a fainting couch if she were alive to hear this," Gus says.

I smile thinking of Gloria. "She always wanted magic to be real."

"Apparently, we just weren't looking hard enough."

"So now what?" Adam asks. "What do you need from us? Is—"

*I will find you, dieva.*

His voice in my head is like a length of silk dragging over my bare flesh.

I can't help but shiver.

I have a moment of panic before I remember he likely can't find me if I'm inside the factory. Eric's witch barrier will stop him.

Gus frowns at me. "What's wrong? You have a look on your face."

*Do you hear me, dieva? Wrath says. You will beg for mercy, and you will find none.*

There's a sickness churning in my stomach. I'm both terrified and filled with guilt.

Why does it feel like I've betrayed Wrath?

I've done what I promised him I wouldn't. I'm no better than his betrothed or his brother.

But he left me no choice. He forced my hand.

I don't know if I can answer him the way he can speak to me, but I'm not about to try. It'll be better if I just keep my mouth shut.

But I have to do something. Wrath is right—I can only hide for so long, and at his age, I'm sure he's made an art form out of being patient.

“I need to talk to Sirene,” I tell Adam. “Do you think you could find out how to get hold of her?”

“Sure. It shouldn’t be hard to make it happen.”

“Thank you.”

Thinking about what I might have to do to survive this has me wanting to crawl into bed and never get out.

I don’t want to do any of this.

Why the fuck did he have to go after Gus?

There’s only so much I can take, so much I can turn a blind eye to.

Wrath did the unthinkable, and he left me no choice.

If he’d cared for me at all, he never would have threatened my best friend. But to him, Gus is just collateral damage. Insignificant. And to me, Gus is everything. Wrath should have known that. He shouldn’t have crossed that line.

*But he’s the villain, my internal critic points out. What did you think would happen if you told him no?*

Adam gets up from the chair. “I have to touch base with my team first, and then I’ll work on getting you Sirene.”

“Thanks Adam.”

He kisses Gus goodbye. “Rest. You hear me?”

“Aye, sergeant.”

Adam blows out an exasperated breath and then leaves.

“So,” Gus says once we’re alone, “are you going to tell me what’s *really* going on?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Of course it is.”

With a sigh, I scrub at my forehead and stall. Maybe Gus deserves to know the truth, considering he was almost killed because of it.

“I’m sorry that he did what he did to you,” I say.

He waves dismissively. “It’s a story to tell my grandkids.”

“Gus.” I level him with a stare.

“*Babe*,” he says mocking me. “Don’t worry about me, all right? Spill the tea.”

“Fine. But if I’m going to tell you all of this, I need a drink.”

He grins at me and nods at the cabinet beside me. “I might have something in there.”

I open the door and pull out a bottle of Patron Silver.



“Well well well,” I say. “The good stuff, is it?”

“It sounds like a good-stuff scenario.”

He isn’t wrong.

I spot a stack of red plastic cups on a shelf and get up to grab two.

Gus pours us each a shot, and we clink glasses.

“To besties,” I say.

“To besties.”

We drink the liquor back, wince and laugh together.

“I’ve missed you and I love you,” I say.

“It’s only been a few days. And I love you too. Now tell me everything.”

So I do.

I TELL GUS EVERY GRUESOME, unbelievable detail. Including the part where I fucked the Demon King. Not once, not twice. Many times.

When I finish, he just looks at me with a blank stare.

We’re both three shots in, our eyes glassy now.

“Say something.” I snap my fingers in front of his face. He blinks.

“I don’t know where to start.” He pours another shot and slings it back, then chases it with a splash of sparkling water. “You’re some kind of immaculate conception from some dark god’s heart? A dark god from another world?”

“See?” I hold up my hands. “Ridiculous. Ludicrous. Absolutely outrageous.”

“And you fucked the Demon King!”

“Shhhh!” I look over my shoulder just to be sure we’re still alone. No one has come in or out since Adam, but it’s always hard to say who might be listening.

“What?” Gus frowns at me. “So what? Who cares? You’re allowed to roll with the devil.”

“Everyone in this entire factory is trying to kill him. So I think they’d be judging me if they knew the truth.”

“They might be actively trying to kill him, sure, but half of them would also be actively trying to fuck him if given the chance.”

I drop back into the chair, laughing but also a little too drunk.

“So was it good?”

I meet his curious gaze. “Fucking spectacular.”

“I knew it. If I wasn’t in pain, I’d be giving you a standing ovation.”

I lean forward again and take a sip from his can of sparkling water. The tequila is making every move exaggerated. I really should have eaten before I started guzzling Patron.

“So you have the Demon King’s crown—”

“Not have. Am. Are? Is? I *am* the crown.”

“Right. And the Demon King wants it back, but in order to have it—you—he wants you to bind yourself to him for the rest of your life.”

“That about sums it up.”

“You know what that sounds like to me?”

“What?”

“It’s like the demon version of marriage. He wants you to be his queen.”

I freeze up. “Ummm...*no*.”

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t want someone to reign—” I get an immediate flash of Wrath’s theory about my name “—by his side. He wants to control the power so *he* can reign.”

“If you say so.”

“Are you taking his side?”

“You know me. *C’est la vie*.”

“This isn’t a burnt biscuit or an unexpected medical bill. This is a demon from another world. One who is relentless and violent and—”

“Fucking dynamite in bed apparently.”

“Gus!”

“What?” He’s laughing now, tears glistening in his eyes. “I’m just saying!”

I really have missed him. So damn much. Being with Gus is my safe space. I feel more like myself when I’m with him.

A shadow darkens the doorway. “Rain?”

It’s Sanjay with Eric at her back.

“Hey guys! Hi.” I try to pretend I’m sober.

“Are you two drunk?” Sanjay asks, eyeing the half empty bottle of Patron between us.

“Sorta,” Gus admits.

“Possibly,” I say.

Head down, Eric comes into the room. He's got an old friend in his hands—the witch-made harness that should shield me from Wrath.

“Adam saved it for you,” Eric says, avoiding my eyes. “I will admit it's a magic I don't know or understand, but I believe it to still be active.”

