

J A S M I N E M A S

PSYCHO DEVILS

ARAN'S STORY
BOOK 2

PSYCHO DEVILS

THE CRUEL SHIFTERVERSE SERIES: ARAN'S STORY
BOOK 2

JASMINE MAS

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ALSO BY JASMINE MAS

The Cruel Shifiverse

Psycho Shifters

Psycho Fae

Psycho Beasts

Psycho Academy

Psycho Devils

Psycho Gods (preorder now, releasing Dec 2023)

WARNING

They are true enemies. This is war. It is excessively violent. This is a reverse harem. Everyone's a villain. There are some intense situations in this book that might be triggering for some readers. If you are concerned please refer to the trigger list on my website jasminemasbooks.com, click on the black "Trigger" tab at the top right of the page for the list.

Please take care of yourself. Enjoy :)

FOREWORD

“I must get my soul back from you; I am killing my flesh without it.”

—Sylvia Plath

INTO THE STARS

All myths are rooted in some truth.

This series is about different planets connected by black holes.

Aka, realms attached by portals with inhabitants you've heard of in myths and dismissed as fairy tales.

There are politics, deceptions, and secrets on the macro scale. And they vary from realm to realm.

In the human realm, the inhabitants learn they live in an anarchic system, that there is no supreme authority over different countries.

They're wrong.

The High Court secretly reigns sovereign over *all* the worlds. "Realm-Wide Peace" is their motto.

Monsters enforce this peace. A next-to-impossible task because wealth corrupts, but power destroys.

And among the hundreds of planets with sentient life, a few special individuals possess power on the nuclear level—more energy in their cells than an atomic bomb.

The truth: Most individuals go their entire lives without knowing or caring about the other realms or the creatures within them. They live in bliss.

In this series, ignorance isn't an option for our main characters.

Through birthright or circumstances, they're players in the macrolevel game.

Now all they must do is survive.

THE BEGINNING: SHACKLES

“Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

—Oliver Goldsmith

CHAPTER I

CORVUS MALUM

REVELATIONS

The beginning: Shackles—Day 1, hour 0

C rack.

Flames exploded as we RJE'd back into Elite Academy, and the five of us returned to an empty classroom.

Orion staggered, and I held my precious mate upright. Scorpius rested his long fingers on the backs of both our necks tightly.

His nails dug into our skin.

I leaned into his familiar touch and tried to ignore the headache that throbbed in my temple.

In a few minutes, everything had changed.

My mates and I were now bound by enchanted tattoos to Aran.

No, *Arabella*.

The honorable House of Malum was bound to a lying, weak fae. A useless. Manipulative. Woman.

I swallowed thickly, and Scorpius's nails stabbed harder against my flesh. "Breathe, Ignis," he whispered softly against my ear.

I nodded to show him I was trying.

Flames licked across my shoulders and down my arms. The heat burned my veins, and sweat dripped down my jaw.

I felt feverish, like I always did when I was close to losing control.

My body vibrated from the sheer force of the power pounding through my veins.

It would be euphoric to release the flames. To raze the world and paint it red with fire.

But I couldn't.

Sweat made my vision blurry.

"Focus on us," Scorpius ordered. My Protector's voice was hard as steel, and he left no room for argument.

His nails dug deeper into my flesh.

Orion leaned against me. His hand reached back and snaked underneath the corner of my sweatpants.

His fingers were icy compared to my warm skin.

I was burning up.

Scorpius pulled my neck back and pressed his cheek against mine. "Listen to my voice," he demanded.

His fingers tightened, and I focused on the pain.

I let it ground me.

"You are in control," he said firmly. "You rule the fire. It does not rule you."

I tried to nod, but his grip was so tight that my head wouldn't move. I licked sweat off my lips and repeated, "I am in control."

Orion put more of his weight on me as he leaned back, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders. I breathed in his decadent, sweet scent. He smelled like danger with a sweet edge.

Like poisoned candy.

The pretty man in my arms was addicting.

My chest pounded erratically; I leaned my weight against Scorpius's powerful figure. His impressive muscles easily supported me and Orion.

I was sandwiched between my mates.

My Revered was in my arms.

My Protector held me up.

Scorpius's heartbeat pounded steadily against my back, and I closed my eyes and concentrated on matching the rhythm.

"Focus on my nails," he whispered as he gripped my neck tighter. "Focus on your breath."

I concentrated on the prick of pain.

Orion inhaled loudly, and I followed his lead. He exhaled with a whoosh. So did I.

His silky blond hair tickled my chin, and he tilted his head up.

Stunning, warm brown eyes looked up at me with concern, and his pouty lips parted. “You okay?” he mouthed.

A bead of sweat dripped off my chin onto his mouth.

His red tongue flashed out and licked it off.

Fuck. I swallowed thickly.

“Yeah, I am,” I said throatily as I stared at the lips of my Revered.

Since puberty, I’d always been interested in other people’s lips. Interest had turned into a full-blown obsession when I met Orion. The depraved things I wanted to do to him.

Scorpius’s fingers pushed my head forward, and I grinned because my Protector knew exactly what I needed. Hell, he knew me better than I knew myself.

I pressed my lips softly against Orion’s.

He tasted decadent.

I licked his mouth wantonly and enjoyed the salty-sweet taste. His pupils expanded until the warm brown was mostly black with desire.

Even though our mating bond wasn’t completed, I pressed my tongue harder into his mouth.

He melted against me and groaned.

I nipped at his tongue, grabbed his hips with flaming fingers, and pulled his firm ass back.

Orion mewled against me. I stabbed my tongue deeper into his mouth, and the faint trace of smoke made goose bumps explode across my neck.

My mind blacked out.

I kissed him deeper, like I was trying to consume him. The smoky taste mixed with his sweetness and short-circuited every rational thought I had. I needed to consume it. Inhale him.

Scorpius’s nails dug deeper as he pressed my neck forward and crushed my face harder against Orion’s.

My Protector’s cock was so hard I could feel it throbbing through both our sweatpants.

Scorpius was a sadomasochist, after all.

I groaned with frustration.

And nothing hurt worse than being close to something you wanted but knowing you couldn’t have it.

The familiar uneasy feeling washed through me, and Scorpius wrenched my head away. Orion rubbed at his chest as if he could physically push away

the sensation.

The three of us panted loudly in the quiet.

Scorpius pulled away, and Orion took a step forward, putting space between us.

Stunning brown eyes looked up at me, then shuttered with devastation. Fingernails trembled against the back of my neck.

He looked at me with concern.

“I’m fine,” I said gruffly.

Flames danced across my arms, but the feverish feeling was gone. All that remained was the queasy, unsettling feeling that occurred when we got too close to one another.

My Revered couldn’t meet my eyes.

My Protector couldn’t stop digging his nails into my skin.

I was their Ignis, and I was failing them.

We were damned men.

Three mated devils who couldn’t complete their soul bond because they were missing their fourth mate.

Until we found our other Protector, we couldn’t touch one another like we wanted. Like we needed.

I raked my hand roughly across my buzzed skull and breathed deeply.

Pushed my shoulders back.

Widened my stance.

For the first time since we’d returned from getting the tattoo, I took in my surroundings.

We were standing in the middle aisle of Lothaire’s classroom.

The vampyre was standing at the window. He stared out with unseeing eyes and looked more like a ghost than a man.

“Wow, what a kiss,” a feminine voice said from the far corner of the room. “That was, just wow. No words. Very intense.” There was a low whistling sound as she blew out smoke.

I ignored her.

Bloodred rays refracted through the room’s stained-glass windows that formed a mosaic of rolling fields.

The peaceful imagery mocked me.

Lothaire whirled around and kicked a desk chair. It exploded into scraps of metal as it slammed against the wall.

None of us flinched.

We were used to his violence.

Lothaire pulled at his scalp and stalked over to his desk while muttering about a guardian and righteous path under his breath. He threw papers around like he was searching for something.

He muttered frantically about secrets.

He was losing it.

“Why do you guys have sex with other people if you’re so into each other?” the feminine voice asked.

I gritted my teeth and pretended that she didn’t exist.

She said louder, “Seems kind of disloyal.”

I concentrated on the hush of the dusty classroom. The perverse sense of tranquility that accompanied the quiet.

Dust particles floated in the stillness, and the red rays of the eclipse made everything glow like it was dipped in blood.

Like we were all drenched in it.

“Personally, I wouldn’t be getting with other people.” She sucked loudly on her pipe. “But that’s just me.”

The calmness I’d experienced while embracing my mates disappeared.

My control snapped.

I said in a menacing tone, “Don’t you fucking dare speak to us.”

I pushed my men behind me protectively as I glared over at Arabella.

She rolled her eyes and turned to the side, like she was trying to make it clear that she was now ignoring me.

Ruby-red lips parted and slowly blew out a cloud of smoke.

A tortured growl escaped my throat at her haughty expression, and flames trailed across my arms.

She arched her brow as she stared at her pipe, then her body sagged. Dainty fingers rubbed tiredly at her forehead and dragged across delicately arched cheekbones. Cuts littered her skin from Lothaire throwing her into the window before she revealed her identity.

Her flesh slowly knit back together and healed before my eyes.

I hated Aran, but I preferred him to the creature in front of me. The pathetic woman.

She was a fucking joke.

Everything about Arabella—the too-pretty face; delicate bone structure; long, curly blue hair—was proof that Aran had never existed.

She had put everyone at risk with her masquerade.

We trained and fought together in life-or-death situations. Our unit was only as strong as our weakest soldier, and in the heat of battle, trust in one another was sometimes all we had.

She'd betrayed us all.

Behind me, my blind mate asked, "What is she doing? Is the slave gloating?"

"No," Orion whispered quietly to Scorpius. "She's smoking and looking at her pipe like she's bored. Now she's yawning. She looks sad."

My mates stepped forward and flanked me.

Scorpius glowered. Malice radiated off him like he disagreed with Orion's assessment. So did I.

In contrast, my gentle mate stared at Arabella with wide eyes.

Orion's mind worked differently from others. He was obsessive.

Where others showed interest, he fixated.

He stalked.

We'd met Orion when he was standing over us in the middle of the night, watching us sleep. Even after we'd all realized we were mates, he'd still break into our rooms to spy on us.

Unfortunately, he was showing the same signs of obsession with the lying bitch.

His eyes were wide. He stared across the room at her without blinking.

Since he was our Revered, it was my duty as Ignis and Scorpius's as Protector to keep him safe. The problem was that we were missing our other Protector.

From the way he was watching her, we needed the help.

"Are you sure she's not gloating about deceiving us?" Scorpius sneered. "She probably loves that she had us all fooled thinking she was a guy."

Orion kept staring at her without blinking, and he whispered, "She looks exhausted and worn out. Like she's in pain."

I snorted. She looked like a stuck-up, lying brat.

From the revulsion on Scorpius's face, he agreed with me. He could hear and sense things others couldn't, and his natural distrust of people made him smart.

After all, people in general were pathetic. They were a means to an end.

Scorpius liked their pain.

I liked their submission.

Orion didn't care about anyone. Until he did. Then things got dangerous.

Across the quiet classroom, Arabella glanced over at us and scoffed.
Flames burned hotter.

My muscles ached from the strain of holding back fire, and I breathed slowly.

Sometimes it felt like the fire controlled me.
I'd never known a single day of peace.

How dare she smoke casually and act unbothered like she hadn't ruined our lives? How dare she scoff at me?

Lothaire muttered about Dick and a grand plan under his breath. He was lost in his own world.

I used his distraction and stalked over to the corner. My mates followed.
As we neared, I glanced down.

Arabella's sweatpants were still askew on her hips and showed off a hint of a tattooed chain.

A horrible reminder.

We were tied together.

When we stood a foot away, she glanced up at me with her bloodshot eyes. They were rimmed in dark circles.

She was weak and pathetic.

"Don't talk to me," she muttered haughtily, then looked away.

I snapped back, "Don't tell me what to do, bitch."

She gritted her teeth and stared at the wall. "I told you not to talk."

I saw red.

As I sneered down at the worthless woman before me, the broken pieces of my existence played before my eyes like a nightmare.

The circumstances of how we'd gotten into this position were grim.

Everything had fallen apart so quickly.

The sun god had announced a tournament, and all quads of male devils eighteen and older had been required to enter. He would judge our power and name his kings.

We'd tried to get out of competing because we were missing our fourth mate. Our mate bond wasn't completed; it couldn't be until an act of intimacy occurred among all mates.

The sun god's representative had denied our request and ordered us to compete.

Maybe he'd known.

We'd been the youngest competitors by centuries.

The other devils had laughed when we'd entered the registration room. They'd quickly stopped laughing.

The contest had been a massacre.

Our massacre.

We'd walked into the competition, not knowing the limits of our abilities.

When we'd left, we still hadn't found them.

The power in our veins wasn't the stuff of legends; it was the stuff of nightmares.

When the god's representative had crowned us kings, he'd said, "Good does not balance evil in the realms; devil kings do."

The sun god had named us his executioners. We were the merciless nightmares of a god's will.

So much power.

So much responsibility.

Yet we were young, missing our mate, and living in pain.

All devils had been ordered by the sun god to attend our coronation, but as we'd stood before the crowd, no mating song had reached out to us. Our fourth hadn't been there.

Which meant our missing mate was somewhere in another realm.

Technically, ancient texts on mate bonds stated that any species or person could be fated to a male devil. However, in recent history, only male devils had been powerful enough to sustain a bond. We were a strong species. Second to none.

I'd argued with the representative that the sun god should just locate our mate in the realms. He'd laughed in my face and said that wasn't how fate worked.

I ground my teeth at the memory.

The academy was our best bet at finding our missing mate. That's what the representative claimed and why we'd agreed to Lothaire's stupid plan.

They were all full of shit.

In the ten years we'd been training with Lothaire, he'd only found four male devils living in other realms, and none of them were our mates.

Our mating song hadn't reacted to them.

When Scorpius, Orion, and I had first met, our fires had sung to one another.

It was a low, heady beat: it resembled the pounding of a drum, the crunch of knuckles against flesh, and the thrumming of a violent heart. Whenever I

was around either of them, the song got louder.

Our mate song was fierce like us.

Now Arabella's worthless life was tied to my precious mates.

It was nauseating.

In exchange for tying our lives to his daughter, Lothaire had agreed to use his network and let us stay at the academy until we found our missing mate. The one who would make our fire sing.

I never would have agreed if I'd known who it was.

Releasing my deep breath, I took another step closer.

"Stop crowding my space. Go away," Arabella huffed as she slumped low and blew a cloud of smoke out her lips. The whistling noise was unnaturally loud in the quiet classroom.

I opened my mouth to retort, and stopped.

Froze.

I gasped as I realized what was setting my teeth on edge.

No.

Everything had happened so quickly. We'd been so distracted by Arabella's revelations and getting tattooed that we'd somehow missed the obvious.

Our mating song didn't sing like it usually did.

It was gone.

The classroom was unnaturally quiet. The only sound was Lothaire mumbling under his breath and shuffling papers.

What the fuck.

Terror rose thick in my throat, and I tried to calm my racing heart. Had the slave tattoo fucked up our mating bond? Had we damned ourselves? Would we never know peace?

Lothaire had assured us there were no side effects other than combining our life forces. He'd lied. Was she in on it? Had it been her plan all along?

I listened desperately, but the quiet was loud.

Stifling.

My knees wobbled, and I barely caught myself. The mate bond was *more* than just a song. I knew this.

It reflected our souls.

I closed my eyes and channeled inward.

I concentrated on the fire that burned in the main hearth of the House of Malum's estate. It was symbolic of the strength of our mate bond. No matter

where I was, I could commune with the hearth.

Our mating flame burned brightly.

Relief rushed through me.

It quickly turned to unease. The bright-scarlet flames didn't jump and writhe to the usual pounding mating beat. Instead, they swayed slowly back and forth in silence, and streaks of light blue glimmered around them.

Any relief I'd felt dissipated like smoke because the slave tattoo had done something.

My hands shook as red streaked across my vision like splatters of freshly spilled blood.

I stared down at the bitch who'd messed with my mating bond.

She brought dishonor to us all.

"How dare you?" I breathed out quietly as I leaned toward her.

Bloodshot eyes blinked slowly as she inhaled smoke. Her expression was bored.

I repeated, "How fucking dare you?"

One dark-blue eyebrow arched upward as she chuckled softly, like the situation was funny. Air left her pouty lips in harsh rasps.

"I told you not to talk," she whispered.

The surrounding air heated as flames crackled on my skin.

"You have no idea who you've messed with." My low pitch was reminiscent of an animal's growl.

Arabella acted blasé, but her neck pebbled in goose bumps.

A predator stood before her.

Only the most powerful devil families belonged to Houses, and I was the heir to the infamous House of Malum. An ancient family synonymous with power and pain.

I let her see it in my eyes.

A small shiver ran through her, and I smiled wider.

Subconsciously, she recognized she wasn't standing in front of a normal man.

All devils could create swords of fire. But only a handful of extremely powerful men were born with soul fire.

These devils were viewed as godlike: the Ignises.

The House of Malum was a long line of these soul-fire wielders.

I was an Ignis, one of those godlike men.

Mate bonds were a unique soul tie that only formed around an Ignis. Our

mates were fated to help us control our soul fire.

The devil mate structure was always the same: one Ignis, two Protectors, and one Revered.

Four powerful men.

One soul bond tying them together.

Protectors and Revered only manifested their abilities when they met their Ignis. Their powers were complementary to their Ignises and involved the manipulation of people. But each mating group had unique skills.

Everything depended on how the Ignis wielded the soul flame.

My father's fire healed people who were sick.

As a result, his Revered could see sickness in the flame of a person's soul.

One of his Protectors had a numbing touch so the healing fire wouldn't hurt. His other Protector made people feel calm in his presence, so they weren't afraid of the healing fire.

Father's ability was beautiful. Envy and sadness expanded in my gut like it always did when I thought about him.

Turning away from the lying bitch, I concentrated on Orion's stunning profile and not the horrible memories.

"It's okay, I'm here for you," Orion mouthed to me.

I tried to smile back at him, but I couldn't.

Most people assumed an Ignis was at the center of a mate bond because they wielded the soul flame.

They were wrong.

The Ignis and Protectors devoted their lives to protecting their Revered.

A Revered's ability was most crucial to the success of the Ignis wielding the soul flame, and unlike most male devils, Revereds were gentle by nature.

They were different, physically and mentally, from the other mates in the soul bond. In devil culture, they were worshipped.

A unicorn among monsters.

Their inherent goodness allowed the Ignis to wield the soul flame without becoming corrupted by the power.

Revereds were always creatures of extreme beauty.

Taking care of, pampering, and protecting a Revered gave the Ignis and the Protectors purpose. It also distracted them from the burden of their power.

Scorpius was my Protector.

Orion was my Revered.

I was their Ignis.

Arabella made a huffing sound and mumbled something about dramatic men under her breath.

All three of us were now linked to a liar.

Jaw trembling with rage, I turned away from my precious Revered and leaned close to her. “What have you done?” I whispered darkly.

If I spoke any louder, I’d bellow and tear her to pieces.

She picked at a scab on her lower lip and scoffed quietly, “nothing.” She didn’t even bother to give an excuse.

I lunged forward like I was going to hit her.

Arabella didn’t flinch.

Faced with my unholy rage, she ignored me. Greater men had pissed themselves in her position.

I rose to my full height.

At seven feet tall, I was used to towering over women. Arabella’s head came to the top of my chest, and it was disconcerting how close our faces were.

But I still had the height advantage.

My breath made her hair flutter as I bared my teeth. “Whatever you thought you’d gain from your deceit, think again. If I find out you’re purposefully messing with our mating song, I’ll destroy you. Violently. In ways you can’t even imagine.”

Scorpius gasped and Orion stumbled as they realized our mating song was missing.

Glancing over, I confirmed Lothaire was still distractedly going through his desk.

I took another step closer.

My chest pressed against hers.

And I dwarfed her with my muscles.

I smiled meanly. “I don’t care that he’s your father. No one will protect you from us. You won’t get away with playing us like you did Horace. We’ll treat you like the bitch you are. I vow on the great ancestors of the Devil House of Malum that if I find *any* evidence you’re purposefully fucking with our mate bond—” I pushed her back against the wall. “—you’ll be crucified on a stake in front of our home and set on fire for all of eternity. Your little slave brand will ensure you won’t die. I’ll make sure of it.”

I expected her to cower.

Arabella rolled her eyes.

A blue curl tickled the side of my arm.

The tangle of long turquoise hair fell in ringlets down to her butt. It disgusted me. I'd always preferred silky-smooth hair like Orion's or Scorpius's. Hers was a curly mess.

She said softly, "I have no idea what song you're talking about. I've done nothing wrong. Unlike you three." She scrunched up her sloped nose. "Stop trying to scare me. It won't work. You've already set me on fire, and trust me, I've experienced worse."

I snorted at her audacity.

She should be fucking terrified.

Also, her face had melted. There was no feasible way she'd experienced worse.

She smiled. "If you're going to threaten me, at least make it creative. Burning me on a spike in front of your little house is very cliché."

"I wasn't joking." I leaned closer and inhaled her icy scent. It burned. "And I'm being serious. Don't worry, it's not a little house. It's an estate with plenty of land surrounding it. No one will ever hear you scream."

Arabella harrumphed and studied her cuticles like my body wasn't flush against hers. Like I wasn't pinning her to the wall.

Her tone dripped with arrogance. "I grew up in a palace. Trust me, I'm sure it would seem like a small house to me."

I breathed in roughly.

She waved her hand dismissively. "No need to be embarrassed. It's not your fault that you're ugly and poor."

Rage.

I'd crush her into little pieces.

Then light them on fire.

I'd show her what it meant to be an Ignis. What it meant to play with people's souls.

Why I was a devil king.

A monster.

CHAPTER 2

CORVUS MALUM

CONSEQUENCES

The beginning: Shackles—Day 1, hour 0

Flames crackled louder as I struggled with control.

Arabella eyed my fire with disgust.