“But I'm in the factory. Do I need it? Isn't your barrier up?”

He frowns at himself. “It is but—”

“This is just another preventative measure. Just to be safe,” Sanjay adds.

With a sigh, I take the harness from him and put my arms through it. Sanjay comes up behind me and clips it into place.

It's either I wear this for the rest of my life and stay locked away behind a witch barrier, or I face the shitstorm of my life and find a way out of this.

But none of those options leaves me feeling rosy and bright.

“Adam has an update on Sirene.” Sanjay comes further into the room and caps the bottle of Patron.

“Hey!” Gus whines.

“You're injured. Alcohol thins the blood. You shouldn't be drinking.”

“Oh shit, that's a good point,” I say. “Sanjay is right. No more Patron for you Gus.”

Sanjay goes on. “Adam is finishing up with something right now and has asked us to bring you to the control room.”

“Okay. Sure.” Fuck this is really happening. Why am I suddenly panicking?

“I'll come with,” Gus says.

“Adam asked to speak with Rain alone,” Sanjay says. “And to tell you to get back into bed.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

I help him back into the bed and tuck the blanket around him. “Good?”

“TV remote?”

I spot it on the cabinet and retrieve it for him. He flicks on the flat screen attached to the wall across from the bed.

“Better now,” he says.

I wish I could do that. When was the last time I just laid in bed with guilty pleasure TV?

I was always hustling before Wrath, thinking that I was working toward something, even though I didn't know what that thing was.

Now I wish I would have taken more time off just to relax.

“Love you, babe,” Gus says.

“I love you too.”

Sanjay and Eric lead me out. We’re in a part of the factory that I didn’t get a chance to see before, but the walls are still prison gray, the floors scuffed concrete. There isn’t much about it that’s different.

We eventually reach the cavernous main room where the metal stairs wind up to the control room. Adam is there at the table, a map spread out before him. Tommy is hunched beside him.

“Rain!” Tommy says and comes over to give me a hug in the wide span of his arms. He smells like stale cigarettes and motor oil, and his hug is like the squeeze of a boa constrictor. It makes me like him even more.

“Hi Tommy. Nice to see you again.”

“Likewise. Likewise.” Then he says something in Russian and chuckles to himself.

Adam rolls up the map. “Have a seat, Rain.”

I plop into one of the metal chairs. “So you found Sirene?”

“I did.” Adam tucks the map into a cubbie behind him as Sanjay sits in the chair beside me. Eric hovers by the door.

“So what did you want to talk to me about?” I ask.

Adam crosses his thick arms over his chest and sucks a breath in through his nose. I sense the others sharing a look between one another.

“What is it?”

“I don’t have particulars,” Adam says, “but I suspect Naomi and General Briggs have commissioned Sirene to take some desperate measures to eradicate Wrath.”

My heart kicks up. “Okay.”

“I’ve made it very clear that if your life isn’t protected at all costs, I will personally destroy them.”

Some people are full of bravado and not much action. They say lots of things that sound serious and grave, but when it really comes to follow through, they shrivel up like old fruit.

Not Adam though. I can tell by the grit of his teeth, the narrowing of his eyes that he means what he says, and he has the courage to follow through with his promises.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“This isn’t up for debate,” Sanjay adds. “We want you to know that what happened at Riverside Park was not something we supported.”

Tears spring to my eyes. “I really appreciate that. Thank you.”

“With that said,” Adam goes on as he starts to walk around the table, “Sirene has asked to speak to you alone. No soldiers. No General Briggs. No president. Just you and her.”

I lick my lips. I’m no match for a witch from another world, but what other choice do I have? I think Sirene has her own agenda, but I can’t forget the fact that she literally helped make me and was my mom’s best friend at one point in her life.

I don’t think Sirene wants me dead. But I don’t exactly feel good about the plans she *does* have for me.

*She will reign.* Those were Sirene’s words once upon a time.

What exactly does she think I’ll do? Overthrow Wrath?

Never. Not in a million years.

But something does need to be done about him before he hurts someone else I care about.

“I’m okay with seeing her alone,” I say. “Just tell me when and where.”

Adam gives a quick nod. “We’re to meet her in two hours on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. I don’t like it, but Tommy and I used remote surveillance to check out the location, and there’s nothing there to warrant suspicion. But it’s entirely up to you what our next move is.”

I give a quick nod. “I’m good with that. I trust you.”

“Then we’ll leave in a half hour. The drive will take us over an hour just to reach the destination. Everyone good?”

The team gives him a nod of acknowledgement, and then Adam unfolds his arms and waves his hand. “You’re dismissed.”

The others leave. Adam checks a notification on his phone.

“Can I ask you a professional question?”

“Of course,” he says, his attention still on the screen.

“What would you do if you were in my position?”

He finally looks up, his dark brow furrowed over his eyes.

“If you were in enemy territory,” I go on, “with your back against the wall and the enemy was closing in...”

“I’d go down swinging.”

“Even if it hurt people?” I don’t think he knows that the ‘people’ I’m referring to is Wrath. I can’t shake this feeling that I’m betraying him even though he literally threatened the life of my best friend.

Would he have followed through with the threat on Gus’s life? Will I ever know?

Why did he have to do it? *Why?*

Or was this always our path? Maybe I wanted to believe he was better than he was.

“Our goal as a soldier is always to minimize casualties,” Adam explains, “but sometimes the risk is worth it if the outcome is better. Does that make sense?”

Betraying Wrath is worth it if the outcome is the one I want.

But where do I go from here?

I’ll still have the *animus*...or *be* the *animus*. Maybe Sirene will have a solution for that. She said I’d reign, but what did she mean by that all those years ago? Did she literally think I’d go to another world and rule the throne?

Fuck no. I’m not doing that. What I want is to go back to having quiche and tea at Collie’s with Gus and enjoying my life.

Isn’t it?

There is a festering seed of doubt at the center of me that I can’t seem to push down.

I just have to focus on dealing with Wrath. Then I can figure out the rest later.

I walk over to Adam and give his forearm a squeeze. He looks down at me. “Gus is lucky to have you. And by extension, me too.”