“Men are so unwell.” She pushed against my chest.

I took a step back, glad to put space between us. She repulsed me.

She rubbed at the large bruises beneath her eyes. The glass cuts on her face had healed and were fading, but dark circles remained. The coloring was stark against her pale skin.

Yet again, I couldn’t help but compare Arabella to her male disguise.

As a boy, she’d been skinny with a wide frame that promised to fill out with enough exercise and food. Arabella’s frame was much narrower. She was covered in lean muscles, but barely had any shoulders.

The girl would *never* be a warrior.

My top lip curled as I remembered how she’d struggled in training and battles.

Female devils were never allowed in combat or war for that very reason. They could wield fire swords, but they were weak and abhorred violence, so they never used their abilities.

Women crumpled in violent situations.

They needed constant attention and pampering or they’d refuse to function. They were useless for anything but child-rearing, which happened infrequently for devils. Most of the time they just lazed about.

My jaw cracked with disgust and I fisted my hands.

While Scorpius and Orion silently waited for me to regain control, they touched my arms to offer comfort.

It didn't work.

The past and the present were converging.

My biological father and his mates had died when I was a baby, and I'd never known my mother. She'd been nothing but a whore who'd been paid lavishly to breed and raise me. She had deceived my fathers and immediately abandoned me.

Arabella was just like her. Lazy and pampered, she'd deceived us to get what she wanted.

Sweat poured down my face and the temperature in the room's corner spiked.

Arabella pulled out the neck of her oversized sweatshirt to cool herself.

When she tugged the material away from her skin, I saw straight down her chest.

Abruptly, I was parched, and it had nothing to do with the flames pouring off me.

I stared at the small swell of her breasts.

I licked my lips.

What the fuck.

I tore my eyes away.

It was because she used to have a male's chest; that was why I was looking. It was pure curiosity.

Nothing else.

No other reason.

I worked my jaw back and forth until I regained enough control to speak without scorching her.

"You're disgusting," I growled.

There was a long pause as my words seemed to echo between us.

Arabella sighed deeply.

She nodded like she'd come to a decision.

She looked me straight in the eyes and smiled. "What was it Lothaire said? You can't find your mate anywhere in the realms. That's too bad." She smiled wider. "It must suck to be you."

I didn't think. I reacted.

I lunged forward.

I needed her to be afraid.

The closest I got to satisfaction was exerting myself over a willing woman. I'd used men before, but their compliance wasn't as sweet. A humiliated woman temporarily gave me the illusion of control.

It helped fill the hole of our missing mate. Marginally.

Even now, as I towered above Arabella, shedding flames, she refused to cower before me. She refused to give me what I needed.

I'd hated Aran for his weakness and his secrets, but I loathed Arabella with every ounce of my being.

She smirked. "I hope you never find your mate."

That was it.

I was going to burn her.

Flames shot forward.

Orion yanked me away from the most worthless creature in all the realms. My fire just barely missed her.

He pulled me back to the center of the room. Away from her.

Scorpius stepped towards the bitch as my Revered dragged me away.

I immediately stopped struggling.

I would *never* hurt my Revered. Ever. It was the foundational tenant of my existence.

We'd almost lost Orion during the competition to become kings, and I'd never known such soul-rending torment. Scorpius and I could not function.

All we could do was stand vigil over his healing body. Ignises and Protectors were extremely defensive and territorial of their Revered. But what we'd experienced had gone beyond that.

It was called bond sickness.

Just thinking about it made me break out in a cold sweat, and I pressed myself against Orion as he held me.

Bond sickness occurred if a Revered was exposed to unimaginable pain.

When an Ignis and Protectors failed their mate, the bond became corrupted to ensure this wrong never happened again. We'd learned you didn't need a full soul bond to experience sickness.

The unfinished bond between us hadn't let us eat or sleep. It had punished us, and we'd gladly accepted the pain.

When Orion had finally awakened, Scorpius and I had openly wept with relief.

Fresh pain and regret squeezed my heart, but I focused on the man

pressed against me.

Your Revered is healthy, I reminded myself as I let him pull me away.

Scorpius leaned toward the bitch and whispered all the painful ways she'd die.

My Protector didn't need to touch people to hurt them.

Scorpius used words to tear people apart, and by the time he got around to physical violence, they were already broken.

Words were his favorite form of pain. He wielded every word with surgical exactness. He was purposeful. Meanwhile, she threw sentences around haphazardly, like grenades.

I wanted to scream in her face.

Scorch her.

"Calm down, Corvus." Orion's soft, lyrical voice washed over me. He wrapped his arms around my flaming body and whispered softly, "We'll find our other Protector, and then we'll know peace. Setting her on fire won't do anything. There are other ways..."

He trailed off, and I shivered as he kissed my neck.

Orion was so fucking handsome and sweet.

He was the perfect Revered for us because no one else could ever handle the darkness that lived in me and Scorpius.

I stood still with flames pouring off me as he cradled me. The fire plumed around Orion but didn't touch him.

I forced myself to relax.

Arabella would learn why the crest of the House of Malum was a dragon—we incinerated anyone who hurt our mates.

Long moments passed as Orion held me.

Minutes later, in the front of the room, Lothaire stopped shuffling through papers on his desk and mumbling about a conspiracy.

He stood up straight.

Orion and I slowly pulled away from each other. Scorpius walked back to join us in the middle of the room.

Arabella stayed in the corner.

We feigned nonchalance because we weren't stupid.

Lothaire was still the vampyre who'd casually snapped the necks of the famed half warriors.

We needed his cooperation to find our missing mate.

If Lothaire noticed the tension, he didn't mention it. Instead, he looked

across the room at his daughter and asked with annoyance, “Must you constantly smoke?”

Arabella blew out a cloud of smoke in the shape of a gun and grabbed the incorporeal weapon.

She pulled the trigger.

A bullet poofed harmlessly off Lothaire’s chest. He gritted his teeth, but otherwise didn’t react.

Her crow cawed with delight while the gun dissipated. For some reason, the crow was the only smoke shape she blew that remained corporeal.

I asked Lothaire, “You thought it was prudent to bind our lives to this pathetic creature?”

Scorpius grunted in agreement.

Orion made a noise of disagreement in the back of his throat.

“You will not speak ill of my daughter.” Lothaire’s scar pulled tight.

Arabella laughed.

Pop. Pop.

It took us all a second to realize the noise came from another smoke gun.

“Really? Now you want to be a father figure?” Pop. “This has to be the pinnacle of dramatic irony.” Pop.

She unloaded a magazine clip of smoke bullets into Lothaire’s chest.

“You will show me respect!” Lothaire roared.

She made a dramatic crying face, then frowned as she pointed the gun at her forehead.

Pop-p-p-p-p-p-p-p.

The magazine unloaded into her skull.

“Charming,” Scorpius scoffed as Orion whispered in his ear what she was doing.

Lothaire glared at her like he wanted to wring her neck. He’d have to get in line.

She was uncontrollable.

Disrespectful.

Petulant.

I said to Lothaire, “We bound her life to ours like you asked. We’ve completed our end of the deal, so you need to uphold yours.”

Lothaire nodded distractedly as he stared at his daughter. “I will have my scouts focus on finding your missing mate. You may stay at the academy until you find them.”

“Good,” I said. At least one thing wasn’t ruined.

Every recorded mate bond in the last few centuries had been among male devils, so we were sure that our missing Protector was a male devil living in another realm. Lothaire was still our best bet at finding him.

A chill ran down my spine as the five of us stood silently in the quiet room.

Would we not be able to recognize our mate because of the slave tattoo?

The House of Malum motto was written in my bones: *Ut sicut meus—to keep as mine.*

Even among other devils, Ignises from the House of Malum were renowned for our possessiveness. We hoarded our mates like dragons with priceless treasures.

We were obsessive.

Borderline psychotic.

The mere thought of being in my mate’s presence and failing to recognize them made bile burn my throat.

Lothaire’s jaw clenched as he said to Arabella, “You’re my daughter, and I will atone for my wrongdoings.”

She made a gagging noise. “I’ve chosen to believe that I was conceived through immaculate conception. The sun god endowed my mother’s deranged loins. You aren’t my father.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Lothaire looked unconcerned that his progeny was a moron. “Someday you’ll feel differently.”

Her expression darkened. “Since you enslaved me to *devils* who hate me, I probably won’t forgive you. Ever.”

“You’re not enslaved!” Lothaire snapped.

“Wait.” Dark-blue eyes widened, and long dark lashes fluttered with confusion. Her jaw dropped. “You don’t even know what you did, do you?”

Awkward silence filled the room.

Lothaire bristled.

Arabella waved her hands impatiently at her father. “You gave me a slave tattoo! I recognize it from my history studies.”

“No.” Lothaire rubbed at his forehead. “You’re mistaken. Dick assured me it just binds your lives, and he said there were no side effects.”

The three of us shifted.

How did he not know?

Suddenly, things made a lot more sense.

“Technically you’re right,” I said awkwardly to Lothaire as Scorpius swore under his breath. “It binds us because it’s a slave brand, but I’ve never heard of them having side effects.”

I didn’t mention that they were taboo to discuss because they were a dark enchantment, so no one talked much about them.

Lothaire clenched his hands and growled. His muscles widened as he flexed like he was going to explode, but then he went still.

He shook his head dismissively and said to Arabella, “We’ll discuss this later. The important thing right now is that the binding is complete. I have a safe house set up in a realm, and you’ll RJE there immediately.”

She blanched. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Lothaire ordered. “You’re going to get checked by Lyla to make sure you’re still healthy after getting that tattoo, then I’ll take you to safety.”

Before Arabella could move, Lothaire stalked across the classroom, grabbed her arm, and dragged her out the door.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked my mates tiredly.

Long moments passed as we just stared at one another and grimaced. Scorpius opened his mouth to respond, but stopped.

Screams.

Pain erupted in my gut like I’d been stabbed by a dagger, and I fell to my knees. My mates did the same beside me.

I gasped at the unexpected agony, but as swiftly as it had arrived, the pain disappeared.

Only anger remained.

How dare he take what was ours?

The three of us got to our feet as the screams in the hall increased.

He threatens Arabella.

Must protect her.

Must get her back.

Must keep her close.

She’s ours, nobody else’s.

Power bristling, we stalked as a unit to retrieve what had been taken from us. Orion led the way, and Scorpius and I flanked him.

Crack.

Lightning lit the dark marble hall.

We turned the corner and walked down another long hall, led purely by instinct.

Fire and ozone filled my nose.

We turned another corner, and I balled my fists.

Lothaire was shouting and kneeling, and Arabella was seizing and twitching like she'd been electrocuted.

I growled like an animal.

As we stalked down the hall toward what was ours, her screams became whimpers.

Finally, she stopped convulsing.

Arabella's ragged breaths were too loud in the quiet hall.

Orion whispered and his lyrical voice had a hard edge as he stared at Lothaire. "Never take Arabella away from us. Ever again." He shook with rage.

Scorpius's voice had a strange lilt to it as he said, "You dared to take her from us."

He reached down to grab Arabella. His scowl disappeared, and he smiled tenderly as he ran his pale fingers across her cheek.

Eyes hooded with contentment, she nuzzled his fingers.

Scorpius's tender expression transformed into horror, and he snatched his hand away.

Arabella scrambled backward.

"What just happened?" I asked as I shook my head to clear the haze from my mind as I pushed Scorpius and Orion behind me protectively.

Scorpius spat, "What did you just do to us?"

Arabella's already fair skin somehow paled further. "Really? Screw you." Her fingers trembled as she shoved the pipe between her ruby lips and mumbled, "I was the one in agony. Not you."

Lothaire looked back and forth with his hands fisted, and he vibrated with rage. "What is going on?"

The possessive rage had drained away, and I was left with an uncomfortable mix of contentment and confusion.

I snapped at him, "You tell me."

On the marble ground, Arabella made a choking noise and blanched like she'd realized something.

"What do you know?" I whirled on her.

Flames erupted across my arms, and I had the irrational urge to throw them at Lothaire for standing near Arabella.

He was a threat to her.

No. I shook my head again to clear my jumbled thoughts. *Arabella is the threat. She killed Horace and deceived you.*

Her voice cracked, and a sharp pang clenched my heart at the sound of her distress.

I ignored it.

She said to Lothaire, “You will supply me with every expensive enchanted drug in the realm, and you will never talk to me. Ever. Again.”

Lothaire arched his scarred brow just like his daughter loved to do and asked, “Why in the realms would I do that?”

She cracked her head against the floor.

“Stop,” Orion and I snarled, both of us vibrating with inexplicable rage that she dared to hurt herself in our presence.

“Because, Father.” She choked on the word. “You enslaved me to these vile men. And some brands have more sinister implications than others.”

Lothaire opened his mouth to argue, but she held up a hand to silence him.

Arabella spoke slowly like it pained her to voice the words aloud, “I can’t leave their presence without excruciating pain. It must be a consequence of this type of brand.”

My jaw dropped.

Scorpius swore.

Orion choked.

Our sudden feelings of irrational possessiveness and rage made sense. It wasn’t our emotions; it was the tattoo.

We were stuck with her disgusting presence. Somehow Arabella kept ruining our lives.

Scorpius smiled, and Arabella shuddered.

It wasn’t a friendly expression.

It was a promise.

We were going to destroy her.

Lothaire staggered back like he’d been struck. “No.” He grabbed Arabella by the arm and resumed dragging her down the hall.

“What are you doing?” she asked in a monotone voice, eyes blank as she let her father manhandle her.

Orion’s pretty features darkened, and Scorpius made a harsh noise.

I agreed.

Arabella didn’t belong to him.

She was ours.

Lothaire's jagged scar was stark against his tight features as he looked back at us and ordered, "You three, stay close."

I fisted my flaming hands and wanted to snarl at him to stop touching her.

Instead, I nodded curtly at my mates and said, "Let's go."

Lothaire pulled Arabella into the bedroom, and we followed him inside.

Sparks leaped around him as he looked at us. "You four are going to stay in this room and not leave until I figure out what's going on."

Arabella yanked her arm out of his hold and flopped down on her bed. She mumbled under her breath, "Good plan. Leave me with the fucking crazy men. Real smart."

Lothaire whirled around. "*Language!*"

She rolled her eyes.

He turned back around to address us, and she mouthed, "Go fuck yourself," behind his back.

Lothaire ordered, "The three of you will not talk to my daughter. You will not look at her, touch her, or even breathe in her direction until I come back. I will handle the situation."

He waved his hand at the wall, which was vibrating with the music from the party still raging in the great hall. "The celebration should last for the next three days. I will be back before it's over. No one leaves this room. Do you understand?" His voice dripped with menace.

"Yes, sir." It took every ounce of control I possessed to bow my head like I was subservient.

If Lothaire wasn't the key to finding our missing mate—flames trailed up the back of my hand and crawled up my arm—he would be dead.

"I'm trusting you," Lothaire said as he took another step closer. "All three of you."

Then he was gone.

Scorpius wrapped his arms around me and Orion and dragged us into our bed. Orion reached over and pulled the string that closed all the blinds on the stained-glass window.

Red light was replaced with darkness.

A yellow sheen glowed across Orion's eyes, and I knew mine had a similar glint.

Devils had night vision.

Arabella smoked and stared at the ceiling, unaware that predators were

watching her.

And she was our prey.

CHAPTER 3

ARAN

DRUGS

The beginning: Shackles—Day 3, hour 21

Sixty-eight hours, three minutes, and fourteen seconds had passed since Lothaire left me in the room with the kings and told me to wait.

Not that I was counting.

The room was dark and cold. Soft snores sounded from across the room. The kings were asleep or dead.

I prayed that their wheezing was a symptom of rigor mortis.

The fireplace was empty, and no flames screamed at me like usual. Disappointing. I missed the shrieks.

The screaming flames added a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the room. An ambiance if you will.

They matched my aesthetic.

Yes, my aesthetic was mental illness; no, I didn't want to talk about it.

I wanted to wallow. That was the bloody point.

Now the room was creepily quiet.

It was pitch-black. Even after my eyes adjusted, I could only see a few inches in front of my face. Immediately after I'd gotten the tattoo, I'd been able to see sharper and more colors, but the effect had faded.

A heavy bass thumped as the party raged in the great hall. The pounding music made my bed vibrate beneath me.

At least the darkness was giving a depressive ambiance.

I'd been fine when I first got back to the room, if you defined fine as a

state of being in perpetual agony and manically hallucinating. The delusion was that I thought I was fine.

It was a vicious cycle.

Truly traumatic.

I shivered for dramatic effect and picked at my lip.

When I'd fallen asleep after Lothaire left, I'd passed out for over forty-eight hours and had woken up feeling like the living dead. I knew how much time had passed, because when I'd gotten up to pee, I'd pressed my face close to the clock on the wall so I could read the date and time.

It ticked at me aggressively.

I'd tapped my finger on the glass and ticked back.

Dr. Palmer would just love that shit. I imagined her pulling down her spectacles and asking me if I'd drawn in my journal this week while her face crinkled up with judgment.

I snorted remembering when I showed her the flip book that I'd spent hours creating. If you turned the pages quickly it showed a tree falling over and crushing a family of chipmunks.

Instead of applauding my impressive drawing skills, Dr. Palmer had asked me if I was trying to be institutionalized.

I missed her energy.

After I tapped at the clock for a few minutes, I dragged the sack of bones that I called a body to my bed and collapsed.

Things went downhill. Fast. Which was frankly impressive because I'd already thought I was at rock bottom.

The last twenty hours had been pure hell.

Limbs locked.

Chest crushed against my bed.

All I could do was smoke my pipe. Inhale enchanted drugs and exhale them until reality became a little less flat and a little more warped.

I lay like a zombie as the memories played. Blood rained around me. Dead eyes stared at me accusingly. Skin cold beneath my hands.

Horace gasped.

For a mostly powerless fae who could only create two small ice daggers, I'd killed many people.

What did you call a murderer who didn't want to kill? A coward or a bad bitch? I couldn't decide which.

My lungs ached from smoke inhalation.

My soul ached from killing.

My shoulders ached from carrying the weight of being the coolest person at the academy.

The longer I lay on top of my covers, the more tangible the images became. Crystal clear. Painted in saturated colors so it was impossible to look away.

Tears leaked out of Sari's eyes.

Horace's blood was neon red, pooling against his pale skin.

Tara stared at me with wide eyes. She was dead.

In the present, my crow pecked at my nose, I fingered his feathers, and the smoke was soft beneath my fingers.

"Why?" Horace asked as he gurgled beneath me choking on blood. "Why, cousin?"

I rolled out of bed.

Didn't bother to catch myself.

Horace was close behind, so I crawled across the carpet as fast as I could. I needed to get away.

Horace yelled after me, "Come back, cousin! Explain it to me!" His voice was loud and desperate. "I thought we were friends?"

Great, I was being chased by a specter of the man I'd murdered.

Normal girly things.

I stumbled to my feet, grabbed the door, and wrenched it open.

The red light was too bright, and I struggled to focus on the empty black marble corridor. Chandeliers and stained-glass windows refracted brightness everywhere. It burned my corneas.

"Come back, friend!" Horace yelled. "I did nothing wrong."

Great, I was being gaslit by a ghost.

I needed to get away.

Now.

I sprinted.

Lightning streaked down the halls, and my teeth hurt from the electricity traveling through the marble.

The great hall was only a few doors down. I rubbed at the tattoo on my hip as I ran and prepared for the pain. Still, I had to try.

I slipped through the open doors and walked into the party. It was as dark as the bedroom, but bursts of neon lights flashed every few seconds.

It was disorienting.

Loud.

The music was cranked up to a decibel level that made my bones vibrate and my chest hurt. The sweaty crowd flowed like a hive, and I let myself be pulled around by the frenzy of gyrating bodies.

I rubbed harder at the tattoo on my hip.

No pain came.

The bedroom must have been close enough to the party that the slave brand hadn't acted up. Or all three of the kings had died in their sleep.

It was definitely the latter.

For once the sun god had truly blessed me. If I could cry, I would have sobbed with relief.

My eyes were bone-dry.

Tipping my head back, pipe between my lips, I closed my eyes and lost myself to the music. Celebrated the demise of my enemies.

It was so loud that I couldn't hear Horace yelling at me. The bass was so deep that I couldn't see Tara.

A man grabbed my hips and pulled me back against his crotch.

A voice slurred in my ears, "Hello, my pretty princess. You visiting?" Hands groped my hips and ass roughly. "I haven't seen you around."

White horns curled off the top of the head of the blond man who was touching me.

I was no man's princess. However, I was a whore.

Being a slut wasn't a title, it was a lifestyle.

The student's eyes were glazed, and three different glowing cigarettes hung from his mouth. From his disheveled look, he'd been partying for days. A green tie was askew, and his white shirt was unbuttoned to his navel. It clung to his narrow, sweat-soaked frame.

I could barely see his face in the flashing neon lights.

It didn't matter what he looked like.

His fingers dug harder into my flesh as he pressed his sweat-soaked body flush against mine. One of his hands groped at my chest.

Did he think my tits were fish that were going to flop away? Because he was grabbing at them like they were.

"Why?" Horace asked from nearby.

I shoved my hips forward and ground myself against the man. Grabbed a joint from his lips and pushed it beside my pipe. Inhaled with all my might and squeezed my eyes shut.

“You a slut?” the man whispered against my ear as he groped harder at my chest. My back didn’t even hurt.

I grinned because his words went well with my new maladjusted depressed girl aesthetic.

Finally, someone got it.

“Yeah. I am.” My voice was scratchy from smoke inhalation.

I rolled my hips faster, and he struggled to match my pace. Bodies crushed around us and pushed us together until I didn’t know where I began and he ended.

Sweat dripped down my face.

A foreign drug filled my bloodstream, and Horace didn’t say another word.

The problem was someone else did.

“What do you think you’re doing? Slave,” Scorpius whispered against the shell of my ear.

Streaks of pain stabbed down my back.

I didn’t open my eyes.

The body I was pressed against was ripped away, and I staggered back with confusion.

I opened my eyes.

My enemies were alive.

Neon green flashed.

Orion wrapped his hands around my dance partner’s head.

Darkness.

Neon red flashed.

Orion snapped his neck.

Darkness.

Neon purple flashed.

A man was sprawled dead in the middle of the dance floor. White shirt unbuttoned, tie askew. One of his white horns was snapped in half.

Darkness.

The rational part of me gasped with horror while the irrational part of me casually noted that the deceased body fit well with my vibe.

Sometimes life was a chill, but then there were the horrors.

It was exhausting being a girl.

Hands grabbed the back of my neck, and sharp nails pricked my sensitive skin. The fingers tightened painfully as they dragged me off the dance floor.

Someone snarled in my ear, “Don’t be a brat.”

“Kinky,” I mumbled under my breath.

A tongue licked across my face. “Don’t tempt me.”

I blinked at the sudden bright light of the hall as we left the party and rubbed moisture off the side of my cheek.

Scorpius threw me to the ground.

I didn’t save myself.

In a clatter of limbs I flopped backward. The marble was icy beneath my sweat-slicked skin. I closed my eyes and breathed roughly.

Another person was dead.

Because of me.

I sucked on both pipes desperately and shivered because death followed me. Everywhere I went. He wouldn’t leave me alone.

Stupid stalker, he was such a pervert.

Most men were.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Malum snarled. He stood beside his mates, and all three of them loomed above me. “Are you fucking crazy?”

Shocker, they were violently angry.

Men had no emotional range.

“Yes, sir!” I raised my middle finger to my forehead and saluted them sarcastically. Closed my eyes. Fantasized about death and a week-long shopping trip.

CHAPTER 4

CORVUS MALUM

PREY

The beginning: Shackles—Day 4, hour 4

I was going to kill her.

My Revered trembled beside me, his body vibrating from the force of his anger.

Scorpius and I stepped closer to comfort him.

Lightning flashed, and it highlighted the gold network of veins that crawled through the cracks of the black marble. The crystal chandeliers tinkled on the ceiling as they rocked back and forth.

The hall was quiet as everyone in the academy was lost in their multiday bender.

Electricity crackled in the air, and it tasted like violence.

Flames leaped higher off my skin.

I crackled with danger.

The eerie silence wrapped around us like a tangible force.

I rubbed at the growing ache in my chest and breathed slowly, forced the tender irrational feelings from the slave tattoo to dissipate as I concentrated on how I *really* felt about Arabella.

Hatred. Disgust. Revulsion.

She'd run from the room like a coward, and we'd stalked her to the party. Arabella was so dumb that she hadn't even seen us following her, and we weren't trying to make it discreet.

For a time, we'd lost her in the crush of bodies.

Hundreds of students and guests had been packed like sardines in the great hall, dancing, and it was almost impossible to move because people had swarmed us. They'd thrown themselves at us with fewer inhibitions than usual.

Everyone wanted the chance to fuck a devil king. They wanted a taste of our wealth, power, and prestige.

It had been infuriating.

After hours of combing through the crowd, searching for the girl with blue hair, we'd almost given up.

Then we'd seen her.

We hadn't looked closely at the couples fucking on the dance floor because we hadn't thought we were searching for a whore.

But alas.

A horned nymph from the Olympus realm had been groping Arabella's tits roughly. Crotch pressed against her like he had a right to touch her.

Arabella's eyes had been closed as she smoked and let him touch her like she didn't care.

She was now associated with the House of Malum.

She was our slave.

Until we figured everything out, only we got to touch her. No one else.

When I'd described to Scorpius what we were seeing, the eye tattoo on his neck had opened wide, and his white eyes had begun to glow.

Cherry-blossom petals had floated across Orion's neck.

The dagger across my neck had become uncomfortably heavy against my flesh.

Flames had danced higher across my arms, and for a long second, we'd all contemplated the same thing.

For a second, every person at the party had been in danger.

Then the nymph had grabbed her ass and buried his face against her neck. He'd decided for us.

We hadn't had time for theatrics.

He'd needed to die quickly.

Scorpius had whispered in Arabella's ear. Orion had snapped the man's neck.

I'd burned the body to ash as we'd walked away.

Now Scorpius smiled at where our slave was sprawled across the floor.

His voice dripped with malice. "You don't get to touch other men while

you're our slave. We don't like our possessions to be dirty." A muscle in his jaw ticked as he licked his lips. "Let another man touch you like that and we'll leash you."

I nodded in agreement.

Orion cracked his knuckles as he stared down at her.

She looked bored by Scorpius's harsh words.

"You're just an object," I echoed more forcefully to get a reaction out of her.

She laughed like I'd made a joke.

Anger shot through me as she lazily lay back on the marble and stared at her pipe like it held the secrets to the universe.

The bruises under her eyes were so dark they seemed to glow against her pale flesh. On the wall above her, the stained-glass window depicted a crying woman on her knees. Her position was subservient. Broken.

Arabella held her fingers up to the chandelier light and made a shadow puppet on the wall.

Her attitude was a harsh contrast to the woman in the window.

It rubbed me raw.

Scorpius laughed louder like he was also trying to get her attention, and the sound was gritty and harsh in the quiet hall. He walked in a circle around her like a predator circling its prey.

"You know," Scorpius drawled. "I've always thought of you as an object, but this just makes it so much sweeter. A little deceitful, slutty fae. Ours to hurt. Punish."

Scorpius cocked his head and listened for her reaction.

She silently mocked him, then rolled her eyes.

Pointed her pipe at him like it was a gun and pretended to shoot him in the face.

Scorpius scowled.

Arabella stuck her tongue out between her teeth like she was concentrating and pretended to shoot him again.

My Protector cracked his knuckles. Loudly.

The feeling of wrongness, the quiet, and the ache in my chest intensified the longer we stood leering over her pathetic, prone form.

I wanted her on her knees but not like this.

This wasn't obedience.

She'd basically fucked that pathetic nymph on the dance floor, but she

wouldn't even look at us. We had over a foot and a hundred pounds of muscles on the man, yet she'd give him her full attention and ignored us.

I wanted to kill the nymph again.

Everything was spiraling out of control.

Arabella made a pouting face at Scorpius and rubbed at imaginary tears. "Just want to let you know." She smacked her lips and said in an exaggerated girly voice, "I'm sobbing. I'm super sad." She popped the P and drawled, "Like, I'm completely devastated."

She made a dramatic wailing noise, then burst into laughter.

Scorpius lunged for her.

Orion was quicker. He muscled himself in front of Scorpius and stood protectively over the girl.

None of us breathed.

My Revered was chest to chest with my Protector.

Violence swirled.

"Calm down," Orion whispered to Scorpius and gently pushed him backward. My blind mate nodded and took a step away.

Orion slowly turned, and his expression softened. "Sweetheart, are you okay?" he whispered breathily to Arabella.

Scorpius and I scoffed.

He was such a manipulative bastard.

Arabella's eyes glossed over as she instinctively smiled up at him. Her expression changed like she remembered he'd just snapped a man's neck.

She leaned away from him and whispered, "Um, you just killed a man."

Orion's gentle expression darkened, and his eyes flashed with hurt that she was questioning his action. He stared down at her like he was lost.

She was hurting my Revered's feelings.

The never-ending well of violence inside me expanded, and fire spread across my shoulders.

"You dare treat Orion so rudely?" I asked as the hall became feverishly warm. "You trap us by tying us to your disgusting presence, then dare to scoff at my Revered? He's everything, and you're *nothing*."

I poured all my malice and hatred into my words.

Arabella chuckled softly, and the sound was husky. "All I did was point out that he *murdered* someone. Also, you think I'd want to be tied to your literal flaming ass for all of eternity? I couldn't think of a worse fate for myself."

Scorpius sneered, "Then why aren't you afraid? You're at our mercy."

"And we have none," I promised.

Flame shadows flickered across black marble, and for a second, dark-blue eyes shuttered as they met mine. From her expression, she was remembering how she'd boiled alive beneath my might.

The moment passed, and blue eyes became black.

Empty.

Ice cold.

She said in a monotone voice, "Because I don't care. Never have." Arabella laid her arched cheekbone against the floor as she exhaled smoke.

She grinned, and it wasn't a pleasant expression.

Dust particles floated in the hall and shimmered as stained glass cast colorful shadows across my mates.

I'd never noticed how beautiful the academy was. It was peaceful. The architecture was grand and artistic, the perfect space for silent contemplation.

I shook my head at my whimsical thoughts.

I was losing my mind.

The slave tattoo must still be affecting me, because this was beyond *weird*.

I didn't have peaceful thoughts. Ever.

And while I freaked out, Arabella lounged like a pampered princess that didn't know the meaning of suffering.

She was a drug addict, and from what I'd seen on the dance floor, she was a slut.

She had no discipline. Sure, she'd trained beside us, but it had only been for two months, which was no time in the grand scheme of things.

We'd suffered for years and hadn't complained half as much.

A sudden burst of excitement bubbled up my chest as I realized what this opportunity meant.

We would teach Arabella the meaning of true torment. I would teach her what it was like for your soul to ache every waking minute of your life.

It was the perfect plan.

When Arabella learned a tenth of the pain we lived with every day and Lothaire found our missing mate, then we'd get rid of her.

Even enchanted tattoos were just marks on flesh.

And flesh could be removed.

Our missing mate would *never* suffer the injustice of being tied to the

lying bitch before us. His Ignis would not allow it; it was the least I could do for my missing Protector.

Everything would work out.

The sun god had named us and marked us as his kings for a reason.

It meant something.

Symbols of what we were: the eye on Scorpius's throat and "Vidimus" on his shoulders; flowers along Orion's collarbone trailing up to his jaw and the "Venimus" on his back; a sword on my neck and "Vicimus" across my shoulders.

Orion's tattoo translated to "we came."

Scorpius's—"we saw."

Mine—"we conquered."

The ancient saying and art on our skin reflected the powers that lived within us. Like the colorful markings of a poisonous animal, they were a warning to others.

We were destined to do the unthinkable for the greater good.

Arabella mumbled something derogatory under her breath.

I swallowed down the urge to growl at her like a wild animal.

Instead, I said calmly, "You're our slave, and your father isn't here to protect you. I wouldn't be saying shit under your breath if I were you. Especially since he can't be around at all times to protect you. And you're stuck with us."

Scorpius chuckled. "You're going to wish you were never born."

"Too late," Arabella whispered.

An unfamiliar pang twisted in my chest. Orion rubbed at his forehead like he had a headache as he stared down at Arabella with a sad expression.

Hardening my heart, I tugged him behind me.

I crouched so we were at eye level. "This is how it's going to go."

I clicked my tongue. "We own you."

Click. "As soon as Lothaire finds our mate, we'll cut the brand from your flesh and sever this bond."

Click. "You won't interfere with our mate bond forever, and you'll *never* know our secrets. Not while I live and breathe."

Instead of cowering like I expected, Arabella sat up, and her eyes shone bright with excitement. "Cutting off the tattoo will sever the bond? Then I'll cut it now."

Sun-god-damn it. I'd let my anger get the best of me, and I'd wanted to

hurt her so badly that I'd inadvertently revealed our plans.

Everything about her had me off-kilter.

She pulled at her loose sweatpants and clawed at her skin like she was going to rip off the tattoo with her bare nails.

Annoyance sparked.

How dare she want to remove the tattoo? She should be honored to be bound to us.

I shook my head at the irrational thoughts and grabbed her wrist. It was pathetically small, and my fingers overlapped twice.

The girl was fine-boned, for fuck's sake.

Gross.

She had long limbs, and the lean, cut muscles of a dancer.

Soldiers needed width. Thick muscles to protect us from the elements and weapons.

She wasn't built for war.

We were.

Even Orion, who was built slightly shorter and leaner than Scorpius and me, was still covered in layers of impressive muscles. Our size, just like our tattoos, reflected what we were.

Power incarnate.

Arabella tried pathetically to wrench her arm from my punishing hold.

"Stop it," I snarled. "You will not remove the tattoo until we find our fourth." I tightened my hand until her bone creaked. "If you remove it, we'll immediately have a new tattoo branded on you," I lied through my teeth.

The ringing silence of our missing mate bond hung heavy around us and was testament to the fact that I'd *never* willingly agree to another binding.

Arabella saw through my ploy and scoffed, "If I remove it, you won't ever find me. You have nothing over me."

I exploded into flames.

She called my bluff so easily it was infuriating. Could she not be agreeable for five fucking seconds?

I held her tighter.

"But, Arabella, Daddy wants you protected." Scorpius laughed as he crouched beside me. "We're only in this predicament because he's convinced you're so weak you'll be *immediately* killed."

His milky eyes flashed with cruelty, and his sharp jaw was tight.

Scorpius had never liked Aran and had raged over Orion's infatuation

with the pathetic boy. Now he could do something about it.

I almost pitied the girl.

Almost being the key word.

Scorpius leaned closer so his breath fanned against both our cheeks. “Actually, you *should* cut the tattoo off.”

He shuddered dramatically. “I can’t wait to hear the sounds as you’re brutally murdered without our protection. You’ll scream for help, and we won’t move a muscle to assist.”

He smiled like he meant it.

I didn’t miss the way his hands were balled into fists or how his voice had the edge it always did when he was stressed and trying to hide it.

His words were cruel, but his body language didn’t match them.

He never showed weakness.

Growing up, Scorpius had been bullied ruthlessly for his blindness, since anything different was viewed as deficient. Devils were ignorant and quick to assume weakness even where there wasn’t one.

As a result, Scorpius saw the worst in everyone.

My Protector liked to terrorize people, before they could hurt him. And from the tension in his shoulders, antagonizing Arabella wasn’t coming easily to him like it usually did.

It was the damn tattoo.

The bitch was clearly a murderer and a liar.

Sure, Arabella’s blatant defiance was making it hard for me to think rationally, but it was still obvious that I needed her to submit.

Brutally.

She scowled at my words but pulled her hands away from her tattoo and looked past me and Scorpius. She stared at Orion sadly like he had betrayed her.

Her gaze was locked on my Revered.

Orion made a pained noise in his throat and mouthed, “Sweetheart,” as he took a step toward her.

Her expression cracked as he looked at her pleadingly.

Emotions swirled between them.

My soul ached.

I didn’t like this little moment for them. He was *everything* to me, and nothing would harm him.

Including her.

Orion reached down and grabbed Arabella. Before she could say anything, he hauled her to her feet and brushed dust off her shoulder like I'd done earlier with Scorpius.

"Don't be mad, baby," he whispered and gave her a small smile.

What was with the endearments?

Arabella flinched from his gentle touch like she'd been struck. "You shouldn't have killed a man for no reason."

Orion stared down at her without blinking, like he was trying to figure out his next move.

They were stunning together.

Arabella's pale skin and blue hair contrasted with his golden skin and white-blond hair. Both of them were unnaturally pretty. An image of my dark-bronze skin tangled with theirs in a writhing mess of limbs played in my mind.

I forgot to breathe.

Scorpius tried to pull Orion back, but he lunged forward to avoid his grip. Arabella stumbled as she was knocked backward with a wince.

For a second, she looked just like her boy disguise.

Memories of drowning, punching, force-feeding, and burning her flashed through my mind.

I'd thought we'd been training a male soldier, someone strong who could handle war.

I swallowed bile.

No. She did it to herself.

I raked my hand across my shaved head and breathed roughly.

Everything was a tangled mess.

Orion frowned as Arabella rubbed at her sternum where she'd been pushed, and he moved toward her with wide eyes.

"Please don't take another step closer," she whispered to Orion as she stepped away from him. Her eyes were wide and filled with pain.

She clutched at her stomach protectively.

The pink cherry-blossom flower petals on Orion's neck began to drift down his collarbone. They swirled and spun. It only happened when he was close to losing control.

The girl was triggering him.

"Find your center," I ordered my Revered and wrapped my arms around his chest. His elevated heartbeat pounded against my palm.

“What’s happening?” Scorpius tilted his head with confusion.

I squeezed my Revered tightly and said, “He’s losing control.”

Scorpius’s eyes widened.

Orion rarely lost control. I did.

Scorpius pressed himself against Orion’s back so he was sandwiched between the two of us.

Together we cocooned him with our strength.

Physical contact with one another was the only thing that allowed the three of us to squelch the chaos that lived inside us.

Scorpius whispered in Orion’s ear and talked him through breathing exercises.

I clung to my Protector’s words and focused on my breath, embarrassed that I needed the grounding as much as Orion did.

Lightning struck the walls, and sparks crackled.

The three of us embraced.

We breathed together.

Arabella stared at the stained-glass window and smoked like she was giving us privacy.

When the petals finally stopped drifting across Orion’s neck, I reluctantly pulled away from my mates.

Scorpius kept his head resting on top of Orion’s. Mollified that Scorpius was still protecting our Revered, I turned to deal with the problem.

“Hey.” I snapped my fingers. “Look at me.”

Arabella turned around slowly but kept her eyes on the wall behind me.

I stalked closer to her.

“Are you purposefully doing this to us?” I snapped with agitation. “Is this a game to you?”

Arabella inhaled, then slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke. “Sorry I didn’t respond, I was purposefully ignoring you.” She smirked. “The only thing I’m doing right now is trying to find a scrap of will to live.” Her dark-blue eyes stared at the wall. “And I’m not finding it.”

She picked at the scab on her lower lip until it dripped blood. Her fingers smeared it around her lip as she twirled her pipe.

Before I could stop myself, I reached forward and buried my fingers in her ridiculous blue curls and yanked her face toward me. “Look at me.”

Arabella kept staring blankly at the wall.

Bitch.

She blew out another puff of smoke but said nothing else.

I leaned forward so my lips were pressed against the sensitive shell of her ear. “Look at me, you lying cunt,” I whispered harshly as my tongue flicked against her warm skin.

Frost and spice exploded across my tongue.

Arabella’s pupils blew out wide, and she shivered, then she flinched like I’d hurt her.

She started fighting like a hellcat.

A strange sense of relief filled me as light came back to her eyes and she struggled against my hold. Fingers still tangled in her hair, I was surprised at the silky texture of her wild blue curls.

I rubbed a smooth lock against my cheek.

I taunted softly, “You need to figure your shit out, slave.”

Blue eyes flashed black.

“Stop fondling me like a freak. And if you think I’ll act like your slave, then you need to be lobotomized. Actually—” She paused like she was thinking. “I recommend just preemptively euthanizing yourself. Your personality is messy, and I don’t see it improving.”

I missed when she’d been staring at the wall in silence.

Aggressive wheezing filled the hall.

I turned around to glare at my mates as I tightened my fist around her curls and yanked her head back as punishment.

“Really?” I asked as Scorpius bent over laughing and Orion smiled widely. “It wasn’t even funny.”

Scorpius shrugged. “You have to admit that was a good one.”

“Thanks.” Arabella grinned proudly.

Blood dripped off her chin from the scab on her lip, and I had the irrational urge to lick it off.

What is wrong with me?

Scorpius scoffed at her. “But your delivery was weak. Your words were generalized and nonspecific. If you want them to matter, hit where it hurts.”

“Oh, I’ll hit him where it hurts.” Arabella tried to slam her thigh into my dick, and I just barely avoided her move.

Yanking her roughly to the side, I shoved my knee between her legs to subdue her. I pressed myself against her just like she’d let the nymph touch her.

Unlike him, I fully dwarfed her frame, and she was completely at my

mercy in the position.

She slammed her elbows into my kidneys.

“Stop fighting me,” I demanded as she refused to submit. “You let that nymph fucker touch you, but now you don’t like it? Make up your mind, slut.”

My throbbing dick was pressed against her, and it took every inch of strength I possessed not to moan at the friction.

She said coldly, “I was interested in him. Not you. Learn the difference.” She blew smoke into my face.

Arabella was ice, while I burned alive.

I shook her back and forth like a doll. “Keep speaking to me like that and I’ll wash your mouth out.”

“Wow, growling like an animal.” She made a face. “Very intelligent.”

I turned my wrist so my entire fist wrapped around her curls, and I yanked her head back at an awkward angle.

I opened my mouth to threaten her but got distracted by her scent.

It was unexpected.

I inhaled deeply.

Smoke and ice mixed with something so rich and tangy that I couldn’t put my finger on it. It was intoxicating.

“Why aren’t you afraid of us?” Scorpius asked as he moved closer, and Orion nodded like he also wanted to hear her answer.

I didn’t know why we were engaging with her.

She should be on her knees.

Pleading for the mercy we didn’t have.

Arabella shrugged. “If you hurt me, I’ll kill each of you. Then I’ll kill myself before the tattoo can regenerate any of our lives. Don’t worry, I’ve come up with a plan on how to end myself. I’ll rip out my heart and feed it to some type of cute woodland animal.” She smiled. “Aw, imagine a little teacup pig ruling from the fae throne. That would be adorable.”

“And you think,” Scorpius scoffed, “that *you* could take down the three of us?”

Arabella smirked like she had a secret. “Do you know how a fae becomes queen?”

Of course we didn’t.

We didn’t bother with the politics of inferior people, but I could guess. Monarchies in other realms always revolved around nepotism.

“You’re a princess. It’s pretty self-explanatory.” I yanked on her curls because I couldn’t get myself to release them.

I wanted to torment her with it.

Use her hair like a leash.

She made a face like she knew what I was thinking.

Red rays cast her too-pretty features in shadows as she said flatly, “A fae ascends to the seat of death by ripping out the current ruler’s heart and eating it.”

The words echoed.

She reached up and picked at the open wound on her lip. “I ate my mother’s heart, and now I’m queen. She was centuries old and known to be mad with unfathomable power. It wasn’t planned out.”

Her eyes were so dark they were black.

“I did it because she’d wronged me and I wanted her to die in the most brutal way possible.”

Vapor from her pipe swirled in tendrils around her.

Orion frowned, and Scorpius arched his brow.

I subconsciously tightened my fingers in her hair and dragged her closer to offer support. Of everything she could have said, *this* wasn’t what I’d expected.