He smiles. It almost looks bashful.

“I mean it. Thank you.”

“Of course, Rain. We’re going to get you through this.”

I believe that he believes it. But I’m not so sure.

The drive to Sirene's secret location seems like it takes longer than an hour, and I find myself dozing in the back seat next to Sanjay.

When we finally pull over onto the rocky shoulder, I look out the window to find we're surrounded by nothing but trees.

"This is it?" My voice is thick and groggy.

"These are the GPS coordinates Sirene gave us." Adam puts the SUV in park but leaves the engine running.

"Is Sirene supposed to meet us or—"

A figure steps through the trees up ahead, and Sirene comes into the beam of headlights. She's wearing a tight-fitting black outfit with several gold buttons up the front and thick suede at the shoulders. Her hair is braided over her shoulder, partially obscuring the three claw marks on the side of her face.

She cocks out a hip and crosses her arms over her chest, waiting.

Adam turns in the driver's seat. "Sirene wouldn't allow us to wait for you, but we'll be nearby if you need us. I can give you that much."

"Thank you." I move for the door handle.

"Rain?" Adam stops me.

"Yeah?"

"If you sense any kind of trouble, you run."

Running won't save me, but I don't tell him that.

I give him a nod and then open the door.

THE GRAVEL of the dirt road crunches beneath my feet as I walk over to Sirene. The wind kicks up, tossing hair in my face.

“I wasn’t sure if you would come,” she calls.

“I’m running out of options,” I say.

She smirks. “Wrath has a way with that, doesn’t he? Closes you off, makes you feel divine and hollow all at the same time.”

The way she speaks about him, like she knows what that feels like, makes my stomach knot.

I think they were together at some point in their long lives, and the jealousy tightening like a band across my chest is both shocking and foreseeable.

“He hurt my best friend.” I come to a stop a few feet from her.

“He’s done worse.”

My heart beats a little harder. She’s baiting me, and I’m biting. I have to. “Like what?”

“Walk with me, and I’ll tell you.” She gestures with her hand to a hollowed path in the forest.

No time like the present I suppose. “After you.”

She crosses over the road’s shoulder and steps onto the path, and it’s almost like the forest swallows her whole. There’s plenty of light from the SUV headlights, but I can barely make out the line of her shoulders or the sweep of her hair.

I follow her and the outside world disappears. It’s a quiet hush that comes over me, like the background noise has been shushed. Now I can hear only the croak of tree frogs and crickets in the underbrush and the panting of my breath.

The air is colder too, mistier.

“What is this?” I gaze around.

“It’s a barrier.”

“It’s incredible. Eric’s barrier doesn’t feel like this.”

Sirene snorts. “That’s because Eric is a diluted witch bastard with very little power.”

“Hey. I like Eric.”

“Given the chance, I might too, but those will still be facts.”

We keep walking deeper into the forest until we come to a large stone mausoleum. It’s straight out of a Halloween movie with its columns reminiscent of ancient Greek temples, arched iron door, and stained-glass



windows.

It's no resting place for a single person, either. It's big enough to house a dozen if I had to guess.

Sirene waves her hand in front of the iron door and a loud clank sounds inside. When she looks over her shoulder at me, her eyes are glowing green.

"Come on, Hellfire Girl." She yanks the door open by a heavy ring. The metal groans and creaks, the bottom corner scraping over the stone.

Inside, it's even bigger than it seems outside with one central room with a frosted glass ceiling held together with ribbing of rusted iron. More stone columns surround the central room. There's one other door opposite the entrance, but it's made of stone and not iron. Almost like it's there for show and not functionality.

"What is this place?" My voice bounces around and comes back to me. The air is dank and cold.

Sirene crosses to the middle of the room right beneath a medallion at the center of the ceiling. It looks like a compass rose but with eight arms instead of four.

"In Alius, they're called *porta limina*. Portal of worship."

I shiver.

Sirene paces across the room. "In Alius, the demon race is revered like royalty whether or not they have a title, but the higher ranked, like Wrath, are worshipped like gods. After all, as you know, our legends tell us that by being king, he is worthy of the power of the Dark Father God."

She stops and looks up at the medallion. "The portals are constructed across Alius by lesser beings, and they worship there, hoping that Wrath or another of the royal line will come to them and bestow them favor or power or gifts."

"Does it ever work?"

She looks at me over her shoulder. "Like with your gods, the humans keep worshipping and the demons keep ignoring."

That does sound familiar. My mom has always been spiritual, always searching for greater meaning and higher powers. Not me. I'm too impatient for that.

"So why is this place, one of your *portas*, here in our world?"

Sirene finally turns to face me. "Because they can be used as portals."

The hair rises along my arms. "Between your world and mine?" Sirene nods. "But I thought you needed a traveler for that?"

“Oh you do. You need both. And usually you need demon blood too, but I suspect with you, that won’t be necessary.”

The goosebumps lift higher on my skin. “Why would you want to open a portal?”

She looks me right in the eyes as she says, “To bring Chaos over.”

“Fuck you.” I turn for the door, but it’s gone. “Goddammit. Let me out, Sirene!”

“Listen for a minute.”

I run my hand along the wall, looking for a break in the illusion. “I’m not solving a problem with a bigger problem.”

“You only know the side of the story you’ve heard from Wrath, and we both know how good he is at manipulation.”

I always went back and forth on whether or not he was manipulating me or if I was just really good about ignoring all the red flags.

My fingers find nothing but smooth stone on the wall. I’m not getting out of here until Sirene lets me out. “Okay.” I turn back to her and cross my arms over my chest. “Tell me the whole story.”

She taps at the scars on her face. “This is from Wrath.”

I frown. “Why would he do that?”

“Because I tried to stop him.”

“From what?”

“Destroying an entire town.”

A lump forms in my throat. Should I be surprised by this? The fact that I’m not makes me question my moral compass.

“I’m listening.”

“One of the demon princes formed an alliance with a vampire house to overthrow Wrath many, many years ago.” She turns away from me and walks to the stone doorway opposite me. “Wrath was planning to decimate the entire town that the demon prince ruled. Chaos and I disagreed with that

strategy. Fear is a powerful motivator for obedience, but it can backfire.”

She tilts her head, thinking. I can only see half her face—the half with the angry white scars. “But as king, Wrath didn’t have to wait for approval, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to listen to us. So he did it anyway.”

I inhale sharply. “He destroyed the town?”

Sirene looks at me. “And everyone in it.”

That motherfucker.

That vile, violent motherfucker.

Of course he destroyed a town.

He’s a fucking villain.

Even though I know all of these things, even though I know who and what he is, I still feel like vomiting hearing this story, thinking of all of those people.

“He’ll do the same here,” Sirene says. “You’ve defied him now. There will be no escaping him.”

I know she’s right. I’m not stuck between a rock and a hard place. I’m stuck between a fucking volcano and quicksand. No one in our world is equipped to stop Wrath.

But is the only answer summoning his brother? The very same demon that had a hand in starting WWII?

“There must be some other way,” I try, but Sirene shakes her head.

“You think I wasn’t exactly in your shoes all those years ago? You think I wanted to help steal the *animus* and shove it into the belly of a new ageist?”

“Hey!”

“And then have an argument with the *animus* all those years later?”

“I’m a living, breathing person. Quit referring to me like I’m an object.”

“I wanted there to be another way,” she goes on. “Any other fucking way would have been preferred.”

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “So say I help you bring Chaos over. Then what?” I look up again. “He wants the *animus* as much as Wrath does. And I’m assuming the throne too?”

Sirene’s mouth twists into a sinister grin.

“What?”

“How would you feel about screwing over not one demon but two?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “What are you getting at?”

Stone grinds against stone behind me. I turn in time to see Ciri step into the mausoleum.

“I think you’ve met the Queen of the Oracles,” Sirene says.

Once Ciri is through, the doorway disappears again. She comes over to me, her white eyes hidden behind dark Jackie O sunglasses. Her hair is neatly combed back in a chignon. “You don’t look well,” she says.

“No shit.”

“Do you remember what I told you?” She takes my face in her hands, making me feel like a child in an auntie’s grip.

“It will get worse before it gets better,” I repeat, and she nods. “He threatened and then stabbed my best friend. And my mom—”

“We’ve protected your mother,” Sirene says.

“How?”

“Magic, of course.” Ciri brushes a lock of hair behind my ear. “Now listen.”

“I am,” I say with a growl and a flash of gold reflects in the lenses of Ciri’s sunglasses. She takes a quick step back.

“Careful now.” Ciri clasps her hands in front of her. “We are not your enemy.”

I inhale, trying to clear away all of the frustration building in my sternum. “I’m sorry. It’s just...I’m stressed out, and I don’t know who the fuck to trust. Didn’t you bring Wrath here? Now you’re double crossing him?”

“I did bring him here, yes,” she says. “We all have a part to play in this. And I made no allegiance to him. He knew that. Why else would he threaten me and accuse me of playing both sides? He wasn’t wrong. I know what needs to happen, and that’s why I’m here.”

That’s all I want. I want to get through it and get to the other side with all of my loved ones intact.

“I’m not going to be responsible for starting WWIII,” I say.

Sirene shakes her head. “It won’t come to that. We won’t let it.”

“All right.” I lean against one of the stone columns and fold my arms. “Then let’s hear it. Let’s hear your brilliant plan.”

“CHAOS is the only one strong enough to take the *oculus* and the *dominus* from Wrath,” Sirene says. “That’s why we need him.”

I’m pacing the mausoleum now trying to make sense of all of the moving

pieces. I know everyone involved in this has something different to gain, but I'm still not sure what Ciri and Sirene want.

"So you want to summon Chaos," I say, "so he can take the rest of the dark god's powers from Wrath, thereby weakening him? And then what?"

"Then we destroy Wrath," Ciri answers.

"And Chaos?"

"We'll destroy him too," Ciri says.

My mouth goes dry at the thought. Two demon brothers gone just like that. Can we really do it? I think Sirene can. I'm not sure what Ciri is capable of, but there's no doubt she's a badass bitch. And on top of that, she clearly knows more about the future than she's letting on.

"Who will take Wrath's place? I'm assuming someone needs to."

*She will reign.*

*Please don't say me.* I keep thinking it over and over again.

"There's a prince," Sirene says and my shoulders sink with relief. "One that would rule fairly and justly."

But as she speaks, I sense Ciri giving her a pointed look, as if there's more they aren't saying.

But do I really care who rules Alius? No. There's just one little problem...

"And me? What about the *animus*?"

"We can't get around that," Sirene answers. "And a ruler must have all three aspects of power. But a prince can't and won't be able to overpower you. Not like Wrath. If you bound yourself to him, you would have your freedom. You could do as you pleased."

I stop pacing to look over at her. "So I could go back to my normal life?"

She nods.

The idea is appealing. With Wrath, there's this overwhelming feeling that if I bowed to him, if I bound myself to him, he would control me and rule me. We are not equals. That will never change.

This whole time, I've been searching for a way to return to my life, and I think this might be the closest I can get, considering my life was never mine to begin with.

That's a whole other thing I need to deal with someday, the fact that everything I thought I knew about myself was a lie. The fact that I was an immaculate conception from a power stolen from a dark god from another world.

Just thinking about it makes my head spin. It sounds too ludicrous even for a fantasy book.

But right now, I need to deal with Wrath and Chaos. I can't bury my head in the sand anymore. It's no longer an option.

I need to do something, and this might be the only something I *can* do.

"Can either of you give me something to assure me Chaos won't run amok? I don't want to be responsible for another world war."

Sirene looks at Ciri.

"I can give you something." Ciri raises a hand and a second later, an Oracle appears. There are no distinguishing features to tell me if she's the same girl as the one who visited me at Wrath's castle. Her gauzy white dress is the same. Her skin is pale and shimmery. When she edges closer, I catch the scent of wet stone and a struck match.

She stops when she's a few feet away. Her dress hovers over the stone floor.

"Through Chaos, there is order," the girl says. "Through order, there is peace. Through you, there is redemption."

She comes closer still, and her scent fills my nose. "You are the only way. So you must do as you must and do it quickly."