Arabella smiled. “It was an uncontrollable fit of rage.”

She turned to me, and the full weight of her empty gaze slammed into me. “It will happen again if you try to hurt me.”

The words lingered like smoke.

“We will all die,” she whispered. “I promise.”

I forced myself to release her and step back. I refused to feel sympathy for her.

Every cell in my body cried with distress at the loss of her body heat. I liked her pressed against me.

I liked her under my control.

Orion made a wounded noise and stepped toward her. He blanched and whispered, “Sweetheart, you never should have had to experience that.”

She looked up at him with wide trusting eyes.

He took another step closer.

They were acting like they were alone. Like Scorpius and I didn’t exist.

Like my Revered cared more for her than his Ignis and Protector.

I pulled Orion back and snarled, “You’re disgusting.” The words tasted

like ashes in my mouth because I meant them with every ounce of my being.

Arabella had also murdered Horace in cold blood.

It made sense.

She was one of those women who didn't care about anyone but herself. We killed because we had to but never for personal gratification.

The nymph had touched what was ours, so he'd deserved to die. He'd groped her roughly, and she'd been too high to see that he was hurting her. We killed but only those who deserved it.

Arabella didn't care. She was just like the whore who'd birthed me.

She nodded.

The ashes burned my throat like flames were eating me alive from the inside.

Scorpius shook his head. "Your plan is dumb. We'd kill you first before you *touched* us."

Arabella pursed her lips. "Agree to disagree. Maybe someday we'll find out."

"If it ever comes to that." Scorpius went impossibly still. "If you try to kill my mates, you better hope you're already dead. Because the things I will do to you will make you wish you were."

She balled her fists, and her features tightened.

In her profile I saw the shadow of Lothaire's high cheekbones and arched brows. She had her father's anger.

She was a worse version of him.

"We'll see," she snapped.

A muscle jumped in Scorpius's jaw. "You better hope for your sake we never do."

Arabella counted under her breath like she was trying not to lose control.

I tested her restraint and sneered, "You're an abomination, and we'll suffer your presence until we find our mate. Then I promise on the honor of my ancestors that I'll remove you from our lives. By any means necessary."

Before Arabella could respond, I turned away and pulled my mates with me.

I headed back to our room.

I was done arguing.

But as we walked down the hall, pain flared in my chest.

Whimpers echoed.

You must protect her, my subconscious demanded.

I gritted my teeth and ignored the tattoo messing with my thoughts.

Instead, I whirled around and snapped, "What are you waiting for, an invitation?"

Arabella stared for a long moment like she wanted to argue, then she jogged down the hall to catch up with us.

I pushed her behind us when she tried to pass. "Scorpius and I always flank Orion for his protection. He's our Revered; he walks first. As our slave, you'll walk behind all of us. That's where you belong."

"Sure, master," she scoffed.

My dick jumped.

She had the type of brattiness I liked to break out of a woman during sex. It was all about the power dynamic.

Nothing else.

No. I don't touch filth.

"Be careful how you speak to us." Scorpius whirled around and reached out to drag his long pale fingers across her cheek.

His nails left five red streaks across her delicate skin. "We like to hurt women like you."

He dragged his thumb through blood and painted her stupidly full lower lip.

She froze and blinked up at him.

Long lashes fluttered.

Scorpius pressed his thumb aggressively between cherry lips and made a rough sound in the back of his throat. The noise hit me in my lower stomach. I breathed out harshly.

Arousal pounded painfully.

I wanted my Protector beneath me, bulky muscles quivering as I owned him. I wanted to take him while he played with Arabella. He'd choke her delicate neck while I fucked him.

I adjusted my sweatpants.

Instead of freaking out like we expected, Arabella arched her brow and opened her mouth wider. She dragged her tongue wantonly over Scorpius's thumb like a trained whore.

He jerked with surprise and pulled his thumb out of her mouth with a wet pop.

Arabella smirked like she'd proven something.

"But we won't touch a slut like you," I said as I tried to regain control

over the situation. “You’re disgusting to us. You were more attractive as a man.”

Hurt flashed in her eyes, and she quickly masked it with a blank expression.

Good. It was true, after all. I was most attracted to the impressive strength of my mates. And when I used women, I preferred them voluptuous.

Not lean with muscle definition.

No. She wasn’t what I wanted.

Not at all.

“Trust me.” Arabella pushed her pipe between her lips and rolled it around like she needed something in her mouth at all times. “I don’t want what you’re selling. Just like your missing mate.”

Her words rang loudly in the quiet.

I pushed open the door to our room.

And slammed my flaming fist into the wall as I ordered, “Stay out of our way, slave.”

Marble and stone cracked against my knuckles. Core twisting, I punched viciously.

Somewhere behind me a bed squeaked, and Arabella said, “Don’t worry, I will.”

“Good.” I punched the wall harder until blood dripped down my forearms.

Everything was spinning out of control.

When a chunk broke and shattered against the floor, Scorpius roughly dragged me away.

He shoved me onto the bed, and he and Orion climbed on top to pin me to the mattress.

They held me down.

I bucked against them.

The problem with unimaginable power was it came with externalities that other people couldn’t comprehend.

I needed to control.

Every person.

My muscles tensed, bones ached, twenty-four seven with the urge to conquer.

If only I could have sex with my mates and know peace. Balance.

Burying my face roughly in Scorpius’s smooth, wide chest, I breathed in

his warm, familiar scent. Bergamot and musk.

I couldn't until we found our other Protector.

Orion ran his long fingers through my hair. He whispered endearments against my ear.

I tangled my hands in his silky hair and held him close against me. Let my mates pin me with their heavy weight.

It wasn't enough.

How dare she taunt us about our missing mate? She had no idea how we suffered. The endless pain.

She'll beg me on her knees while she sobs.

I was going to ruin Arabella.

Until she felt how I felt.

Broken.

Uncontrolled.

Every. Single. Day.

CHAPTER 5

LOTHAIRE

BETRAYAL

The beginning: Shackles—Day 3, hour 6

“**D**ICK!” I screamed as I slammed my fists into the glass artwork on display near the entrance of his office. The glass shattered into a million pieces. “*How fucking dare you? You manipulative cunt!*”

I threw one of his fancy guest chairs into the wall until it was a bent, useless hunk of metal.

I’d waited all day in the High Court’s headquarters to see Dick only to find out the blasted angel was working from his home realm.

After another day of waiting in the angel realm for him to open his office door, I was done trying to think rationally.

When Dick’s assistant had finally tapped her clipboard and said he would see me, I’d seen red.

She’d pushed open his office door, and all it had taken was one look.

One glance at the pretentious prick’s smirk and my mind had blanked out with rage.

I wanted his blood.

“You called?” Dick drawled casually from behind his desk as he watched me tear apart his office, like it was just another mundane workday. He was a heavy-set man with a barrel chest and beady dark eyes.

At first glance, he seemed overweight. He wasn’t. It was part of the reason he made such an excellent spy for the High Court. People misjudged him and weren’t prepared for his immense strength.

Now I wished he were weaker so I could beat the shit out of him like I'd always dreamed of.

Dick didn't bother to reach for the ice sword positioned across his desk. It was impossibly wide and five feet long, and frost dissipated in the surrounding air.

Angels and devils and their stupid swords.

Sun god, I hated this realm.

I snarled at it with disgust, and Dick leaned back against the floor-to-ceiling windows behind his desk. Like he didn't have a care in the world.

The office glittered in the bright sunlight, and I squinted. The angel side of the realm was cast in perpetual daylight, and I hated it; I preferred the darkness of the devil side.

My chest heaved as I pinned him with my gaze and said, "You're done. Does your deceit know no end? Do the gods know the extent of your manipulations? How fucking cruel you are?"

Dick smirked like he knew something I didn't. Like something was funny about what I'd said.

Raw power sparked around me.

He eyed me warily.

Dick thought he knew who I was, but ever since the massacre five centuries ago, I'd kept my true savagery restrained behind walls and fortresses of control.

All my walls had fallen.

There was nothing left but *rage*.

"How dare you? No god can save you now. You've lied to me for the last time," I whispered as I reared back and picked up one of his stupid glass guest chairs. Unbridled vampyre strength coursed through me as I slammed it against the stupidly expensive tile floors.

Dick stared at me and said, "I'm confused."

He *dared* to pretend he didn't know what he'd done. Again.

That was it.

"*You enslaved my daughter.*" I chucked a fragment of the chair across the room.

Screaming because I'd lost my grasp on sanity, I reared back and chucked a shard of glass at him as hard as I could.

A hand shot forward, and Dick caught the glass in the air. He swung it lazily back and forth like he was getting ready to fight with it.

“Calm yourself,” Dick said casually as he arched his brow, like I was being irrational and he hadn’t obliterated my existence.

Click.

My fangs descended.

I got ready to rush him.

Dick’s eyes went pure black, and his blue crystal wings flared across his back. Feathers clattered together as he spread his wings wide and rose to his full height.

He was a *monster*.

As I stalked toward his desk, my feet crunched over the glass, and I imagined it was his bones beneath me.

“You enslaved my daughter,” I repeated softly.

Dick arched his brow. “No, you did. You were the one who wanted her protected. The tattoo accomplishes that. The title of the bond is of no consequence. It makes no difference; I told you everything that mattered. I never lied.”

“You bastard,” I spat. “What do you mean, of course you lied.” I paused then asked with confusion. “Why would you do this?”

He shrugged casually. “Because you asked me to.”

“No,” I snarled. “Answer me honestly.” I pressed my knuckles into the glass top of his desk and leaned forward.

“I did.” He shrugged.

Typical. Dick refused to take responsibility and was putting it all on me.

“*Coward!*” I whirled and grabbed the second guest chair, and crystal wings clattered as Dick casually stepped to the side and avoided it. “*All you do is hide behind your precious gods.*”

He chuckled and murmured, “If only you knew.”

The crash echoed loudly in the large office as it exploded against the window.

I picked up a large glass shard from the first chair and chucked it.

Again, he dodged it.

I threw another one.

He caught it.

I threw everything I could get my hands on as I screamed like a lunatic and fantasized about wearing Dick’s flesh as a coat. Mounting his head on my wall. Drinking his blood until he was silent.

He kept dodging glass casually.

When my hand was slick with red like I was wearing gloves, I staggered backward with exhaustion. Heaving breaths shook my chest as I took in my ruined surroundings.

Carnage all around.

“Are you done yet?” Dick’s voice was monotone.

“No.” I spat onto the mangled tile floor.

Dick put his hands on his hips. “Would you like to throw something else? Perhaps break off a chunk of the wall and chuck it at me.”

I walked over to the wall, punched a circle with my fist, ripped out the wood paneling, then flung it at Dick with all my might. He waved his arm lazily, and wood slammed against the floor.

He rolled his eyes. “Feel better?”

“Never.”

Dick stared at me for a long moment, then dropped into his fancy leather chair that was curved at the back to allow room for his wings. He sat at his desk like this was an ordinary meeting and said, “If you’re done acting like a petulant child, I have a matter I want to discuss with you.”

Manic laughter exploded from my throat, and I almost fell to my knees from the weight of emotions coursing through me. “A matter to discuss? You enslaved my daughter with that tattoo, and now she can’t leave the kings without pain.”

Dick waved his hand like he wasn’t listening. “That has nothing to do with the tattoo.”

How quickly he dismissed everything as trivial.

He’d ruined my daughter’s life with his games, in so many different ways. She was going to be devastated when she discovered how far his deceit reached.

I already was.

Would the lies ever stop?

Dick leaned back in his ostentatious leather chair and placed his hands behind his head. He put his boots on his desk and stared at me impassively.

He was so sure I’d just keep playing his games.

Not this time.

He’d gone too far.

I smiled. “I’m done. Turn me over to the sun god, I don’t care what you do. I’m finished being your pawn.”

Silence stretched between us.

“Perfect. I’ll alert the entire High Court network that Arabella Alis Egan is enemy number one and should be exterminated immediately.”

My fangs dug deeper into my gums. “You made a vow.”

Dick’s pale skin glowed under the bright lights of his office, like he was a god addressing a subject. “I vowed to leave your child alone once they took on the mantle of ruling the fae realm and sided with the sun god. Your child has not yet done so. There is no vow binding me.”

My jaw trembled. “Stop with the games. You know what she is. Why would you want her to rule?”

“Because that is her destiny.” His lips thinned. “Because I’ve decided that is her fate and she will fulfill her role.”

My fangs dug deeper into my gums as I spat, “I hate you.”

“I know.” Dick spun a fountain pen between his fingers and said calmly, “Emotions aside, the matter to discuss is important. At the direction of the gods, the High Court is instituting the Legionnaire Games at Elite Academy.”

My temples throbbed with pain.

Dick said casually, “We’ve both known for decades that war is coming. Now it’s here. It is crucial to the war effort that the gods establish this generation’s legion leadership structure. They’ve already identified the six strongest groups in all the realms. All that’s left is to test them and evaluate how they interact with one another. The gods need to see how they suffer.”

I’d been monitoring the ungodly for years, and I’d seen firsthand how dire the situation was becoming. How they were spreading.

There was an infection in the galaxy.

But some things were more important than the threats to civilization, so I shook my head and said, “I don’t care.”

Dick continued like I hadn’t spoken, “Your current training group is among the strongest we have. So the gods have evaluated that they have enough ties among them to make up a single legion.”

I narrowed my eyes.

Foreboding skittered down my spine.

A legion was a group of elite warriors, people whose lives were bound by more than circumstances or blood. It was about devotion and loyalty. Legions were the building blocks of war.

You couldn’t fight a multirealm war unless you had the best from all the species on your side.

My recruits fought well together, and there was no doubt they were

powerful, but some days, they barely tolerated one another. From what I'd seen, they had *nothing* in common.

Legions were thrown into the trenches of suffering, and they usually only survived because they had one another. My recruits did not have those types of connections with each other.

I didn't like it.

"What ties them together?" I asked slowly.

Dick arched his brow like he knew something I didn't. "That's above your clearance level."

I bared my fangs at him.

"All you need to know about them"—Dick's feathers clattered as he leaned back in his chair—"is that their connection is strong. The gods are excited to watch them perform."

Working my jaw up and down, I stabbed my fangs into my gums until copper flooded my mouth.

I rolled it around my mouth.

Dick nodded. "I'm telling you this because the gods have ordered you to host the games. You will work beside me and the other representatives. Centuries ago, you were involved in the last Legionnaire Games, so you know how it works."

"No," I said harshly as I took a step back because I knew *exactly* how it worked.

I could see what they were doing.

They wanted to put distance between me and Arabella.

If I hosted the games, then I wasn't allowed to interact with the competitors or assist them.

They wanted to remove her from my protection.

They wanted to tie my hands so they could make her suffer without repercussions.

Dick shook his head and smiled like my existence amused him.

He grabbed a stack of folders off his desk and said, "Glad we could have this talk. The paperwork regarding your duties will be sent to your office. The High Court is constructing the stadium on the west side of the island as we speak. The games will start in a week."

"No," I repeated with more force. "I will not do this."

I might as well have been talking to the wall.

Dick kept talking. "Failure to take part in the Legionnaire Games will

result in immediate extermination procedures for each person who disobeys. Disobey, interfere, or meddle in circumstances above your pay grade, and your daughter will be named enemy number one. Classification: kill on sight.”

We both knew what *circumstances* he was insinuating.

As he stared me down, his lips flattened into a straight line. Twenty-four years ago he’d positioned me neatly into his spiderweb of lies. Until recently, I’d had no idea just how entangled it all was.

“You’ve lied to me from the beginning,” I said. “No more.”

Dick twirled his fountain pen faster until it was nothing but a blur. His stare was hard. Uncompromising. “The truth changes nothing. Why do you care?”

“I care”—my jaw cracked as I narrowed my eyes, unsure *which* of the lies he was referring to—“because it’s my fucking daughter.”

He rested his head back on his fancy leather headrest. “Exactly. For now, your daughter is alive and healthy. What’s the problem?”

For now.

Nothing he said was ever an accident.

I didn’t like this.

Dick continued calmly, “I will send you the paperwork for the Legionnaire Games. Please read through the clause on page three about interactions with competitors. Familiarize yourself with it.”

“Stop.” I gritted my teeth. “Stop talking like I have no say.”

“But, Lothaire?” Dick furrowed his brows. “You have no choice.”

“Screw you.”

He leaned forward in his chair and said sharply, “We’re on the same side. Don’t forget what we’re fighting against. Do you want another massacre on your conscience? Because this one won’t have any survivors if we don’t act.”

He stared at me.

In the darkness of his eyes, I saw the ungodly ripping apart a realm.

“I hope,” I said quietly, “that you die painfully and get shanked up the ass.”

Dick beamed like I’d complimented him. “The gods appreciate your service. Such delightful wit. I’ll be seeing you soon.”

He stood up and lunged across his desk to pat my face condescendingly. His fingers were so cold the tips smoked with blue flames. Pain screamed along my nerve endings.

Wrenching away from him, I activated the RJE device, and the world exploded as I flung myself through the universe to escape his presence.

I was alone in my quarters at the academy.

Staring at the mirror on the wall, I pressed my fingers against my unmarked cheek. Ripping my gaze away, I staggered onto my knees and collapsed.

I was pinned by my thoughts: Arabella's enslavement, the Legionnaire Games, Dick's secrets, and the endless capacity of the gods to manipulate and ruin the lives of men.

I opened my mouth, and no sound came out.

Inside I screamed.

CHAPTER 6

ARAN

HIM

The beginning: Shackles—Day 5, hour 2

The bed was too squishy.

I sank into the soft feathers like the mattress was consuming me. Somehow, slavery was the least of my problems.

I pretended I was drowning.

It was fun. Kind of.

Lothaire still hadn't come back, and the room still vibrated with noises from the party. After Orion had murdered my dance partner and dragged me back to the room (he was clearly having an episode) I'd fallen into a nightmare-filled sleep.

When I'd woken up, all the blinds were open, and the room glowed with red light.

The brightness burned my corneas.

I missed the dark.

John's empty bed mocked me, and my stomach was in knots of worry. I hadn't seen him since he'd been tied up and Lothaire had taken me to get tattooed. When we'd RJE'd back to the classroom, he and the demons had been gone.

I'd finished smoking the joint from the party hours ago, and the drug had worked its way out of my system. My pipe wasn't doing much to help, because panic had returned.

I avoided looking over at Horace's empty bed.

Smoke poured from my lips, and it made my skin tingle as it rubbed against the bleeding cut on my lower lip.

Turning my head, I stared up at the enchanted black hole swirling across the ceiling.

Someone had started the fire in the hearth, and the voices screamed at me in the flames.

My eyes itched from smoke exposure.

I sucked harder on the pipe.

My brain kept looping back to the same thought pattern: I was a grim reaper in a woman's body.

It was obvious what was happening. I needed a shopping trip.

My body was crumbling under the stress of not being able to buy pretty clothes. I was degrading on a cellular level.

I could barely remember the rush that accompanied purchasing gorgeous shoes. I pinched my hand to ground myself as I became hyperaware of the fact that I'd been wearing the same sweat suit for weeks on end.

"This place is trying to kill me," I said to Horse as he flapped above like he was trying to teach me how to fly.

Poor demented creature. He reminded me of my best friend Sadie.

The wall against my bed vibrated to a heavy beat and shook my headboard.

I rocked with it.

Muffled music echoed down the halls.

Across the quiet bedroom, three devils softly snored and were, unfortunately, still alive. Although, I didn't know how they were still asleep. It wasn't healthy.

They slept in a pile of limbs. After Malum had had a tantrum and fought the wall (he'd lost), the three of them had climbed into the small bed and promptly passed out.

I shivered. Men were such simple, primitive creatures.

The grand clock on the wall ticked. In a feat of pure mental strength, I stopped myself from clicking my tongue back at it.

While my slavers had been sleeping, I'd been wide awake still losing my mind.

At least the screaming voices in the fire had returned. I'd missed them.

I'd also established a little routine.

I stared at the stain on the floor, wallowed in silence, stared at the ceiling,

dragged my nails across the wall like a rabid animal trying to escape a cage, pretended to be in a coma, stared at the clean sheets on Horace's bed (RIP), hyperventilated, then danced to the music. Repeat.

Structure was good.

My vision blurred, and with a heavy sigh, I decided it was finally time to do something productive.

I rolled over.

Then I positioned myself so my head was hanging upside down as I smoked. A nice changeup.

The devils snored.

The room was upside down.

I counted how long I could go without blinking.

Fourteen minutes and five seconds. Six seconds. Seven seconds.

Time flew by.

The world was shadowy.

BANG, the door was flung open.

I groaned as I lost count. Now I'd have to start over.

Two demons and a human sauntered inside, and they stank of cigarettes, booze, and sweat.

Vegar and Zenith fell onto their bed in a tangle of limbs and smacking lips.

Young love. Not relatable.

A flying projectile hit me out of nowhere, and the impact cracked my head at an awkward angle.

I broke my neck and died.

The end.

Story over.

I wish.

"You're finally back!" John bounced up and down on my bed aggressively and rattled my dislocated neck bone. "I've been losing my mind with worry."

The depressive ambiance I'd spent hours carefully cultivating was ruined, and now I'd have to start wallowing all over again. Still, warm relief exploded in my sternum.

John was okay.

"What ya thinking about?" John asked with a grin.

"How much I hate you." I narrowed my eyes. "Wait, weren't you tied up?"

How did you get out? I've also been worried. It's been days."

"The servants freed me. Then Lyla healed me and made us all wait in a separate room until Lothaire got back. I think she forgot about us though." John ruffled my curly hair, and his dimples disappeared as he became serious.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "How long have you been back, my little Smurf bestie?"

I shook my head because I didn't want to upset him. "I just got back. I've been fine. Nothing really happened."

Disturbing events in my life were frankly not surprising or special enough to be worth noting.

John narrowed his eyes like he didn't believe me.

I squirmed under his scrutiny.

Horse must have sensed my unease, because he made a show of pecking at John's eyeballs.