My eyes burn looking at her, so I blink for a reprieve, and in that fraction of a second, she's gone.

I stumble back and suck in a breath like I've just been shoved out of a dream. My head is suddenly pounding, my stomach swimming.

"Did you get what you needed?" Ciri asks.

I lick my lips. "I don't know. Maybe?"

*You are the only way.*

It still feels like my hands have been tied, but if I put my faith in anything, it has to be in the belief that this is all happening for a reason and that I will get through it.

I can set things right.

"So?" Sirene says.

"Tell me what to do."

The witch's face lights up, her scars wrinkling as she smiles. "Let's get to work."

As Sirene and Ciri prepare the portal, Wrath comes to me in my head.

*Dieva, he says, I can't feel you.*

He's probably just playing games again.

In my head, I think, *Dieva is busy right now. Fuck off.*

*There she is, the mighty Rain. Surly and fierce. My two favorite characteristics.*

*Shut up. I'm going to destroy you for what you did.*

*You think so, do you? Tell me, dieva, what do you plan to do? You think your mortal soldiers can stand at your back and save you from me? I will decimate them.*

His voice is louder in my head, stronger.

Sirene points at something on the gate and Ciri nods.

I don't know how long we've been in this mausoleum. It feels like seconds and hours all at the same time.

*And how do you plan to stop your brother without the animus?* I ask.

There's only silence in my head now, and my heart aches at the void.

Wrath has me all twisted up. Clearly, he's been brainwashing me. The sooner I can get this over with, the better.

"Rain?" Ciri says over her shoulder. "We're ready for you."

I rise to my feet and meet them at the gate. A year ago, I never would have believed a fake door might actually open a portal to another world. But now it's as real as the clothes on my back.

"What do you need from me?" I ask.

"Your blood," Sirene says, not missing a beat.



Of course.

“Give me your hand.”

I hold it out for her, and she produces a knife and drags the blade over the soft flesh of my palm. I hiss from the pain and flinch, but Sirene holds me tightly as the blood wells in the cut.

“Now what?”

“Put your palm to the stone doorway,” Ciri answers.

“That’s it?”

She nods. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“*Dieva!*”

We all go silent at the sound of Wrath’s voice.

“Did you guys hear that too?” I ask.

Sirene’s eyes narrow. “Apparently his ability to track her is stronger than I thought.”

“He’s really here?”

“Keep going,” Sirene orders us, and then with barely any effort, she scales up one of the stone columns and peeks out through the glass domed ceiling.

With a deep breath, I step up to the doorway and press my palm to the cool stone. Pain radiates out through the cut as pressure is applied to it.

“He has a witch,” Sirene reports. “Rhys Roman’s witch, I think.”

Kat is helping Wrath?

I like Kat. I trust Kat. If she’s taking his side...

Doubt settles in my gut. But then again...she doesn’t know that Wrath threatened my best friend. If she did, would she still be helping Wrath?

“What’s Kat doing?” I ask.

“Trying to bring down the barrier.”

Panic tightens like a band across my chest.

“Step back.” Ciri puts a hand on my shoulder and yanks me away from the stone gate.

“Maybe we should wait—”

“Absolutely not.” Sirene climbs down the column. “We have a job to do. We’ll do it.”

Ciri lifts her arms above her head and whispers foreign words beneath her breath. The ground trembles.

“*Dieva!*” Wrath shouts again. “When I get my hands on you, you will beg for my mercy.”

“Fucking hell,” I say beneath my breath.

“It won’t come to that,” Sirene promises me even though I don’t think she has it in her power to make such a promise.

The gate pops and light pierces through the stone.

My heart rams in my throat, thumps in my head.

I’m putting my trust in complete strangers, and I don’t know if I’m making the right decision, and what if Chaos is worse than Wrath?

Sirene said Chaos wanted to stop his brother from destroying that village in Alius, but...Chaos started a fucking world war and...

Fuck, I don’t know what to think or believe, and I think it might be too fucking late anyway.

More light shines through the mausoleum as the stone doorway melts away, and a portal takes shape with a ripple of energy.

A dark figure appears in the light.

I squint against the brightness as the figure steps through.

Ciri drops her arms, panting, and the portal disappears with a crackle of air.

When my eyes adjust, I look over at the man standing in front of the doorway.

I don’t know what I expected Chaos to look like, but it isn’t this, and seeing him sends a shock of relief through me.

He looks like an English professor. A hot one, sure, but nowhere near as intimidating as Wrath. I can immediately see the similarities between them though. The chiseled jaw, the sharp cheekbones, the knowing gray eyes. But his are hidden behind round, tortoiseshell glasses.

He’s wearing a heather gray henley that hugs his biceps and skims his waist.

I can only imagine what he looks like with it off.

Hot English professors might be my new weakness.

Wait, what? Nope. Not going down that road.

I can’t forget this man is a demon whose name is literally Chaos.

He takes two steps down from the gate and looks over at me.

My heart is hammering against my ear drums. I’m finding it hard to catch my breath.

“Rain, I presume?” he says with a slight accent that sounds British to my ears.

“Hi.” I wave awkwardly.

He tilts his head, his eyes sweeping over me. “You’re gorgeous.” He looks over his shoulder at Ciri. “You didn’t tell me she was gorgeous.”

“Does it matter?” I ask, half joking.

“I suppose not.” He takes another step, but when he comes within a few feet of me, he stops and his attention wanders beyond the mausoleum. “My brother is here, and he’s close to getting in.”

“Sirene said you could help defeat him,” I say.

“I can.” He smiles, flashing perfect white teeth. He has an easy, casual way about him, like he’s had all of these conversations before and knows just where they’re going.

Maybe I was wrong about him not being intimidating. Every word that comes out of his mouth makes me doubt that assessment even more. I get the distinct impression he’s five steps ahead of me already.

“Wrath told me you started World War II. I hope you don’t have plans to do it again?” I laugh nervously

A pinch of regret appears between his brows. “An unfortunate accident.”

I snort. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“What about all of the shootings? The chaos in our government? The unrest?”

I hadn’t planned on confronting him, but now that he’s here, I can’t seem to stop it.

“What is light without darkness?” he challenges.

“It’s too much darkness.”

“Is it?”

Sirene comes over and nearly steps between us. “We don’t have time for this. I can feel the barrier crumbling. Wrath will get in and soon.”

“Let him come.” Chaos is still staring at me, dissecting me with his eyes.

“Wait, you want to fight him now?”

“What better time?”

“I can’t. I’m not ready.”

“You don’t have to do anything.”

“Sirene,” I try. “Was this part of the plan? I didn’t want to have to be here when they went toe to toe!”

*Dieva*, his voice sounds in my head causing me to flinch. *I’m coming for you.*

“I can’t do this. Poof me out of here,” I tell Chaos.

“If we’re to take my brother, I need you by my side. Come.” He winds his arm around my waist and tugs me into his side. “We’ll face him together. A united front.”

The hair along the nape of my neck lifts at his touch.

There’s a crackle in the air, and Sirene grumbles beneath her breath.

“What is that?” I ask.

“That,” Chaos says down to me, “is the barrier crumbling.”

A second later, Wrath appears in front of us, and his gaze immediately goes to Chaos’s hand curled around my waist. Rage etches itself into the fine lines around his eyes.

“Brother,” Wrath says.

“My king,” Chaos answers.

My shirt is rising and falling to the rapid beating of my heart. My stomach is in knots.

This is all part of the plan, so why the fuck do I have the urge to vomit?

“I’ve called *dieva*,” Wrath says. “So I will ask nicely, just this once, that you remove your hand from her.”

Chaos looks down at me again. “You called *dieva* for this little one?” With his other hand, he brushes away a lock of my hair, and Wrath growls as darkness rises from his shoulders.

“The *animus* is already yours by right. So why go to the trouble?” Chaos asks. “Unless...” He takes a chunk of my hair and yanks it, baring my neck. “Unless there’s more to her than just the power?”

“If you hurt what’s mine,” Wrath says, “I will reach down your throat and pull out your fucking spine, brother.”

“That’s what I thought.” Something sharp flashes in Chaos’s hand. I realize too late that it’s a blade.

“NO!” Wrath shouts, his face sharpening, twisting into the monster as he lunges.

But he isn’t quick enough.

Chaos sinks the blade into my back, and everything goes white.

The world blinks. Darkness. Light. Pain. Darkness again.

The stone floor is cool against my cheek, but my back is white hot with pain, my shirt soaked with blood.

Wrath and Chaos are a cloud of darkness as fighting ensues.

I can't feel my legs.

Sirene comes into my line of sight. "Rain. Rain? Can you hear me?"

I blink and a tear escapes the corner of my eye, runs over the bridge of my nose.

What have I done?

What have they done?

Ciri's warm hand comes to my neck, her fingers searching for a pulse. "Her heart is weak. Fix this."

Sirene grumbles in the back of her throat. "This isn't my area of expertise."

"I told you this would happen, and you assured me you could manage it," Ciri whispers.

"I am. Just give me a second."

Ciri knew I'd be stabbed? They let this happen? I try to speak, but my throat is dry and everything is impossibly cold now.

Am I dying?

I guess if I'm dead, I don't have to deal with all of this bullshit anymore.

Something loud thuds against the mausoleum wall. Wrath roars. Several *narrow* take shape around the room, and Chaos faces off with them.

I catch sight of Wrath. He doesn't look good. He looks like he's fucking

losing.

All because of me.

His skin is paler than normal, and blood is dripping from the corner of his mouth.

Fuck. Fuck.

They knew this would happen?!

How the fuck does this fit into the plan? I move my lips trying to get the words out, but my voice is scratchy and too quiet.

Sirene presses hard against the wound in my back, and I cry out, nerves lighting with excruciating pain.

Wrath roars an echo of pain as my vision spins.

Chaos grabs his brother by the throat and lifts him off his feet. With his other hand, he tears the shirt from Wrath's body and claws at his demon mark.

The mark glows red. The *narrow* screech and quiver, their forms dissipating like smoke.

"It's happening," Ciri says from above me. "Chaos is taking the *oculus*. Whatever you gotta do, Sirene, you do it now."

"I'm fucking trying!"

A sharp pain echoes through the connection between me and Wrath.

We lock eyes across the room.

He's losing.

All because of me.

No. No no.

There's a hollowness carved out of the center of me, seeing Wrath vulnerable.

And a terrifying thought burns through my skull—there's a sick feeling in my gut seeing Wrath in danger, the same sick feeling I had when I knew Gus was in danger.

Oh hell. Fuck. Fuck.

I can't breathe because of the panic. I can't think straight because of the fear.

I can't lose Wrath.

I hate him. I loathe what he did to Gus.

But...

Fuck.

I can't let anything happen to him.

I'm shaking now and burning hot.

"Sirene," Ciri says. "Are you—"

Light burns in my field of vision, and Sirene hisses as smoke curls from her hand.

I'm suddenly flush with the power of the *animus*.

The pain fades away.

Wrath needs me.

The Demon King needs me.

Power crashes through me.

Chaos turns to me, his mouth gaping open.

"Let him go," I say.

Chaos drops Wrath to the stone floor and turns to me. There's a small stone in the palm of his hand.

I think it might be the *oculus*.

The power to control minds.

When he stole the *animus* from Wrath, he couldn't hold on to it. That's why he gave it to Sirene. But now? Wrath is weakened, the triad of power split. Can Chaos take on the power now?

The stone glows in his hand.

"We're just one stone away," he says and steps toward me. "Let's bind ourselves together and take the last from him."

I laugh. "That was never part of the plan."

I don't exactly know what the plan is at this point. Everyone is keeping secrets. Everyone has their own idea of how this should go down. And I'm fucking sick of it.

Flames lick up my hands. I can feel the kiss of their warmth, but it doesn't burn.

"Give me the *oculus*, and maybe I'll let you live," I say.

He smiles at me and undoes the top buttons on his shirt, baring his demon mark.

"When I took the *animus* from my brother, I wasn't strong enough to hold on to it." His demon mark glows bright red. "I made sure not to make that mistake again."