"Good Horsey." I gave him air kisses. "Mommy loves you."

He squawked back, which roughly translated to, *I love you Momma*, and pecked harder to show me his devotion. Or maybe he was summoning Hades, the legendary king from the Olympus realm renowned for his ferocity.

You could never tell these days.

John wrapped his arms around my shoulders and strangled me—that or he was giving me a hug?

I honestly couldn't tell.

His technique was horrible, and he exerted just enough pressure to make me feel weird.

"What are you doing?" I thumped against the hard muscles on his back.

John ruffled my hair. "Um, I'm hugging my bestie? Don't be so dramatic." He whispered conspiratorially, "Wait, are you on your period?"

I prayed for death.

"Just because I'm a woman," I scoffed, "you think I have my period? You sexist pig. Fae don't ovulate until they're twenty-five, and I'm only twenty-four. Duh."

Now that I knew my sperm donor was a vampyre, I had confirmation that I'd gotten my powers from my mother.

All along I'd hoped I was something special, but it turned out I really was just a failure of a water fae. It was pretty obvious, since I looked so much like Mother.

Still, it was good to have closure. My lack of fae ears had given me hope. Mother had probably just cut off the tips when I was a baby because she was mad.

I mean, the woman had been clinically insane.

No judgment though.

We all struggled.

Except, maybe judgment because she'd lit me on fire every night for years?

At least she'd been consistent. It was hard to find people with discipline these days.

John pursed his lips as he continued to half hug, half strangle me. "So you don't have your period. You're just being a bitch?"

I punched him in the throat.

Hard.

Horse cawed with excitement and flew into the wall with such speed he dissipated, because he wasn't the brightest.

John didn't gasp for air—proper throat-punching decorum—instead, he arched a brow and jumped up with his elbow extended.

Six and a half feet of male slammed me into the overly squishy mattress, and I saw stars.

John might only be a human, but he was thick. The boy knew how to eat, and it felt like a five-hundred-pound weight was smothering me.

"You oaf. Get off," I snapped as I tried to choke him with my thighs.

John wrapped an arm round my throat and squeezed. "You're being like *super* bitchy right now."

"Gonna shmove a bitch down yourst throatm." I raked my long nails down his arm aggressively.

"Don't be such a girl." He grinned and didn't let up. "It will seriously ruin the vibe of our friendship."

My nails pulled out a chunk of his flesh, and he paused.

I used his surprise to kick him in the balls.

"Low blow," John croaked as he curled into the fetal position and moaned.

"Don't be such a man," I mocked. "It's ruining our friendship."

John smiled, between the moments he writhed and groaned, and flashed his dimples as his dark eyes twinkled.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" I sucked on my pipe and rubbed at

my sore throat. "You were baiting me."

He winked. "Guilty as charged. I guess you'll have to spank me now, you beautiful blue-haired goddess."

I combed my fingers through the ridiculously curly mass that now hung to my waist. It was heavy and annoying.

Of course John would make fun of it.

Playing along, I leaned across the bed and slapped his butt. "Count to ten," I said in a deep voice like I'd heard Malum do when he was acting like a pervert and spanking women with his belt.

"Oh yes, mistress," John yelled in a dramatic high-pitched voice. "One," he moaned exaggeratedly.

My cheeks flushed, and I pulled my hand away from his butt like it burned. Had it always been so firm?

Friends did *not* spank friends and enjoy it.

That was a rule.

"Please, mistress, let me have your spanks," John said dramatically between laughs.

He was ridiculous.

"I just threw up in my mouth," I said with a grimace.

John laughed harder. "Same. Between the two of us, I wouldn't be the one being spanked."

I narrowed my eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Nothing," John smirked and rested a hand on his messy hair as he flexed.

"What are you doing right now?"

"Nothing," he repeated and winked, long dark lashes fluttering. "Why do you ask?"

I pointed at his face. "That's what I'm talking about. Why did you just wink? And are you flexing right now?"

John tipped his head back and exposed the thick column of his throat. He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed. "I'm not doing anything."

"You're being weird."

John pouted, and his perfect white teeth dug into his thick lower lip. "Baby girl, don't be like that."

Why was my best friend being so weird?

A strange sensation churned in my lower stomach.

For a long second, we stared at each other in silence.

John flung his head back, laughing. "You should see your face right now." He gasped. "Baby." He laughed harder as he slapped my bed with his palm. "Girl."

"Oh, shut up." I punched him in the gut. "You're not funny."

"Could you imagine if I called you 'baby girl'?" John gasped for air and wiped at his eyes. "You're not anyone's baby girl. I can tell you that for free."

He paused as if he realized something. "Except technically Lothaire's. Talk about daddy issues."

John howled with laughter.

I shoved a pillow over his head and tried to suffocate him, but he wrestled it out of my hands as he kept laughing.

Rude.

No, I didn't want a man to call me baby girl. Gag. But that didn't mean a man wouldn't *want* to call me baby girl. The distinction mattered.

I bristled.

Was he implying no one would ever want me?

John didn't know about the scar Mother had carved into my back, so he had no reason to think I'd die a virgin.

Insecurity unfurled in my gut as I mumbled, "You don't have to be mean about it."

I shuffled backward on the narrow bed to put space between us.

"What?" John stopped laughing and stared at me with confusion.

I said under my breath, "Some man might be into me someday. It's not that funny."

"Wait." John scooted closer, and his size overwhelmed my small bed. "You think I'm laughing at the idea of a guy being into you?"

Why was it suddenly so hard to speak?

"Aran," he said slowly.

The strange gleam in his dark eyes made my stomach swoop, and I blurted out, "Do you hate me now that you know I'm really a woman?"

His expression darkened. "I loathe you."

An awkward moment passed.

He glared.

Talk about whiplash.

Had Mr. Hyde returned? John didn't switch personalities on a whim; it was more of a couple of days of John being a brooding psycho kind of thing,

then he was super smiley and back to normal.

I couldn't figure it out.

"Just kidding, you dumb cunt." John showed off his white teeth and slapped me on the arm with all his strength.

Thank the sun god.

At least some things never changed.

I rubbed at my throbbing arm. "You know, you don't get to start calling me a cunt and bitch now that you know I'm a woman."

"Okay, slut."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and prayed for a different life, new friends, and a scrap of mental health.

I opened my eyes.

John made a breast motion with his hands over his chest, and he wiggled his eyebrows at me.

Never mind—death to all men.

CHAPTER 7

ARAN

LOYALTY

The beginning: Shackles—Day 5, hour 3

“**Y**ou’re disgusting,” I groaned.

John’s powerful thighs took up the width of my bed as he knelt before me, making indecent gestures.

He raked a hand through his messy brown hair and smirked. He was clearly still Dr. Jekyll. Thank the sun god.

Then he punched me in the middle of my chest.

My heart temporarily flatlined, and I yelped as I fell backward.

John moved quickly and straddled my hips, the heat from his crotch burning where it pressed against my stomach.

His face hovered inches from mine.

“I’m your best friend,” he said, as his dark eyes glinted with an intense emotion. “You’re still the person I’ve trained and fought beside for months. Still the person I sat next to at meals. Still the weirdo who refuses to eat meat and chokes people in their sleep.” He stared at my mouth. “Never doubt that we’re besties.”

My heart burned with emotions.

It also burned from the giant hematoma on my sternum that his knuckles had caused.

“Okay,” I whispered.

John leaned closer and flashed a dimple. “Did I not promise you I’d dispose of a body if you asked me to?”

I sighed. "Yes. You did."

His nose brushed against mine as he asked, "And did you not kill someone three days ago? Did I not dispose of them without asking questions?"

"You did," I whispered. "I think? What actually happened to the body?"

Dark eyes glanced down at my lips. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Tell me."

"Aran." His lips hovered centimeters from mine, and I could taste his minty breath. "You can't handle my secrets."

"What do you mean?" I breathed into his mouth.

John straightened his wide shoulders and pulled away. "Don't worry your cute little head." He ruffled my curls aggressively. "My little depressed, angry Smurf."

I forgot how to breathe.

He was kneeling atop me wantonly, but he was acting casual like it was perfectly acceptable for him to straddle me.

Was this normal friend behavior?

I'd always thought of John as a friend. The special kind that you snuggled in bed with and held on to for dear life as you drowned in the ocean for hours.

I'd grouped him in with Sadie, but there was a problem.

I was bizarrely aware of the fact that he wasn't a woman; he was an extremely handsome six-foot-five supernatural assassin.

John was definitely treating me differently than he had when I was disguised as a boy.

There was an unfamiliar edge in his eyes.

The way he looked at me.

It made me squirm.

I cleared my throat and tried to appear relaxed. "You still haven't told me what type of creature a Smurf is. Also, I'm almost your height, so I'm not little."

I flexed my arms.

Sadie was short and petite. I was tall and strong, and there was nothing little about me.

John chuckled, and I felt the vibrations in my groin.

Pain streaked across my back with such intensity that I barely heard him say, "Please, I have half a foot on you. You're girly and adorable with your

big blue eyes and hair, a little Smurf princess.”

His hand was resting on my thigh, and he absentmindedly drew circles with his thumb.

The maroon rays of the eclipse wrapped around John in a hazy glow.

Everything took on a dreamlike quality.

Warm feelings of friendship were twisting in my lower gut and becoming something more.

Something dangerous.

Streaks of pain lit up my back where “WHORE” was carved into my skin.

Whatever was happening between us needed to stop.

“Actually.” I pivoted the conversation by flipping my hair over my shoulder and pretended to put lip gloss on with my middle finger. “It’s Queen. Why does everyone keep calling me Princess?”

John laughed as he punched me in the gut. “Calm down.”

The pivot worked.

I punched him back. Harder.

The weird tension between us dissipated as we beat the shit out of each other like we always did.

After a light spat of arm wrestling (fourteen rounds later, we were evenly tied), John pinned me to the mattress and asked, “Did you really think I was going to treat you differently just because you’re a girl?”

My stomach flip-flopped.

I flexed and rolled so I was on top.

John punched me in the kidney and used my momentary shock to roll so he was once again hovering above me.

His eyes narrowed. “What type of misogynistic, close-minded jerk would hold the fact that you’re a girl against you? From what I’ve heard, you disguised yourself for a good fucking reason.”

I smiled widely at him, and he grinned back.

Everything with John was so simple.

He got it.

He *understood*.

Lately it felt like he was the only man who actually listened to me.

“Excuse me?” Malum growled roughly, and his deep baritone voice sent goose bumps down my spine. “Why are you on top of Arabella?”

Speaking of men who didn’t understand.

Malum stood in the middle of the room, glaring at me and John like he wanted to kill us with his stare.

Apparently, he really had been napping and not in a stress-induced coma. Disappointing.

“Looks like our property is not only a murderer and a liar, but she’s also a slag,” Scorpius sneered.

“Don’t call her that,” Orion whispered and shoved at the blind devil he was lying on.

Scorpius lounged on the bed with his hands behind his head. He smirked like he was unconcerned that Orion was mad at him.

There was something dangerous about two powerful warriors cuddling. It lulled you into thinking they were soft and approachable.

They weren’t.

I snapped back at Scorpius sarcastically, “Don’t forget that I’m also a whore.”

The blind king smiled condescendingly. “Thanks for the reminder.”

I slumped back against my pillows and answered John’s rhetorical question. “The kings are those misogynistic, close-minded jerks.”

John climbed off the bed and stood in front of me protectively with his arms and legs spread.

He physically blocked me from the kings and asked incredulously, “Did you call her your property?”

I peeked over John’s back.

“It’s Arabella,” Orion mouthed like he was making a point as long lashes framed stunning brown eyes that stared at me without blinking. Scorpius’s fingers dragged across his muscled chest.

Orion met my gaze while Scorpius played with his nipple.

The quiet devil kept staring.

Since I’d revealed I was a girl, Orion had also been watching me with a new intensity. Every time I glanced at him, his eyes were on me.

I had yet to see him blink.

What did I really know about him?

I knew he tasted like raspberries, chocolates, and sin. He’d grabbed my jaw in his powerful hand and kissed me like he was consuming me.

I knew he was the most attractive man I’d ever seen.

He’d also whispered that he wanted me to be his toy, in a silky-smooth voice that was lyrical like a haunting song.

He stuck up for me.

I shivered and looked at where Scorpius touched him.

The weight of Orion's gaze made my skin prickle, and I knew he was still staring. Little pinpricks of pain danced down my spine.

The blind king dragged his fingers up over Orion's sharp jaw and high cheekbones, then he buried them in blond hair.

They were both shirtless. A tangle of pale and gold.

Scorpius slowly licked the cherry blossom tattooed on Orion's neck. A pang of jealousy stabbed my gut.

I shivered.

Orion still hadn't taken his eyes off me.

Scorpius bit down, and Orion jerked, a droplet of red dripping across pink petals. The flower turned red.

I blinked at the optical illusion.

"What's going on?" John asked as he narrowed his eyes at the kings' sexual display, then looked back at me.

The devils were always loud bullies, but unlike the demons, they were mostly private about their lust for one another.

They'd been aggressively horny since I'd gotten the tattoo.

I shrugged at John. Who knew why bullies did what they did?

Across the room Scorpius laughed darkly. "I called her that because it's true. Arabella is our filthy property."

He nibbled at Orion's neck as he grinned.

Only Mother had called me Arabella.

While Scorpius was sucking on him, Orion licked his lips and stared at me.

I shivered harder.

John flexed and made a harsh noise. Darkness expanded around him, and he moved like he was going to go fight the kings.

I sat up and wrapped my arms around John from behind.

Resting my head on his shoulder so our faces were side by side, I said, "Try not to panic, but I have something to tell you."

John went still beneath me.

Malum snarled from the middle of the room, "Stop touching him like that." Little scarlet flames danced along his wide bronze shoulders.

Layers of muscles ripped, and he cracked his neck back and forth like he was getting ready to explode.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I said as I hugged John tighter. No one was going to tell me I couldn’t lean on my friend for support.

John was tight with tension.

Scorpius licked the side of Orion’s stunning face, then said, “But Arabella.” He kissed along his jaw. “We own you, so technically we can.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said through gritted teeth.

The slave tattoo was annoying, but we were all aware of the circumstances and that it meant nothing. I didn’t know why they were putting on a show.

Even for them, this was dramatic.

I pulled back from John and said to Scorpius, “I prefer Aran, not Arabella. Grow up.”

Scorpius chuckled darkly. “Oh, don’t worry, we’re grown.” He lifted his hips provocatively and smirked. “Your comebacks are shit. You need to work on them, Arabella.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped.

Malum took a step closer to my bed and said, “How dare you talk to my mate like that?”

My life felt like one never-ending argument with the kings. It was like bashing my head against a brick wall. You couldn’t reason with narcissistic, Machiavellian psychopaths.

John cracked his knuckles in warning.

“I told him not to call me Arabella.” I rubbed at the beginning of a tension headache.

“When will you learn?” Malum asked roughly. “We don’t care what you want, *Arabella*.”

I flinched as he emphasized the name, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

A cold sweat broke out across my hairline.

“*Arabella, you’re so weak,*” Mother whispered as she snapped her fingers and set me on fire. The terrible cold came after as my body shook from stress on the icy palace floor.

I blinked and realized John was holding me and rubbing comforting circles against my back.

I slumped against him.

Over John’s shoulder, Malum scowled as flames covered his arms like sleeves.

“You don’t own me,” I said forcefully. “I’m just temporarily enslaved to you. There’s a difference.”

Scorpius scoffed.

Orion kept staring.

“Excuse me?” John asked as he went still in my arms.

“Um.” I gnawed on the inside of my mouth. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Malum laughed cruelly. “There’s no difference.”

My stomach cramped with nausea.

The devils didn’t talk about ownership in the way Sadie’s mates talked about her, which was with an edge of obsession and devotion that was kind of endearing. They called me property like I was the muck beneath their boots.

If I had any self-esteem, it would have been crushed.

Good thing I had none.

The air around John shimmered with darkness as he pulled away and asked darkly, “You’re their slave?”

Across the room, Zenith and Vegar stopped making out and turned to me with startled expressions.

I grimaced and rubbed at the back of my neck.

The flames in the fireplace screamed in a frenzy, and I pretended they were aggressively yelling compliments at me. *You’re so pretty and smart. You’re so cool. You have an impeccable sense of style.*

No. Coping was not a linear process.

“Oh, did Arabella not already tell you?” Scorpius taunted, and his high cheekbones were sharp as glass as he smiled.

His handsomeness was captivating, like a grotesque disease that made you stare in horror.

He pulled down the corner of his sweatpants, and his Adonis belt gleamed in the firelight.

With Orion draped all over him, he looked like a painting. The title would be *The Carnal Delights of Monsters*. Or something equally off-putting and sexy.

Scorpius showed off the tattoo of a snake eating its own tail that was wrapped in four chains. He proudly said, “Arabella is now our slave, and she can’t leave our presence without pain.”

Chains glinted as they rotated on pale flesh.

John stumbled back and leaned against the bed as he clearly recognized

the symbol.

Dark eyes widened.

He looked at me with horror.

John had been present when Lothaire had forcibly taken me from the realm to bind my life to the kings, but just like me, he hadn't realized it was through *slavery*.

I sucked on my pipe and nodded gravely.

John choked.

Darkness expanded around him like it was sentient.

It didn't take analytical skills to see that John was not fully human, but I had no clue what type of creature wielded literal darkness.

The darkness dissipated, and John's expression changed from furious to concerned.

He hugged me and said, "I get why you were having a pity party."

"It's fucked up, isn't it?" I whispered.

John squeezed me tightly, then asked, "Should we kill them?"

"The kings?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm," he confirmed as he played with one of my curls.

"For sure." I closed my eyes and enjoyed his warmth. "But right now? That seems a little aggressive."

Sometimes a girl was just too tired to murder. My creative killing juices weren't flowing.

Yes, my depression was definitely impeding me from living my best life. I was aware. Just another thing to talk to Dr. Palmer about if I survived this realm.

John wrapped my curl around his finger. "We might as well just do it now."

"Maybe?" It was all sorts of complicated with my lives tied to theirs, and my headache was making it hard to think. "You decide."

John tugged at my curl. "Come on, I don't want to choose."

"I decided to kill Horace all by myself last time," I pointed out.

John sighed and mumbled against me, "You're being a bitch."

"Don't try to goad me into action." I pulled back from his embrace. "You know it's your turn to choose if we kill someone. You can't just expect me to always decide. That's rude."

We glared at each other.

Someone growled, and the pitch was reminiscent of whiskey, cigarettes,

and broken glass.

“Are you two done?” Malum snapped. “Neither of you is going to kill us.”

“Now who’s acting like they’re on their period?” I pointed at Malum and arched my brow.

John slapped his hand over his mouth to muffle his laugh.

I drew on my inner fae bitch and whispered dramatically to John, “He probably has a heavy flow, but is one of those weak bitches who refuses to use an enchanted period cup because he passes out at the sight of blood.”

I’d listened to elite fae women talk for hours at the palace balls and had learned a lot from them.

Men thought they were so big and scary, but a gossiping woman was evil incarnate. They knew how to eviscerate a person with a few words. I aspired to be like them.

John choked.

Scorpius clapped and said, “That’s a better insult. Still not great though.”

Unsurprisingly, Malum’s red flames shot higher into the air.

Orion still hadn’t blinked.

Sadly, before Malum could light us all on fire and end the misery that was known as existence, Lothaire walked into the room and distracted everyone.

Lothaire asked, “What’s going on here?”

I studied my cuticles. “Malum needs a tampon.”

There was a long moment where my vampyre sire—the only man I’d ever call Daddy was my fictional lover who’d raze the realms for me—stared at me like he was trying to figure out if I was being serious.

“Is this a daughter thing?” he asked slowly. “Do you need sanitary products?”

I blew out a smoke gun.

And shot myself in the forehead.

I was twenty-four, not twenty-five; obviously, I hadn’t started ovulating yet. Men were ignorant, dumb, ugly creatures.

Frankly, I was done interacting with them.

It wasn’t good for my constitution.

John’s shoulder shook, and he slapped his other hand over his mouth to muffle his laugh.

Scorpius sneered something under his breath. Both Malum and I opened our mouths to speak.

Lothaire held up his hand.

No one spoke.

His brutal training was so ingrained in us you could instantly hear a pin drop. We barely breathed.

I half-expected him to whip out his baton and start beating us all bloody in a rampage.

Lothaire pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let's forget whatever just happened. We have something important to address."

"Coward," I mumbled under my breath.

Personally, I respected him more when he attacked us. But maybe that was just me.

He turned to the kings. "First, I want to confirm that you will do everything in your power to keep my daughter safe like you promised. Otherwise, you'll never find your mate."

Malum's chest rose and fell as he breathed harshly.

"Am I understood?" Lothaire's voice cracked like a whip.

"Yes, sir," the kings said in unison, but the expressions on their faces said they weren't happy about it.

Lothaire nodded like they were in agreement.

How he missed the manic sadomasochistic glint in their eyes was beyond me.

"Good," Lothaire said gravely. "Because there's been a change of plans with this year's training."

Everyone froze.

"The High Court has ordered all of you to form a legion and compete in the Legionnaire Games. The games will be held here at Elite Academy. I'll be the host."

I blinked.

Swallowed thickly.

I dug my nail into my lower lip. I pulled off a flap of skin.

New life plan: figure out how to kill myself before the Legionnaire Games began.

CHAPTER 8

ARAN

BESEECHING

The beginning: Shackles—Day 5, hour 4

Flames screamed in the crackling hearth.

There was a bloodstain on the ornate rug beneath my feet.

The room was red and hazy.

Stained glass sparkled.

I'd spent countless nights hyperventilating in this room, but Lothaire's presence made it seem darker and more depressing than usual.

He'd sucked the life out of the space.

On the ceiling, a black hole swirled lazily.

I stared at the cracks behind Lothaire where Malum's blood was smeared against the broken wall.

"So," I asked softly, "do I have to compete, or do I get a pass?"