He presses the stone to his sternum, and the demon mark flares golden. He grits his teeth, tendons sticking out of his neck as he tenses up against the power burning through his body.

The air crackles around him, and light flickers like heat lightning.

Chaos hangs his head back and roars at the ceiling, hands fisted at his sides. The glass dome spiderwebs and cracks and then glass is raining down around us.

I throw my arm over my head, glass cutting at my skin.

When I come back up, Chaos is panting, head bowed. Then he starts to laugh.

Shit.

He levels his shoulders and lifts his head, his eyes glowing red.

Several *narrow* take shape around him. But they're not poised to attack him. They're lined up like soldiers at his side.

"My brother has ruled long enough." Chaos looks over at me. "His time has come to an end. Will you join me, Rain? We would be mighty."

Blood drips from a cut on my nose as sweat beads at my temple. Wrath never gave me the choice to join him. He never asked. He demanded. He expected me to fall in line.

But even still, the thought of joining Chaos instead leaves me hollow and cold.

"No fucking way," I answer.

Chaos smiles at me with his polite professor's smile. It makes my blood run cold.

"Very well." He flicks his wrist to the *narrow*. "Kill him."

"NO!"

I know from experience that the *narrow* are fast. Faster than my legs can carry me.

I don't think I can reach Wrath's side quickly enough.

I can't let the *narrow* take him.

The air pops. My skin grows taut. There's a flash of light and darkness and a forceful shift of my body.

Suddenly I'm standing in front of Wrath, arms raised.

The Hellfire Crown has come out to play.

And she is not taking any shit.

My feet leave the ground as the room burns bright orange.

Wrath is mine.

He is as much mine as I am his.

I can't deny it any longer. I hate him, and I want to murder him for hurting Gus, but he. Is. Mine.

And no one, not Sirene, not the president, not Chaos or the *narrow* is



going to take him from me.

A loud WHUMP sounds through the room as fire plumes around us. The *narrow* shriek. Their darkness crackles along the edges like burning wood. With a collective scream, they burn off into embers, and the heat of their destruction warms my skin.

When my feet hit the stone floor again, I'm breathing heavily, but I feel like I could go another ten rounds.

Adrenaline is pumping through my veins and energy coils in my bones.

But when the smoke clears, Chaos is gone.

“Where did he go?” I turn in a circle.

Wrath uses the stone wall to lift himself up. There’s blood dripping from his nose and from the corner of his mouth. The skin around his left eye is purple and black with a mottled bruise.

“Are you—”

The monster comes to his face, and he darts across the room to Ciri taking her by the throat. He sways on his feet, but his grip is tight.

“Wait!” I shout and come to a stop beside him. “Don’t hurt her.”

Where the hell is Sirene?

Ciri’s face is contorted in pain as Wrath lifts her off her feet. “It’s okay, Rain,” she chokes out. “Today is the day I die.”

“You betrayed me,” Wrath grits out.

She smiles down at him. Her sunglasses are gone, and her white eyes almost glow in the smoky half-darkness. “I did what I had to do.”

“Wrath,” I try and put a hand on his shoulder. “Please.”

“You can’t control her,” Ciri says. “So stop trying.”

Wrath’s expression sharpens even more. “I am the fucking king!”

“And you are no longer the most powerful person in the room.”

His eyes burn bright red.

“Wrath—”

CRACK.

Ciri’s neck snaps, and her head goes limp in Wrath’s grip.

“What the fuck! You can’t just—”

He drops her like a sack of trash and rounds on me, eyes still burning.

“You’re fucking next.” His hand wraps around the back of my neck. He lifts me off my feet and slams me on the ground, kneeling beside me. Pain shoots through my body as a dull ache pounds through my head. I wiggle beneath his grip, but his strength is greater than mine, and he’s caught me off guard.

“Kat,” he calls, and the distinct sound of stilettos on stone comes into the mausoleum.

“You can’t really expect me to bind her?” comes Kat’s voice.

“Did I ask for your fucking opinion? We had a deal. Or will you betray me too?”

Kat sighs. “Very well.”

Something sweet perfumes the air, and then my arms are tugged behind my back and locked into place. There’s a phantom sensation of being tied up, but there’s no pressure on my skin, no rope or bindings.

“Can I go now?” Kat asks.

Wrath grabs me by the bicep and yanks me to my feet.

Despite being summoned to battle, Kat looks like she was prepared for a night on the town in a bright red dress that hugs her curvy body. Her dark, wavy hair curls around her face, and her puffy lips are painted in the same shade of her dress.

“I’m sorry, Rain,” she says with a frown. “Rhys ordered me to. I am bound to do his bidding.”

I’m not sure if I should be offended or not. Kat owes me nothing, but whatever happened to girl solidarity? I guess when you’re battling with supernatural forces, the lines are a little blurred.

I decide to keep my mouth shut, and Kat just gives me a quick nod and turns around and leaves.

Darkness wraps around me and Wrath. He gets in close to my side, his hand still wrapped around my arm as he pulls us away from the mausoleum. We reappear outside of the castle, but Wrath collapses when solid ground appears beneath us.

I stand by awkwardly, my hands still bound behind my back.

“I’d help you, but—”

He looks up at me with a sneer. “You’ve done enough, *dieva*.”

Arthur and Lauren come out, and I have a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. It’s Lauren that helps Wrath up.

“Chaos has the *oculus*,” he tells her.

“Fuck,” Lauren says. “Her fault, I assume?”

Wrath ignores her. “Is everyone here?”

“Who’s everyone?”

Arthur nods. “We were unable to locate the prince you spoke of. If he’s on this side, we can’t find him.”

Wrath curses beneath his breath.

“What is going on?”

Wrath turns on me and bears down on me. The monster hasn’t come out to play, but the way his eyes glow red is warning enough. “You keep your fucking mouth shut. Do you understand me?”

My heart is a staccato beat in my ears.

“Just kill her,” Lauren suggests.

“I would if I could,” Wrath says.

He would? Of course he would. I’ve betrayed him. I’ve crossed the uncrossable line with him.

The guilt is sour in my stomach now, but it’s threaded with rage.

“You hurt Gus!” I yell at him. “You knew what I would do! You gave me no choice!”

Without thinking, I reach for the fire of the *animus*. But the call goes unanswered.

A lump forms in my throat when I realize just what a binding means. I don’t have access to the power. I’m pretty much fucking useless.

Wrath takes my jaw in his hand and squeezes. Pain shoots through my bones. “I’m going to make you hurt, *dieva*,” he says as he gets in close to my mouth, his breath hot and spicy as it spills down my neck. “I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done.”

The threat slivers down my spine and lights a flare of heat between my legs. The fuck?

Wrath notices. Of course he fucking does.

The smile that comes to his face is full of darkness and sin. “That’s what I thought.”

He takes me by the arm again and drags me into the house. Lauren and Arthur follow. We go down a hallway, then another, then down a set of stairs.

We enter into a large hall and stop on a landing that puts us on a stage at the head of the room. Several torches flicker from stone columns. Iron chandeliers hanging from the ceiling fill the rest of the space with golden light.

And when I take in the sight, the air gets lodged in my throat.

The hall is easily the size of a football field and filling the hall as far as the eye can see are men and women and dozens and dozens of the *norrow*.

There must be thousands here.

An army.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.

When Wrath shouts across the room, his voice booms with command and echoes back to us.

“Prepare yourselves,” he says. “We’re going to war.”

## EPILOGUE

Wrath barely looks at me as he instructs Lauren to get me *out of his sight*. Actual words.

I'm led to a cell in the depths of the castle. Using an iron key that hangs around her neck, Lauren unlocks my arms from behind my back, but binds them again in front of me. "You know, you might be the stupidest person I've ever met."

"You might be right," I mutter.

The cell has one window at ground level. Bubbled glass inlaid with iron bars lets in a few rays of early morning light.

"Hopefully Wrath can figure out a way to kill you and get the *animus* so we can finally be done with you."

"You'd love that, wouldn't you?" I circle the small room. There isn't even a bed. It's just an uneven stone floor with a dusting of dirt and pebbles.

Lauren crosses her arms over her chest. "Obviously. You've been nothing but trouble since you showed up."

"As if I had any choice in the matter."

"You had a choice," she points out. "And you betrayed him."

Yes. As everyone keeps reminding me.

"Can you just go? I'm tired."

Lauren rolls her eyes, but leaves me in the dark, cool silence.

I pace the room for a while, looking for any kind of weakness, but of course there's none to be found. The window is solid, the iron bars firmly cemented in the stone foundation. The door to the cell is thick wood and strapped in more iron.

I try using Wrath's power to travel through the sub-dimension—I've used it twice now, so I know I can do it—but nothing happens no matter how hard I try.

Probably because of the binding. Kat's magic is strong, and I don't know the first thing about breaking it or even if I can.

As the daylight fades again, I find a divot in the stone floor and curl into it on my side. I have no blanket, no pillow. Just the clothes on my back. I shiver as the light fades. I slip in and out of sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Wrath comes to me.

I see the outline of him against the weak moonlight at the window.

I know he knows I'm awake, but I say nothing. There's nothing to say.

"Why did you do it, *dieva*?" His voice echoes around the cell and slithers over my skin. A chill lifts the hair along my arms.

"Why did you threaten my best friend?" I counter. The rage builds in my gut, but without the *animus*, it's just useless emotion.

"Is one man really more important than an entire world?" he asks.

I pull myself upright. "Yes."

"You don't believe that. Not really."

"Is power really more important to you than life?"

"Power is life. Life is power. They are intertwined."

"I never wanted the power," I admit.

"You think I did? You think I chose this life? To rule?" He stands and the sandy floor grits beneath his boots. "I do what I must because it is my duty. It is in my blood, much as the power is in yours. And yet, you keep running from it because you are afraid." He's suddenly in front of me, crouched before me. The barest hint of moonlight skims half his beautiful face. "You may be powerful," he says, "but you are a coward."

I bit at my bottom lip, feeling a sting of tears.

Because he's right.

I am so fucking afraid.

I'm afraid of who I am and who I'm meant to be. I'm afraid of losing who I thought I was and becoming something else.

But most of all, I'm afraid of how he makes me feel, how ravenous I am for him despite all of the horrible things he's done.

Even now, hands magically bound, locked away in a dank cell, I want him to touch me. I want to get lost in his molten eyes and burn beneath his scorching touch.

I hate him and I fucking love him.

No sense hiding from it any longer.

I would scorch the earth for him just the same as I would for Gus.

“I asked you nicely to bind yourself to me,” he says. “And you denied me.” His eyes flare in the dark. “I won’t ask nicely again.”

A tear escapes from the corner of my eye. I quickly swipe it away. I don’t want him to see my pain.

“You will bind yourself to me,” he says, his voice thick and hoarse with something that sounds like heartache, “or I will destroy everything you’ve ever loved.”

I believe him.

I believe him, and it kills me.

There’s a crackle of air, and I immediately sense the void he’s left. But he pops up again a second later, and a thick, warm blanket is draped over my shoulders, driving the chill away.

“If I say yes now, will you unbind me and get me out of this damn hole?”

He laughs through his nose. “Oh *dieva*. You think you’ve suffered enough?” He crouches in front of me again and traces a finger over my cheek. His touch ignites me. I close my eyes and sink into the feel of him as my heart kicks up and butterflies fill my belly.

“Your suffering has only begun.”

His touch disappears and then he’s gone.

And the chill immediately returns.

THANK you so much for continuing on this journey with me! I am having so much fun writing Wrath and Rain. I can’t wait to share their final book together!

In the meantime, while you wait, check out my filthy vampire serial on Kindle Vella if you want more paranormal romance!

IT'S NEAR IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE MY VAMPIRE NEIGHBOR, BRAN DUVAL, when he has a habit of shucking off his clothes while the blinds are up. He's playing games with me, but I don't mind a challenge. Only problem is, I'm supposed



to pledge myself to a rival vampire family and now all I can think about is Bran Duval, black sheep of the Duval vampire family, and the things he's promising to do to me in the dark.

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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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