My eyes wide with fear, shoulders slumped, my body language screamed, *My delicate feminine constitution can't handle any more violence, and I'll probably pass away from the stress.*

In my periphery John narrowed his eyes.

"I've just had enough violence for a lifetime." My voice quivered. "It's too much. I'm out."

Scorpius scoffed. Orion's eyes flashed with concern, and Malum said something under his breath.

Focusing on Lothaire, I crossed my arms protectively and stood small.

I took up less space.

“What?” Lothaire’s scar pulled as he furrowed his brow.

“I don’t have to compete, right?” I asked. “Now that everyone knows I’m a woman, it wouldn’t be safe for me. Especially after all this effort you’ve gone through to protect me and keep me safe.”

Lothaire narrowed his eye.

I breathed out heavily and said, “I can’t fight after everything that happened with Horace.”

I shivered as I thought about what I’d done.

Mere days ago.

In this very room.

It was the second time in my life that I’d killed someone close to me.

Underneath the room’s dusty scents of parchment and cotton, there was a copper tang.

“Arabella,” Lothaire whispered as he took a step toward me.

I picked at my bottom lip and sank into the feelings of worthlessness. Memories of Mother’s lessons scoured my psyche.

Her vitriol.

Arabella was a fae who’d never developed any aptitude for powers like she should have. Sure, if I concentrated hard enough, I could create measly ice claws and ice daggers, but they were nothing in the grand scheme of abilities.

The most powerful ice fae could create avalanches of snow.

I was weak.

I always had been. And now I was also trapped. A rat in a cage.

The walls of Elite Academy were drenched in misery.

You could taste it on the sulfur wind that battered the island. You could feel it in the heat of the lightning that struck the walls.

“Please,” I begged Lothaire as I scratched at my back.

Lothaire scowled and pulled at his thick braid, and curls escaped, then he looked down at me sadly and said, “You’re my daughter.”

Eyes wide, I nodded.

Opal fangs flashed as Lothaire opened his mouth and said, “I’m impressed with your cunning and acting skills, but believe it or not, I wasn’t born a century ago.”

I rose to my full height.

Pulled my upper lip back in a sneer and glared.

Lothaire chuckled. “Since you *are* my daughter, I’m aware that you’re

completely full of shit.” He shook his head. “Admirable, really, to try to use my feelings against me. I’m impressed that you’re smart enough to try it, but that doesn’t mean I’m falling for it.”

I spread my legs wide and took up as much space as possible.

I let him see the hatred on my face and said, “So you’d make your precious daughter fight in a violent competition? That’s messed up.”

Lothaire shrugged. “Honestly, yes. I’ve seen what you can do. Why wouldn’t you compete?”

Where was the misogyny when you actually needed it? “Because I’m a woman,” I said through gritted teeth.

Lothaire arched his eyebrow and smirked like the situation was humorous. “And I’m a vampyre. I don’t see your point.”

It wasn’t funny.

I walked forward and jammed my finger into Lothaire’s chest. “You branded me a fucking slave because you thought I was weak and pathetic. Or did you already forget? Or do you just get to decide my character when it fits into your little agenda?”

Lothaire rested his hand over mine gently, like we were having a tender family moment.

I yanked out of his grip.

Lothaire frowned. “You’re my daughter. And you’re more powerful than you even know. But that doesn’t mean you’re safe from the millions of fae who want to rip out your heart and take your throne.”

“Oh, please, save me the theatrics.” I gritted my teeth. “My life is fucking hell because of your horrible choice in women.”

“Language!” Lothaire yelled.

I screamed, “*Fuck you!*”

His eye flashed with danger, and he yelled louder, “*Language!* No child of mine will speak like a common foot soldier.”

“I’m not your child.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No. I’m not. You can’t force me to accept you as my father.”

Sparks crackled in the air around Lothaire as he said, “You don’t need to accept anything. I’m your father. That’s a fact.”

I smiled widely. “False.”

“I’m your father,” Lothaire whispered and held his hand out, like he was offering something to me.

He waited for me to take it.

I didn't move.

An empty feeling expanded in my chest.

It spread.

"Force me to compete and we will never have a relationship. This is your last chance," I whispered.

The black hole swirled above our heads.

Light filtered through stained glass and cast a network of geometric shapes across fabrics. Curtains billowed in the cracked windows. Fire leaped in the hearth.

Lothaire dragged his hand over his chin and scoffed like I was ridiculous. Then he chuckled.

He laughed.

At me.

At my feelings.

The emptiness became a cliff.

"You don't get to choose not to compete," Lothaire said with finality. "The gods personally handpicked the legions, and you were named a part of this one. You're already a member. There's no choice to be made. Your fate has been decided."

The cliff became a free fall.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Nodded.

And walked backward across the room to put space between us.

The other recruits were standing with their legs parted. Heads down. Arms behind their backs respectfully.

I adopted the same position.

Lothaire kept talking to me like we were having a conversation. "You are strong, daughter. We can use this to your advantage. Being in a legion has many benefits. I've thought about it, and everything is working out for the best."

I nodded as I stared at the floor.

Lothaire had made his choice.

I was making mine.

"This is good, Arabella." There was a note of desperation in his voice.

Silence.

When it became clear that I wasn't going to respond, Lothaire addressed

the rest of the room, “This legion is an honor for each one of you. You’ll be connected to one another for the rest of your immortal lives. You’ll be stronger together. Unbeatable.”

The flames screamed.

Lothaire waited for an answer.

“Whatever you say, sir,” I said in a monotone voice.

Lothaire flinched like I’d hit him. “I swear you will know peace one day, my daughter, but it must be earned with blood and pain. That is how our world works and sheltering you won’t change that fact.”

I replied in a monotone voice, “Yes, sir.”

Horace’s desperate gurgles as I stabbed him.

Tara’s sightless eyes.

A snap of a finger, the half warriors dead.

“WHORE” carved into my flesh.

Villagers grunting as they died.

Anxiety and depression consuming me.

The slave tattoo on my hip.

Fighting monsters in the shifter realm.

Mother’s endless flames burning but never leaving any marks.

“Of course, sir,” I whispered, “You’re correct. I have not known suffering.”

Lothaire’s ability to forget that he’d left me with my mad mother was inspiring and convenient. He claimed he cared. Yet he didn’t care enough to see the truth right in front of him?

Bullshit.

There was no room for him in my life.

Some relationships require a lot of patience and forgiveness. Sadly, I’m not a good person and I don’t care.

Sadie had shown me what it was like to be unequivocally cared for, loved without expectation, and accepted without judgment.

Lothaire wasn’t offering that.

He was nothing to me.

Lothaire huffed exasperatedly like I was a naïve child who was too impatient to understand I just had to fight for my life one more time, then I’d be happy.

I didn’t bother to argue.

Lothaire whispered, “I’m proud to call myself your father.” He crossed

the middle of the room and walked toward me.

The other recruits shifted uncomfortably at his desperate, pathetic words.
I stepped back.

“It doesn’t matter what you think,” Lothaire said as he reached for me.
“No matter what you say or feel, I will always be there for you.”

“Okay, sir. Sounds good.” My voice was icy. Normalize gaslighting men.
He sighed heavily.

A sudden thought hit me, and I looked up at him. “Sir, I need to go back and find my enchanted ring and disguise myself before anyone else sees me as a woman.”

Malum made a rude noise and I ignored him.

“No,” Lothaire said. “The Legionnaire Games are a showcase for the gods. You don’t hide yourself before a god if you want to live. They already know everything about your identity.”

I shook my head. “But, sir, everyone at the academy thinks—”

Lothaire cut me off. “It doesn’t matter what the sheep think. You should be concerned about the gods.”

We stared at each other.

A monster screamed in my mind, but the emptiness in my chest was more demanding.

I lowered my head respectfully and stared at the floor. “Yes, sir.”

Lothaire reached a hand forward like he was going to touch me, but then it fell away back to his side. Lothaire whirled around and ordered, “Fall in line, soldiers. We need to announce the games to the rest of the academy.”

We moved into formation.

Malum stood in front of me, and his wide shoulders blocked my view of Lothaire. A hand rested comfortingly on my shoulder. I looked back to find John smiling at me sadly.

Leaning into his touch, I closed my eyes.

Took a deep breath.

The last sliver of a child’s hope that her father would shield her from harm turned to ashes.

Died.

And there was nothing left.

Just a gaping hole in the center of my chest where my heart should have been.

THE LEGIONNAIRE GAMES

“The games douse legions in kerosene,
And set their relationships on fire;
The loyal few emerge stronger,
Most die on the pyre.”

—Lyla the Witch

CHAPTER 9

ARAN

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Legionnaire Games: Day 5, hour 5

We stood before the tree that split the great hall in two.

Commoners sat at their long table on one side, wearing green finery, and royals wore purple on the other.

The seven of us wore black.

It matched our souls.

It also had the unintended consequence of making us look skinny. Sun god forbid the elite assassins appeared bloated.

We had a reputation to uphold.

I stood hunched forward with my hood pulled low over my head, concealing my face.

Yet again, we were given no time to adjust to horrible circumstances.

After Lothaire had told us we'd all be competing in the Legionnaire Games, an emergency announcement had been broadcast through the academy. All students had been ordered to leave the party and change into their designated wardrobes.

All the guests had been RJE'd away.

The servants who worked in the shadows of the academy had removed all evidence of festivities.

Most students swayed drunkenly in their seats.

Lucky bastards. The demon brew had burned off days ago when I'd murdered my friend for murdering my other friend. Tragic.

I picked at the blood crusted beneath my nails.

Stared blankly at the floor.

Lothaire stood in front of us and spread his arms wide. "I've brought us all here because I've received exciting news."

His voice echoed off the high, arched ceiling.

The hall was dead silent as Lothaire said, "The High Court has chosen Elite Academy to host the Legionnaire Games, and our very own assassin recruits will compete as the academy legion."

I startled when the hall exploded in cheers.

Students shouted, hugged one another, stood with excitement, and stomped their feet.

The stained-glass windows rattled as the floor shook.

Of course they were excited; they weren't the ones who had to compete in an infamous supernatural competition.

I knew little about the games, but what I did know wasn't good.

History books said it was extremely important and dangerous. That was it. They never elaborated.

Apparently, the rest of the hall knew something I didn't.

A royal student squealed to my left as she fanned herself and said, "Oh my sun god, can you believe we're so lucky? I've heard it's a hunk show."

At the other table, a commoner student clapped his friend on the back. "Dude, my family's going to be so jealous." He smiled widely. "It's going to be so bloody."

The students' voices jumbled together.

I stretched my neck to the side to relieve the discomfort. Their voices were like gnats biting my skin as they all spoke at once.

"The most brutal showcase in history. Who would have thought we'd see it in our lifetime?"

"I can't believe we get to see the kings fight in person!"

"I've heard the competitors fight shirtless."

"Really, I've heard they fight naked."

"This is going to be wild because I've heard they make competitors do crazy, fucked up punishments."

"Holy shit, imagine the carnage."

"The assassins are going to be so horny after competing, I bet they'll go wild. I'm gonna be all over the kings."

"I've noticed John looking at me recently, and I've already gotten with

him twice. He's just one orgasm away from the alliance father wants so badly."

"I call dibs on the new legions that arrive."

"My parents will definitely want me to get married to one of the competitors. Sun god, imagine the power."

"I heard the gods watch the games."

"I heard the gods have their representatives attend and they watch through their eyes."

"Wait, does this mean war is coming? That will be great for business."

I dragged my gaze around the whispering hall.

A gorgeous woman sat with her shoulders hunched low. She stared at me.

The corner of my lip pulled up slightly in a tentative smile. "Are you okay?" I mouthed.

Her eyebrows scrunched and her face darkened with pure malice. Disgust. Her eyes were filled with hatred.

She sneered at me.

Blood rushed through my ears, and a wave of dizziness hit me.

Sari was sickly pale as she stared at me like I was filthy. Faint blue bruises covered the side of her pretty face.

Just a few days ago, I'd ripped Horace off her and stabbed him to death.

Tara had been dead beside us as I'd carried Sari's limp body through the corridor and laid her at Lyla's feet. I'd collapsed onto the dance floor as colors and sounds spun around me.

Tara's sightless eyes staring at the ceiling.

Sari under Horace on the bed, refusing to look at me as she bled out.

I brought my pipe to my lips, and it rattled against my teeth.

Nausea churned my gut.

I pursed my lips but couldn't inhale.

My lungs were flat.

Sari *knew* me. She'd eaten lunch beside me every day for a month while I'd helped her with her homework. We'd talked for hours.

She was a friend.

From her expression, we weren't friends anymore.

I tore my eyes away and stared down at the cracked gray floor. Scuffed my toes back and forth.

Concentrated on anything but the pressure on my chest.

"Settle down!" Lothaire held up his hand, and the hall quieted. "Students

will still attend their respective classes but will get competition days off. The members of the academy legion will no longer attend class because they will be recovering and training.”

The students murmured with disappointment.

“*Silence!*” Lothaire shouted.

No one made a sound.

He breathed deeply, then said calmly, “As some of you know, the Legionnaire Games is a showcase where the strongest warriors in the realm compete before the gods. Yes, that means exactly what you’ve probably guessed—”

He paused dramatically.

Everyone stared at him with rapt attention.

“War is coming.”

Ice washed down my spine.

“A stadium is being assembled as we speak on the west lawn of this island, and per tradition, there will be six legions that compete. They are arriving now. You will treat them with respect and will bring pride to this academy.”

There was another swell of excited chattering.

Lothaire continued, “The gods will observe the legions in four competitions that will be held every ten to twelve days. All teams will be evaluated to see what role will fit them best in the upcoming war. After the first four performances, the gods will choose their top two legions to compete against each other in a showcase.”

Forty days.

Four competitions.

That was doable.

Lothaire spread his arms wide theatrically. “If the two chosen legions pass the showcase test, then the games conclude and all teams will be given their assignments. However, if the gods dislike what they see in the showcase, the games restart from the beginning. The process will continue until the top two legions pass the final test. Some of these games last for two months. Other times, they last for years.”

I blinked.

Never mind, not doable.

I wanted to puke.

Lothaire’s face was hard as he said, “If the top two legions pass the test in

the showcase tournament, they will be named the champions in the next war. The rest will be sorted into leadership roles, training and guiding the generals, spies, assassins, and foot soldiers.”

Students smirked at one another across their tables.

Grown men trembled with excitement.

Like this was all a game.

A realm-wide war against something that was so serious it was led by the gods. It didn't take a genius to see this was about the ungodly.

The implications of everything hit me.

I would fight with the men standing beside me in a war. There was no escaping them.

We were now a legion.

Lothaire spread his arms. “Now, before we welcome the other five legions, I have one more announcement.”

His expression hardened.

“It is now necessary to inform you that Aran is really Arabella Alis Egan, Ruling Queen of the Fae Realm. She's been disguised as a male for safety, but circumstances have changed, and the subterfuge is no longer needed.”

The entire hall stared at me.

Waited.

My fingers were numb as I pulled back my black hood and my unruly blue curls tumbled out. The bright-blue mane ensured I always stood out.

I donned the blank expression of a heartless queen.

“Holy fuck!” someone screamed, and the room erupted in shouts as everyone chose collectively to lose their minds.

I stared forward like I was bored.

Unbothered.

You're a pampered, unfeeling despot. I pretended to be the heartless bitch Sari thought I was.

Men and women picked me apart like vultures as their voices swirled around me like a vortex.

“Wait, she's actually hot.”

“I still thought the queen would be prettier.”

I made a mental note to throat punch whoever said that.

“I'll bet you a fortune. I'll have her on her knees within a week.”

“I'll have her within three days.”

“Didn't she kill her own mother and eat her heart?”

“I heard there’s a warrant on her head.”

Lothaire spoke loudly, but his voice barely cut through the fray. “You will treat her with respect, like the rest of her legion. I am aware that she is wanted back in the fae realm. However, the gods have decided that her services are needed here. If anyone tries to harm her, they will answer to me and I will not be merciful. This is your only warning.”

His threatening speech didn’t stop the whispers. More people started talking.

“I wonder how much she paid Lothaire to say that.”

“How embarrassing that she pretended to be a guy. I’m sure the men are super pissed right now. I would be.”

“Does that mean she’s competing in the games? She doesn’t look like a warrior; she’s going to get destroyed.”

“I heard she’s insane like her mother.”

“She probably pretended to be a guy so she could get close to the kings. What a slut.”

“I heard she’s powerless and doesn’t even have any fae abilities. She’s desperate for power. She’s probably been fucking the men.”

“As soon as she sets foot in the fae realm, she’s dead.”

“She must be so embarrassed right now.”

Ice crept up my throat, and the numbness became a ledge.

The ledge was razor thin.

I was free-falling.

John grabbed my shoulders and forcibly turned me so I was facing him and not the rest of the hall.

Sandalwood surrounded me as he stepped closer. His dark eyes were intense. “Are you okay? You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I’m fine.” I tried to suck on my pipe, and I missed my mouth.

John patted my back. “Don’t fall apart now.” He flashed his dimples and whispered, “It will ruin our street cred.”

I choked. “What street cred?”

“Exactly.” He nodded gravely. “Honestly, I can’t be your friend if you’re going to fall apart over nothing. It’s bad for business.”

“I’m not falling apart,” I hissed with annoyance. “And what business?”

“You don’t want to know. If I tell you, then I’ll have to kill you.” He playfully ruffled my curls.

I swatted at his hand and pushed him away. “You’re so weird.”

“Okay, Smurf.” His dimples deepened.

I smacked his hand away from my hair. “You talk a lot of crap for a man who shares a name with unidentified corpses.”

He arched a dark brow. “Oh, please, like Aran is much better. Who even spells it with two *as*? You don’t see me spelling my name J-o-n or G-o-n.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.” I rolled my eyes.

The rich scents of bergamot and musk were the only warning I got.

Fingers squeezed the back of my neck.

Nails dug into my skin.

Scorpius sneered into my ear, “Shut the hell up, Arabella. Lothaire is speaking and some of us are trying to listen to what’s being said.” His warm breath made me shiver.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Orion whispered as he tried to pull his psychotic mate off me. It didn’t work.

With John in front of me, no one could see the way the king gripped me.

His fingers were warm against my cold skin.

Scorpius tightened his grip. He touched me like he owned me—held me like I was his.

“How about you shut up?” I tried discreetly to pull my head out of his grip, but it was like wrenching against a steel wall. “And don’t call me that.”

“Don’t touch her,” John said darkly.

Scorpius’s nails gouged me harder.

Orion was suddenly inches away from my face. “Are you okay, sweetheart?” he mouthed. His gaze flickered to where his mate held me, and his pupils expanded.

His tongue snaked out.

I’d never noticed that his upper lip was fuller than his lower lip, and it gave him the appearance of a perpetual pout.

I stared at his mouth. The remnants of raspberries and chocolate still lingered on my tongue. The urge to lean forward and press myself against him was overwhelming.

A few days ago, he’d kissed me.

I ripped my gaze away from temptation and forced my expression to harden.

Everything had changed.

“Your mates are calling me a slave,” I whispered back. “I’m not your sweetheart.”

His pouty lips furled into a snarl, and his pupils dilated until he didn't look soft. He looked mean. Angry.

Orion grabbed Scorpius's arms and ripped his grip off me. The blind devil's nails scratched down the side of my neck.

Pain streaked across the letters on my back.

I moved closer to John.

The royal students sitting closest to us weren't blocked by John, and they stared up at us with open mouths.

We ignored them.

Scorpius bared his teeth as he backed up, and the harsh shadows on his sculpted face made him look like an animal.

"Simmer," I said patronizingly.

He made an obscene gesture with his hands, and Orion stepped in front of him so the rest of the hall wouldn't see.

"Stop being so obsessed with me," I whispered as I turned to John. "Some people are so rude, interrupting other people's conversations."

John tsked under his breath. "You just can't teach class these days."

We grinned at each other.

Respectfully, we were hilarious.

Malum, who'd been standing in formation and paying attention to everything Lothaire said like a good little soldier, leaned toward us. "He's right. You two need to shut up and pay attention."

He shuffled to the side.

The demons glared over at him, confused why he was pushing out of formation.

It became clear what he was doing when he inserted a fat thigh between John and me as he tried to push himself between us.

John yanked me to his side so we were pressed against each other.

There was nowhere for Malum to go.

I whispered in John's ear, "At least we're not named Corvus Malum. Talk about a mouthful. His mother must have hated him. I think the name Mitch suits him better."

John furrowed his brow and asked, "Why, Mitch?"

I smirked. "Male bitch."

We both chuckled.

Flames crawled up the sword tattooed on Malum's neck as he glared down at us.

Lothaire looked over midspeech, and we all snapped our backs straight and looked forward like we were paying attention.

Sweat streaked across my temple.

Malum was uncomfortably close on my other side, and his skin was burning up, little flames multiplying and spreading across his skin.

Steel eyes flashed as he glared down at me.

Turning my head discreetly to the side, I stood on my tiptoes and whispered loudly in John's ear, "Have you noticed that Malum's looking very bloated today?"

When I stood on my toes, I was over six feet tall and John was the perfect height for gossiping.

Something sizzled.

It took me a moment to realize the arm of my sweatshirt was on fire.

I patted it out with a smirk on my face.

Pissing off Malum was quickly becoming a hobby. There was something about upsetting a bully with control issues that made me infinitely happy.

He swore viciously under his breath.

I stared forward.

He might call me his slave, but the tattoos bound all of us together. The poor egotistical megalomaniac couldn't see the obvious.

I was better at battle analysis.

By the end of this, one of us was going to be on their knees.

It wouldn't be me.

I tuned back into Lothaire's speech as he said, "We will now welcome the other legions to our academy."

Damn. That was quick.

Servants rushed from the shadows and pulled open the heavy iron doors.

Five lines of people waited in the hall, and even from a distance, I could feel the power radiating off them.

"The angel legion," Lothaire announced.

One line walked forward into the silent hall.

Four men and four women sauntered forward. They each had a different hair and skin color but were all built tall, lithe, and gorgeous. Broadwords were strapped across each of their backs.

As they marched forward, shimmering wings erupted out of their backs.

Students oohed and aahed.

Gaped at them with wide eyes.

From a purely sexual standpoint, I'd do them.

Their weapons matched their shimmering blue wings. Feathers clattered loudly as they walked forward, and the sound was something between the tinkling of bells and gemstones rattling together. It was expensive. Dangerous.

They stopped in front of Lothaire and bowed their heads. He gestured for them to fall into line facing forward, and they marched into position like well-trained soldiers.

A large tan angel with shoulder length dark hair stood in the front.

He slowly turned his head.

I inhaled sharply.

He had heterochromia. One of his eyes was so dark it looked black and the other was neon yellow. With his catlike sculpted features, the effect was startling.

Even more shocking, his blue wings had streaks of black.

His sword crackled and steamed, and I leaned closer to get a better look. The smell of frost hit me before cool air nipped my face.

Their swords were made from ice.

The angel with the mismatched eyes looked over, and I realized I was staring.

I grimaced. His entire persona was menacing.

"Form a line, academy legion," Lothaire hissed like he was embarrassed.

We'd completely fallen out of formation when we'd been arguing with one another, and we quickly reassembled.

One black eye and one yellow eye flashed as the angel sneered at our legion.

Up close, his black feathers looked clear, almost like crystals.

"The devil legion," Lothaire announced the next legion, and I turned forward.

Four men entered.

Like Malum, they were all about seven feet tall with deep-bronze skin and buzz cuts. Apparently devils ran tall. Every inch of their exposed skin was covered in Latin words. They even had words tattooed across their cheekbones.

That was where the similarities ended.

They were lean. In contrast, Malum and Scorpius were covered in striated muscles and looked more like enchanted comic-book warriors than flesh-and-

blood men. Even Orion had a whipcord strength that these men were missing.

The devils marched forward down the aisle toward Lothaire. Flaming broadswords were strapped across their backs.

Up close, their features were harsh and ugly.

Unattractive men were kind of hot. I'd fuck them.

They were like Malum's ugly stepsisters; where his features were patrician and regal like he was carved from bronze, theirs were too wide for their faces.

They bowed to Lothaire, then stomped into a line beside us.

"Corvus from the House of Malum," the man in the front of the line said coldly as he stared straight ahead at the hall.

Malum muttered back, "Tal from the House of Dar."

Aggression swirled between them.

I waited for something to happen, aka prayed Tal would accidentally stab Malum with his sword.

Neither man said anything else. *Pussies.*

Lothaire said, "The leviathan legion."

Seven average-looking men entered.

They differed from the other competitors. No wings, tattoos, fire, or unnaturally large bodies. Most of the men were short, almost Sadie's size, and they didn't look that powerful.

Leviathans were rumored to be a secretive race that turned into monstrous beasts. Their unassuming nature was a disguise which lured in their prey.

In history, almost every famous rampaging serial killer had been a leviathan.

Not my type. *Pass.*

As they fell into line next to the devils, one of the short men smiled at me. He looked nice.

I moved closer to John.

Smiling men always creeped me out.

"The assassin legion," Lothaire announced.

Four pale women entered next, and like the leviathans, they were short, but they sure as shit weren't average-looking.

They moved like wraiths, gliding over the air.

If I wasn't a raging heterosexual, we'd totally make love.

As they were clad in all black, with dark features and bony builds, it was hard to look at them. My eyes kept bouncing over them as they blended into

the background.

They slinked toward the tree.

My brain struggled to comprehend that they weren't just silhouettes.

They stopped in front of Lothaire and bowed deeply. "Nice to be back, sir. We've missed the program."

Lothaire's lips pulled up. "You're still the best recruits I've ever had." He pointedly looked over his shoulder and glared at us.

We stared back.

None of us were offended by his words because he'd already told us we were the most powerful people he'd ever trained.

However, the assassin legion moved to the top of my list of people to avoid.

Who would ever miss drowning in the ocean and getting boulders thrown at them? Not people I wanted to be around.

Thank the sun god, it was a relief to not be the first woman in the assassin program.

I wasn't born to be a trailblazer. I was born to kill men and suffer.

The assassins were lined up on the other side of the angels, and it was comical, the contrast between the two groups. Like shadows next to glistening diamonds.

One of them I could barely see.

The other group was mesmerizing.

I'd thought our legion would be a shoo-in for the assassin position in the war, but now I wasn't so sure. Something told me these women could kill me before I knew they were present.

"Finally, our last group," Lothaire said.

The last line of people came into view.

"The shifter legion."

The realm stopped spinning.

My jaw dropped.

In a religious way, immediate smash. In a realistic way, hard pass.

Four powerful men stalked behind a short, scowling woman. She had long white hair and glowing ruby eyes and wore a low-cut top that showed off a patchwork of thin, jagged scars. She was missing a finger.

"Wait, isn't that..." John trailed off with a frown.

The kings swore under their breath.

I bounced up and down on my toes and tried to stop myself from running

across the room and flying into her arms.

“We’re honored to have you,” Lothaire said, and Sadie ignored him.

She shoved between the devil legion and forced the tattooed men to move over so she could squeeze next to me in line.

Tal from the House of Dar puffed up his chest with aggression.

He quickly piped down once four shifters surrounded him with glowing eyes. Xerxes brandished his knives, and Ascher cracked his knuckles.

The shifter legion settled into line beside us, and Sadie launched herself into my arms. She straddled me and squealed, “Oh my sun god, you’re a girl again! Damn, I forgot how gorgeous you were. Sexy mama.”

I choked on laughter. “Never call me that again.”

“Get out of our line.” John stared at her with narrowed eyes, and I stomped on his foot. He’d never liked her for some reason.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I whispered to Sadie.

She squeezed. “I know. We’re going to have so much fun together!”

Lothaire cleared his throat, and Sadie awkwardly climbed off me. Cobra grabbed her shoulders and yanked her into line behind him.

Her snake shifter mate glared at me with slit pupils and said, “Aran.”

“Cobra.” I glared back.

He scowled menacingly.

Lothaire raised both his fists and tipped his head back as he bellowed, “We bleed for the gods!”

Everyone chanted back, “And we will kill for the glory!”

Students stomped their feet and hollered.

Sadie and I locked eyes.

“Kind of fun,” she whispered at the same time I said, “We’re so screwed.”

CHAPTER 10

ARAN

PSYCHOLOGY

The Legionnaire Games: Day 6, hour 5

I dug my toes into the silky grass and closed my eyes.

The crashing surf, howling wind, and sulfuric stench faded into the background.

In my mind I stood in a flower field.

Two fae suns warmed my skin.

Lothaire shouted over the icy wind, “For the first four games, only a few competitors from each team will be selected to represent their legion.”

The mirage broke, and I opened my eyes.

The eclipse swallowed the sky and cast everything in blood red. The salty air whipped my curls into an unruly mess.

We stood in our lines on the west side of the island on what used to be rocks.

It was now an arena.

Neon-green grass was squishy beneath my bare toes.

A perfect circle of lawn was surrounded by dozens of wide pillars. They jutted high into the cloud cover. The arena was about the same size as the gladiator stadium in the fae realm, but there were no surrounding seats.

A small silver set of bleachers sat off to one side.

The seating was comically out of place compared to the height of the posts and the tall spires of the academy.

Sadie glanced over at me with a wide smile like she was having fun.

I grimaced back.

She wiggled her chest in what was supposed to be a shimmy but came across as an uncontrollable tick.

Competitors glanced over at her with raised eyebrows.

“Stop it,” I mouthed.

Sadie shimmied faster and mimed thrusting her hips sexually in my direction.

I pinched the top of my nose and pretended that the lunatic woman with white hair wasn’t gyrating in my direction.

Her mate Cobra wrapped his arm around her shoulder. He pressed her against his side to stop her movements.

She smirked at me, and I purposefully looked in the other direction.

Lothaire’s braid whipped in the wind. “Every team has been assigned an approved substitute. This person will be mandatorily subbed into a legion if a member becomes indisposed.”

Indisposed.

“Do you think he means dead?” John asked as he clapped his hand across my back like he always did.

Pain jolted down my spine, and I swallowed a scream. “One can hope.”

Lothaire gestured to his side. He waited for something.

CRACK.

Dick and Lyla appeared out of thin air.

The witch knelt on the grass. White runes glowed against her dark skin, and her green hair hung around her face in a sleek sheet. Not a single strand moved in the blustery wind.

An RJE device glowed in Lyla’s hand. Five people were linked, holding on to each other.

She looked up, and her eyes landed on me.

I averted my gaze.

Worry flared in my gut as I took in the monster who had tormented Sadie growing up. Lately, Dick seemed to follow everywhere we went, and I didn’t like it. Sadie claimed she had made her peace with him, but I didn’t know how that was possible.

“No,” Jax growled loudly to my right. His outburst was surprising because he was the most rational by far of all Sadie’s mates.

My stomach plummeted when I saw what had made him swear.

This wasn’t good.

“These are your substitutes,” Lothaire announced. “They will room with you and can assist in strategizing and health management when they’re not needed.”

Health management? He was choosing his words carefully.

Not good.

Lothaire pointed to the substitutes. “Join your lines.”

A tattooed man sauntered forward and stood with the devil legion. A black man with arching blue wings stood with the angel legion. A tiny pale woman with purple-streaked hair joined the assassin legion. A nondescript short man went over to the leviathan legion.

I ignored them all.

We stared at the last person in the line.

A short pale goblin child with black hair and the eyes of a psychopath sauntered forward to the shifter legion. As she walked by the angel legion, she glared at them with disgust. A ferret was draped across her shoulder.

Jinx was here.

The ferret was Warren, the omega shifter the don had gifted her as her personal bodyguard.

She shouldn’t be here.

The ferret *really* shouldn’t be here.

This was bad.

Sadie gasped, Cobra grinned, Ascher and Xerxes glowered, and Jax trembled with rage.

“*She’s a child. There’s been a mistake!*” Jax shouted over the wind at Lothaire.

Everyone on the field stared at the shifter with expressions of disbelief, as if they couldn’t believe someone had dared to challenge Lothaire. A couple men and women brimmed with excitement like they wanted to see bloodshed.

Lothaire turned toward Jax slowly and said, “She was the only person associated with your group that qualified.”

Jax roared like the bear he shifted into. “She’s only *twelve!*”

“I’m thirteen,” Jinx scoffed.

The leviathan legion laughed, and the devil legion cracked smiles.

Jax grabbed her arms. “What you are is a child who should be in school with your sisters. We made arrangements to keep you safe.”

His chest vibrated with a growl, and the sound made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

You didn't mess with an angry bear.

Jinx rolled her eyes and said, "Plans change. We both know my talents were wasted at that childish institution."

She studied her cuticles like she was bored, and my heart swelled with pride. Jinx had learned that mannerism from me.

Jax shook her and said, "It is the top university in the beast realm. I'm not arguing with you. You're going back to stay with your sisters. Now!"

"No." Jinx smirked and pointed at me. "If Aran can compete, then I'm more than qualified. Remember when she was afraid of our fireplace?"

Malum turned around in front of me and raised his brow questioningly as he glanced down at the red flames playing across his fingers.

Never mind, my heart was not swelling.

No pride.

Jinx looked me straight in the eyes and said, "You better pull yourself together for this competition. I don't have time for your theatrics."

A leviathan member made a strangled sound as he tried to conceal his laughter.

It was too bad that I was going to have to murder a child.

Jax pushed Jinx into Sadie's arms and stomped out of line toward Lothaire. Warren licked his hairy armpit. All the legions stared with wide eyes and open mouths.

Jax shouted over the wind, "Send her back now or we'll walk away!"

The psychotic vampyre I was allegedly related to (I had seen no proof, so I was pretending there was still a chance he was just a stranger), pulled out his baton and smacked it against his hand.

Crack.

Sparks leaped.

I took a step forward to warn Jax, but John grabbed my arm and held me back.

We all knew intimately what happened when you messed with Lothaire and his baton.

You got your ass beat.

The gold jewelry in Jax's long braids tinkled as he vibrated with rage. "If you don't send her back this minute, then we refuse to compete. She will *not* be fighting in any war."

Lothaire narrowed his single eye.

He said calmly, "If you walk away, then you're signing your death

warrant, and the gods will still make her compete. She's destined to fight in the war. You have no choice. You're not an individual with freedom of choice. You're a legion that has been selected to represent the gods. Tread carefully."

Jax's gray eyes glowed signaling that he was close to shifting. "This is not fair. She's my little sister. She's just a child."

Sadie nodded vehemently.

Lothaire glanced over at me, and something soft flashed across his face.

The expression disappeared.

Lothaire said harshly, "The gods don't care about fairness. She's qualified, so she's your substitute. If you don't want her to have to compete, then don't become indisposed." He cracked his baton against his hand. "Now get in line or the child you're so worried about will have to watch you get beaten before she's forced to take your place."

Jax's muscled body began to expand, and I held my breath.

Just when I thought violence would break out, Jax whirled around with a roar and stalked back to stand in line.

"Hold me back," he said, and Sadie and Cobra immediately wrapped their arms around him.

The angel with heterochromia furled his lips as Jax was held back. You could feel the judgment radiating off him.

Ascher stared down at Jinx with narrowed eyes. "Did you get a neck tattoo while you were at school?" he asked incredulously as he rubbed at the rose-and-flame ink that covered his throat.

Shit.

A small cursive word was tattooed vertically down the side of Jinx's pale neck.

Sadie and I made panicked eye contact.

Jinx had mentioned tattooing her neck when she'd visited the academy a few weeks ago, but I'd assumed it was a joke.

"Hold me back before I kill her," Jax growled, and Cobra tightened his pale arms, the jewels embedded in his skin twinkling.

He and Sadie struggled to restrain the angry alpha.

Jinx rolled her eyes at him and petted Warren's head. "Don't be so dramatic."

"Why is the pervert with you?" Sadie asked as she pointed at the ferret.

None of us liked that Warren had been disguised in his animal form for

months, living with the girls. Plus, we'd caught him with underwear on his head. He claimed he did not know what it was and had thought it was a hat, but none of us believed him.

Jinx glowered at Sadie. "This is just a ferret." She shook him back and forth like a rag doll. "Don't bring it up again or he won't be able to stay. He's my backup."

Oh, great.

A thirteen-year-old had secretly smuggled a grown man into Elite Academy.

Lothaire was going to love that.

"I didn't think pets were allowed?" the angel with the two-colored eyes asked loudly as he leered at Jinx. His harsh feline features were pulled tight with disgust.

Sadie and her mates whipped their heads in his direction. Their eyes glowed as they moved out of line to surround her protectively.

"Are you threatening my sister?" Jax asked slowly as his chest vibrated with a low growl.

The angel faced forward and said nothing else.

Jax turned back to Jinx, and his eye twitched as he stared down at the ferret. Cobra looked even angrier, and his jewels began moving across his skin like they always did before they became his shadow snakes.

Jinx flipped her hair over her shoulder and turned away.

Since our line was standing next to the shifter line, it gave me the perfect chance to check out her tattoo. I leaned closer to read it. It started with a *G* and ended with an *n*, but I couldn't make out the rest of it.

Does it say Garden?

Weird choice, but since I had "WHORE" carved into my back, I couldn't judge.

"Why are you staring at me with mopey eyes? Buck up and get ready for the games, cannibal." Jinx looked over at me with disdain.

I glanced around and was relieved to see that everyone had turned back around and was listening to Lothaire give instructions.

No one was paying us any attention.

Sun god. If everyone started calling me that, I'd lose it.

How had I ever missed Jinx? Guess it really was true: Stockholm syndrome was a silent killer.

I tried to assert my dominance and whispered back, "Big talk coming

from someone who has the build of a malnourished garden gnome.”

Jinx scoffed.

Her body posture was casual like she wasn't a small child standing in the middle of an arena built for war, surrounded by powerful warriors two times her size. She narrowed her eyes at me and said, “I almost didn't recognize you. I forgot how pathetic and unimintimidating you look as a woman. You're barely stronger than Sadie. You need to train harder.”

I made a mocking face and pretended I wasn't offended. She'd attack if she caught a sniff of insecurity.

I tried discreetly to lift my shirt and wipe my face to show off my six-pack abs.

Jinx gaped at me like I was an idiot.

I pushed my shirt down as I realized I was acting like a douchey male. Apparently, the enchanted disguise had *really* gotten to me.

Unsurprisingly, I'd become the problem. Again.

Scorpius chuckled behind me in line, and it took me a second to realize he was laughing at what Jinx had said about me looking pathetic as a woman.

Does he agree with her?

From what I'd seen, John and the kings were bisexual.

It was stupid, but I wondered if they all secretly wished I was a guy. In the hall, the kings had said they thought I was disgusting as a woman, but I'd assumed they were trying to get a rise out of me.

What if they meant it?

They had constantly called me pretty boy, but no one had called me pretty since I'd revealed I was a woman.

I grimaced at my ridiculous train of thought.

My vampyre father was standing in the middle of an arena designed to test people for war. I was about to compete against angels, devils, leviathans, assassins, and shifters for leadership positions in an inter-realm war.

Yet I worried about whether men I hated preferred what gender I was?

This was 100 percent why Jinx bullied me.

I rubbed my hands over my face and took a deep breath, determined to focus on what mattered. Surviving the next forty days.

“Where's our substitute, sir?” Malum asked, and it pulled me out of my thoughts.

Lyla had only RJE'd with five people, and there were six teams.

I looked around the arena and realized there was no one else arriving.

We were missing our substitute.

Lothaire looked unconcerned and said, “Your substitute is making arrangements to be present, and it will take a few weeks. All of you have met him before and know him well.”

John made a choking noise behind me.

How could a human, an undercover fae queen, three devil kings, and two demons all know someone?

It made zero sense.

Except. *Oh shit.*

There were only four men in all the realms that all of us knew: Horace, Noah, Shane, and Demetre. All of them were dead, each death because of me.

My stomach cramped.

The gods were involved in these games, so it wasn’t impossible to think someone had been brought back from the dead. Maybe?

My thoughts became increasingly panicked. *How did John dispose of Horace’s body? Did I not actually kill him?*

I sucked on my pipe as Lothaire resumed talking about the games like everything had been cleared up.

“The Legionnaire Games are not a normal tournament by any means. They’re not a medieval killing spree like you’re probably expecting. This is not a pissing contest to see who can stab other people most effectively.”

Not what I’d expected.

Lothaire shouted over the ocean’s roar, “The gods already know about your legions’ physical prowesses.”

He paused.

“To lead a war, you all must be so much more than warriors.”

I exhaled a cloud of smoke.

Lothaire glared at each of us. “You will make gut-wrenching decisions under pressures that none of you can imagine. Repeatedly. And you’ll have to make the right ones or people will die. The fate of civilization as we know it will be in all your hands.”

I coughed as I sucked in smoke too quickly.

He did not just say that?

Sun god, had he ever heard of not jinxing people? The realms were 100 percent doomed.

RIP civilization. I made the sign of respect for the dead with my hand. It was good while it lasted; I was going to miss showers and freedom.

Although, technically, I had no free will.

Guess it was just showers.

Lothaire's expression was flat as he said, "The games are the most demanding psychological test in all the realms."

Who said that to people? Was he trying to make us panic?

It was working.

"Sweet," Jinx whispered and fist-bumped the air. I stepped out of line and kicked her in the shins.

She fell to her knees, and Jax glared back at her and told her to behave.

Jinx made a vulgar gesture.

I smirked, then turned back to stare at the frothing ocean as Lothaire hammered away further at my nonexistent will to live.

He said, "On the morning of each competition, I will announce the specific combination of people the gods want to see compete. Most weeks, they will choose, but sometimes you will have to decide as a legion who will compete. You will be judged on your selections. Everything is a test."

I picked at the scab on my lip.

Lothaire's eye roamed over each of the legions. "The rules for each competition will change. The loser of each competition will be punished. The punishments will be chosen by the gods."

I picked harder at my lip.

"This is a psychological showcase. You will be judged on every choice you make. It's not just about what you're willing to dole out; it's about what you're willing to take. You will be judged on how you suffer."

The scab on my lip ripped off, and I rolled the flap of skin into a ball between my fingers.

Droplets of salt water burned the open cut.

Lothaire pointed to the academy.

"Each legion has a designated room in the academy where you'll sleep and recover. There will be no outside assistance for healing. When you're not competing, you have free use of the academy and grounds to train and prepare yourselves. Meals are served at six a.m., twelve p.m., four p.m., and eight p.m. every day."

My eyes unfocused.

Then Lothaire pointed at each of our legions. "The first competition is in ten days. Right now, appoint a team captain who'll lead and organize your legion. Your captain will be in charge of deciding who competes when the

choice is presented.”

Lines melded into circles as each group whispered to themselves like they were excited.

Not relatable.

I didn't move.

The waves crested and crashed.

“I appoint Corvus as captain,” Scorpius said, and Orion nodded. “Does everyone agree?”

“Fine with us,” Zenith and Vegar said.

John shrugged. “That works.”

Water slammed against the rocky coast and sent droplets spraying into the air.

“Arabella, do you agree?” Scorpius snapped his fingers in front of my face.

“Sure.”

Scorpius made a rude noise under his breath.

“Good,” Malum said in his deep baritone voice. “We'll begin training after this with a long run. We need to be ready.”

I couldn't hold back my snort.

“Got something to say, Arabella?” Malum asked through gritted teeth.

“Nope.”

Scorpius snapped, “Please, Arabella, share with us what you were just scoffing at.”

I made a face at the blind king, then turned to Malum. “Nothing we do is going to prepare us for this. You heard what Lothaire said. It's a psychological competition. A run will not help us make better decisions.”

The idea was ludicrous.

Malum bristled like I was usurping his leadership. “That's why I'm the captain and you're nothing but a liar who concealed her identity.”

Men were so melodramatic.

“That has nothing to do with this,” I said tiredly.

Malum's deep voice was abrasive as he said, “It has everything to do with this.” Scarlet flames jumped off his bronze arms.

He crowded my personal space.

“How?” I asked as I refused to tip my head back to look at him.

“Because you're clearly broken.” He tapped his temple and smirked. “The rest of us don't have your pathetic little mental problems.”

I dropped the ball of skin from my fingers. “Whatever.”

“Back away from her.” John shoved himself in front of me. “What’s wrong with you?”

Malum chuckled meanly. “Arabella is the problem, not me.”

John’s voice was bitter. “Do you really think that? After everything she’s been through. She’s proven herself.”

“Please!” Malum glared back and forth between John and me. “She doesn’t need you defending her.”

I pushed John behind me. “Don’t talk to him that way.”

Red flames multiplied along Malum’s arms. “Grow up. You think you can—”

Malum ranted on and on, but I didn’t hear another word he said as I compartmentalized everything we’d learned.

I only had to survive four competitions.

Then an *intergalactic war*.

Wonderful.

CHAPTER II

SCORPIUS

OBSESSION

The Legionnaire Games: Day 13, hour 5

We were running as a legion around the perimeter of the island in our usual formation.

It should have been a routine exercise, but it wasn't because of one person—Arabella. She wasn't okay.

I could tell she was mentally struggling.

Not that I cared.

I just could tell.

I'd been listening to her long before she'd revealed herself to be a woman. Before she'd been branded as our slave. There was something about the way she breathed, spoke, ate, slept that made it impossible to ignore her.

Over the last few days, my fixation had gotten worse.

I couldn't stop myself from listening to every stupid, uneven breath she took.

Arabella was a mouth breather and just all around a pathetic, annoying person with too many issues to count.

She was also loud as fuck.

The loudest person I'd ever met.

So many noises. A small catch in the back of her throat when she was panicking and forgot to breathe. Shaky inhales as she sucked on her pipe and it clattered against her teeth.

Her stress was loud.

And she was always stressed. Twenty-four seven.

It was driving me mad.

The worst of all her mannerisms was the numbers: she constantly counted under her breath. Sometimes it was prime numbers or square roots, and other times it was odd numbers.

With how many times within a minute that she sucked on her pipe, choked on air, and muttered to herself, it was obvious Arabella had no control over herself.

She was the antithesis of Corvus's quiet control.

Arabella was chaos.

She was annoying.

A nuisance.

Who couldn't *breathe* correctly? It was the first thing children learned and mastered.

Now, as we jogged as a legion around the island, everyone else was fine, but Arabella was panicking.

Yet again.

For the sixty-eighth time in the last hour, Arabella choked as she inhaled.

I fisted my hands until my knuckles cracked.

Dug my nails deep under my skin until pinpricks of pain calmed me.

Water splashed beneath my feet, and I displaced pebbles with each step I took. The small rocks clanged against one another. The salty ocean soaked the bottom of my sweatpants.

The sensations were familiar. Calming.

The howling eastern winds that blew off the sea weren't the only noises. High above, I'd estimate a few hundred feet in the air on the north side of the island, there were loud flapping noises. Shouts.

Feathers clattered together.

Ice swords cracked as they clashed.

Orion had whispered that the angels were training in the air above us.

However, even the sounds the angels made weren't enough to distract me from the small, pitiful noise Arabella made in the back of her throat.

Abruptly she stopped panting.

She fell silent.

I waited, but there was no loud, rattling whoosh, the one she always made when she exhaled.

It never came.

Arabella's footsteps didn't falter, and she continued to sprint beside John a few feet behind us. It was easy to distinguish her gait from the rest of our legion. She was much lighter on her feet and favored running on her toes.

I cocked my head to the side and focused.

Nope, she still hadn't breathed.

Corvus was pushing us at a sub-five-minute mile pace, and we were over twenty miles deep into the run.

My Ignis trained hard. Always.

As his Protector, it was technically my duty to protect the rest of my mates. Foremost, I was conditioned to lay my life on the line to ensure my Ignis and Revered stayed safe.

The slave tattoo had warped my natural instincts to protect and made me want to focus on Arabella.

It was also probably because I'd never met a person who needed so much safeguarding in my life.

Arabella needed safety from herself.

Case in point, a minute had passed, and she should have inhaled by now.

She hadn't.

My nails dug harder into my palms.

What type of idiot kept forgetting to breathe during a thirty-mile run? Who did that?

She was going to be the death of me.

Instead of the usual peace I felt during these exercises, I bristled with rage.

I loved running at the academy, because our route was always the same circle. I could feel the minute changes in elevation beneath my feet and knew without a doubt where we were on the island. I barely needed Corvus to guide me.

It was one of the few times I could be completely relaxed in my environment.

There were no noisy students talking loudly and bumping into one another.

But this run was pissing me off worse than when students filled the halls in between classes.

Yet another thing Arabella had ruined.

I bit down on my tongue, and copper flooded my mouth, as I physically stopped myself from turning around and screaming at her to breathe. I wanted

to call her horrible names, say cruel things to her until she pulled her head out of her ass and focused.

Teeth sliced through my tongue, and I welcomed the sharp sensation.

I would never scream at her, because I'd never let her know how much her existence got under my skin.

I'd never give her that power.

Instead, I leaned closer to Orion and tried to act casual as I whispered, "What is she doing?"

My Revered didn't ask what I was referring to.

He was the same way.

Whenever Arabella whispered to John, Orion asked me what she said because I had far superior hearing.

We had a little arrangement.

I told him everything I heard, and he told me everything he saw. It was part of the reason we were fated mates.

We understood each other perfectly.

And for some reason, what we both needed was to know every single thing Arabella did.

Maybe it was because she was our slave? Maybe it was because we'd both been diagnosed as having psychotic, obsessive tendencies as children?

Malum was the angry one; we were the neurotic ones.

It was part of the reason all three of us worked so well together and why we'd been named kings. Compared to "normal" people, we were dangerous. Very dangerous.

I couldn't wait to meet our missing mate, our other Protector. Orion was already so on the same wavelength as me that I couldn't imagine how close I'd be with another devil who was built for safeguarding our mates. It was almost unimaginable to me.

Orion and I had bets going on whether our mate would be angry like Malum or obsessive like us.

Sun god help us if he was like Malum.

A grin curled the corner of my lips, and I couldn't stop the smile that split my face wide. I hoped our mate was fucking crazy.

It would make it so much fun.

Orion shuffled closer and whispered under his breath too quietly for anyone else to hear, "She's staring out at the ocean, and John keeps looking down at her with concern."

I heard the frown in his voice.

Could he tell she hadn't taken a single breath for the last 123 seconds?

Lately it seemed like all Orion told me was that Arabella was staring out at the stupid ocean or that John was touching her comfortingly.

I didn't like it.

Not that I cared if she was emotional.

No, I cared about Orion. My Revered's life was now bound to hers, so she needed to pull herself together and snap out of it. I didn't care that the brand tied our lives together and was supposed to strengthen us.

I was a Protector and anyone close to us was a liability. She was our biggest security risk.

It was my biggest failure to date that I'd failed to realize Aran was really Arabella.

I should have known.

When I'd first dragged my nails across Aran's face to piss him off and assert my dominance—Orion had already explained what he'd looked like—something had been off.

The lips had been a little too lush, the cheekbones too high, and the jaw too sharp. Something hadn't been right, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Now it all made sense.

It had been an enchanted disguise.

My muscles pumped with adrenaline as my feet slapped against the stone beach. Cool wind dried the sweat off my cheeks, and the ocean roared as it crashed. Salt sprayed through the air.

She was still silent.

I'd had enough.

Turning around I said viciously, "Keep up, Arabella, don't want our slave falling behind."

John made a harsh noise, and I ignored him.

Arabella inhaled sharply, then her breathing returned to a steady rhythm.

I smirked triumphantly. Corvus chuckled beside me.

"I'd rather drown in the ocean than be enslaved to you, stinking pieces of ugly shit," Arabella muttered under her breath, quiet enough that she thought no one could hear.

Corvus barked, "What was that? Don't care. Shut the fuck up."

Orion bumped my shoulder to get my attention. I leaned closer and whispered what she'd said in his ear.

He made a sound of amusement.

“Die already,” Arabella responded lazily to Corvus.

My Ignis’s bare feet slapped harder against the stones like he was pounding against them with all his might. Rock cracked and broke beneath him.

Losing our mating song was driving him crazy, and I could practically feel his hatred for her.

I’d never admit it to Corvus, but the mating song had been driving me crazy for years. The constant beat had interfered with my ability to hear the world.

Now with the girl as our slave, it was blissfully silent.

I could hear everything.

The silence was like taking a deep breath at sea level after years of living in the mountains.

It was satisfying.

Freeing.

If Arabella kept the world quiet, then I’d gladly keep her as our slave forever. That I’d get to torment her was just a bonus.

I relaxed my shoulders and pumped forward with my legs.

Enjoyed the freedom of working up a sweat.

Water splashed in our wake as we chewed through miles like they were nothing.

In war, strength was important, but speed was necessary because stamina made all the difference in battle.

As we ran around a bend, a woman’s familiar scratchy voice carried on the wind and said, “Go, best friend!”

Sadie was nearby. I hated that bitch.

From the way John swore, he agreed.

I’d been sick with rage when I’d listened to Aran and her have sex in the shower. It didn’t matter that Arabella was a girl; I knew what I’d heard. Every slap. Every moan.

At the time I’d convinced myself that it had sounded off. That they were faking it.

Afterwards, Orion described they were looking into each other’s eyes tenderly and I realized I’d been deluding myself.

They’d fucked. Hard.

I dug my nails deeper into my palms and let the pain calm me.

Arabella hadn't cared that Sadie had mates. She also hadn't missed the opportunity to make out with Orion a few days later, then had been all pressed against a nymph at the party.

Based on how Orion described Arabella's looks, it made sense.

Orion said she looked stunningly innocent with wide blue eyes, plush lips, and messy blue hair, but also that she seemed sad. She was taller and stronger than most women, but her muscles were lean, and her bones were long and willowy. There was a delicateness about her, like she was so angry she was fragile.

He said the combination made him want to protect her. Shelter her from the world.

I'd scoffed at his artful description.

It sounded simple to me.

She was pretty, and she knew it, just another woman using her looks to get what she wanted.

As we finished rounding the bend, Sadie cheered, "Wow, you are really moving. Do you need water? Are you sure you shouldn't take a break? This can't be good for you."

"I hate you," Arabella laughed back with a yell, then lowered her voice and asked Corvus, "Why can't we just go for a long walk like the shifter legion?"

I scoffed and answered, "Because we're not weak, pathetic little bitches."

She huffed. "It seems a lot smarter to focus on our mental health during a *psychological* competition. Just saying."

Corvus's voice cracked like a whip. "You're training with real men. Stop whining, or is that all you women know how to do?"

There was a snarl and a loud splashing noise as Arabella stumbled. Her voice dripped with venom as she panted and said, "Thanks for the reminder. I forgot I'm just a hole to you, Malum."

"Oof," Zenith said under his breath.

Orion winced, and a strange sensation tied up my stomach.

Corvus didn't share any misgivings. His voice was hard as he said, "Damn right. That's what you are. And you're not even a good one at that."

"Sun god," Vegar groaned.

My Revered preferred a more manipulative approach than my Ignis when dealing with people. This time, I had to agree with him.

Corvus's anger was too uncontrolled around the girl.

He was uncomfortably abrasive.

Instead of falling apart like I expected, Arabella asked loudly, “How does it feel?”

“How does what feel?” Corvus’s voice was harsh.

“I’m not talking to you. I’m asking the others,” Arabella said haughtily. “How does it feel to have chosen a misogynistic, ugly fucktard without a single functioning brain cell to be your captain?”

Silence.

I almost grinned at her creativity. Almost. But she’d insulted my Ignis with her words.

No one breathed.

Corvus’s voice vibrated with violence as he said, “I was going to have us stop after this lap, but it looks like we’ve got another nine miles to go thanks to Arabella’s whining.”

He started to sprint.

CHAPTER 12

SCORPIUS

COMPULSIVE

The Legionnaire Games: Day 13, hour 5

No one complained when Corvus ordered us to run more.

The pace picked up.

“Good. I actually wanted to run more,” Arabella said like she was unconcerned.

Corvus snapped back, “Perfect. Now shut the fuck up.”

She gasped with outrage and mumbled about someone named Mitch.

Heat burned my left arm where my Ignis had reached out and gripped me for support. Flames licked against my skin.

I welcomed the burn.

Nine miles later, which made thirty-nine miles total, Corvus ended the run.

All of us were panting, and not a single word had been spoken for the last nine miles. The energy between Corvus and Arabella was volatile.

“We’ll do another thirty miles tomorrow, just for Arabella,” Corvus said darkly. “It’s time for dinner. We can shower afterward.”

His fingertips gently pressed against my back as he guided me forward across the uneven rocks of the island, and I slung my arm around Orion’s shoulder. My Revered melted against me.

I should have been relaxed with my mates surrounding me.

I should have been enjoying the runner’s high, which was my favorite part.

My head swiveled to the side as I listened intently to what was happening behind us.

“Ew, you’re sweaty. Don’t touch me,” Arabella groaned as her sweatshirt rustled.

John’s deeper voice taunted back, “Don’t be such a sissy.”

Grunts and slaps. Arabella laughed loudly as she and John wrestled with each other.

“Stop acting like fools. The angels are watching,” Corvus shouted over his shoulder.

Orion and I weren’t the only ones distracted by our slave.

The angel’s wings flapped distantly, and they were on the other side of the island, too far to be paying attention to us. Corvus was just pissed that John had his grubby hands all over her. I agreed with the sentiment.

“Relax, fire ass,” Arabella muttered, and John choked.

Corvus shouted, “*What was that?*”

No one spoke for the rest of the walk, not even when we entered the academy.

But from the sweatshirts rustling behind me, the closeness of their steps, and the random bouts of laughter, John still had his arm thrown over Arabella’s shoulder.

It was unacceptable.

My skin itched with the urge to hurt John. I wanted him to bleed. Scream. He’d be an appetizer, then I’d turn my attention to the main course: Arabella. She’d beg me so sweetly. I couldn’t wait to taste her tears.

“Careful,” Corvus said as he pulled me to the side and lightning struck down the walls right where I’d been standing.

I raked my hands through my short hair, agitated by how distracted I was lately. My sadomasochism was flaring up with more frequency.

I was satisfied with hurting anyone: the ungodly, random women at the academy, or new recruits. I wasn’t picky. Usually.

Lately, I’d been fixated on hurting a single person. I thought about her as I trained, ate, showered, jacked off, and slept.

Arabella.

My thoughts always spiraled in the same pattern. I’d give her a reason to forget how to breathe. I’d replace her precious little pipe and give her something thicker to choke on.

I shuddered with anticipation as we went to dinner.

The dining hall buzzed with more energy and commotion than usual because of the five tables that had been set up on the dais for the other legions. Students called our names as we walked past. Men and women alike.

I settled into my usual chair, and a woman touched my arm. “Hey Scorpius, want me to come to your room later?”

The back of my neck prickled with awareness.

Tension tightened in my gut.

Something was wrong.

“No. Leave us,” I snarled at the woman as I tried to concentrate on my surroundings. She said something else, but I ignored her and swore because I couldn’t hear Arabella’s annoying breaths.

The slave tattoo wasn’t acting up, so she couldn’t be far away. It didn’t make me feel any better.

I picked up my table knife, and it creaked as the metal bent.

The room buzzed loudly.

How was I supposed to monitor the idiot and protect my Revered if I couldn’t hear her?

I forced my jaw to unclench and asked Orion, “Where did she go?”

He immediately replied, like he’d been tracking her, “She’s sitting at the shifter table with that pathetic woman she had sex with.”

Corvus growled, and I stiffened.

“Arabella!” Corvus shouted loudly across the hall, and students quieted. “As your team captain, I didn’t give you permission to sit at another legion’s table.”

I loosened my grip as I located her.

Arabella whispered with exasperation, “No, you can’t infect them with your blood. No, it’s fine.”

“You gonna let them treat you like that? Pathetic,” the child they referred to as Jinx countered.

Arabella snapped, “Be careful sweetie, you won’t always have Jax around to protect you.”

“You can’t hurt me,” Jinx said with a finality to her voice that was odd.

From the way Arabella murmured about garden gnomes as she stomped away, she’d missed the strange inflection.

I rolled my eyes at how oblivious she was as she huffed and threw herself into the seat across from me.

My shoulders relaxed, and I resumed counting her breaths.

Ten minutes later, all calmness was gone, and I seethed with rage.

“You’re not eating,” I snarled at her.

There was a pause, then she said vehemently, “I will shove this fork so far up your ass if you even think about trying to force-feed me again.”

I choked on a piece of meat and tried to ignore the way my body came to life at that statement.

If only she knew, she was talking to a sadomasochist.

She’d watch her words more carefully.

“Also,” she said haughtily, “If you try any more food bullshit, you won’t just have me to deal with. Sadie will interfere and destroy you.”

Her fiery words sent a shiver down my spine. The urge to hurt her until she whimpered meekly overwhelmed me. Would she moan breathily, or would she screech with outrage to cover her whimpers of enjoyment?

No.

I wouldn’t think about it.

The fork bent beneath my grip, and I dug my nails deeper into my palm. The sharp bite of pain calmed me. “You still need to eat,” I said dismissively like I didn’t give a shit what she said.

“I am.” Arabella smacked her lips aggressively so I could hear her chewing, but she didn’t swallow.

She was such an idiot.

If I weren’t so hyperfocused on every sound she made, I would have missed the soft squishing sound next to her foot.

I cocked my head to the side to listen harder.

Arabella smacked her lips louder.

Splat. Another thing dropped next to her foot.

Now that my mate song wasn’t interfering, I could hear minutiae I must have missed before. I sat up straighter and leaned forward. “What did you just drop under the table?” I asked her.

“What did she do?” Corvus leaned closer.

“Calm down,” John said, and I knew from the defensive tone of his voice that he was covering for her.

Arabella huffed, “Nothing,” and counted odd numbers under her breath.

The chair beside me squeaked as Corvus looked under the table.

The temperature at the table increased.

His voice was deadly. “Why is there a *pile* of meat beside your chair?”

I sat straighter with incredulity because I’d known there was something

off about Arabella's eating pattern.

"You will eat meat to retain your strength," I ordered.

She scoffed and tapped her foot. "I don't negotiate with slavers."

"Good thing it's not a negotiation." I lunged across the table and wrapped my fingers around her throat.

Ever so slowly I dragged my callused thumb across the smooth planes of her neck. Her skin was impossibly delicate.

She shivered beneath my touch, and I masked a similar response.

I moved up to her jawline.

Arabella held her breath, and anticipation unfurled in my gut. I'd wanted to touch her face ever since I'd shoved my thumb into her mouth and she'd sucked it wantonly.

The feeling had been obscene.

This time, I touched her face because I wanted to feel for myself how different she was as a woman. I didn't need to touch her to know what she looked like; it was an ownership thing. A marking. To let her know what it would feel like when I rubbed my bodily fluids all over her.

Her chin was delicate. I dragged my nails up to her cheekbones and made sure they pinched her skin lightly as I felt her lips.

Her mouth was lusher than Orion's, and her lower lip was ridiculously full.

I felt a scab and frowned.

Had she been picking at her lip? Was that the scratching sound I hadn't been able to place? I'd deal with that later.

For now, I forced my fingers upward and couldn't hold back a scoff. Her nose was a ridiculously small thing with a gentle slope. Long, soft lashes fluttered as I slowly traced her eyes.

Orion was right; the enchantment had disguised how large they were.

She had doe eyes.

My fingers were featherlight across her eyelids. Sooty lashes fluttered and sent little pinpricks of sensitivity shooting into my groin. I smirked and leaned forward. "Hideous. Just like I thought."

My fingers grasped at empty air as she wrenched away from me and said, "You don't get to touch me without permission."

I chuckled and sat back with my arms crossed like I didn't have a care in the world, even though my fingers still buzzed with the rush of touching her.

She might act unaffected, but I knew my words got to her.

“Tsk, tsk,” I said sarcastically. “I own you, Arabella. You don’t make the rules.”

Her breath hitched when I said her name.

I smiled. I liked that she hated it. Liked that I could get on her nerves so easily.

If only she knew how badly I could torment her.

How intoxicating I could make it.

How fucking obsessed she’d be.

I’d never been the white-knight type—the devil society that had tortured me while I grew up for being blind had ensured that—but fuck, I wanted to be Arabella’s villain.

I wanted her to cry my name in her sleep as she trembled from fear. Convulsed with it. Moaned with it. Choked on it.

I leaned back further in my seat and smirked. “Eat your meat like a good slave.”

She didn’t snap back like I expected. Instead, Arabella’s voice was monotone. “No,” she said with no inflection.

“Do it,” I snarled.

Silence.

I heard a rustling but nothing else.

“What is she doing?” I whispered to Orion.

My Revered said, “Flipping you off with both her fingers. Now she’s miming shooting you with a finger gun. Wait, now she’s holding her arm out straight and hitting her inner elbow and pulling her arm up. She just picked up a piece of meat, then stabbed her knife through it. I think she’s pretending it’s you. Now she’s—”

“Enough,” I cut him off.

At this point, she was begging for me to hurt her.

I tensed my muscles, ready to throw myself at her and drag her to the floor.

“The other legions are staring at us. Stop acting so embarrassing,” Zenith hissed, and I jolted with surprise.

The demons usually minded their own business.

“He’s right,” Corvus said through gritted teeth like it pained him to admit it.

Arabella and I both huffed, but neither of us did anything else.

I pretended to ignore her the rest of the meal, while discreetly piling food

onto her plate whenever I heard her fork scrape against the empty surface.

Using my superior sense of smell, I avoided the meat because she was clearly being unreasonable about it. I didn't like how delicate her neck had felt. It didn't matter that she was a tall woman; she felt breakable.

It was like Orion said.

And it was unacceptable.

I needed her strong so *I* could break her. No one else was allowed to hurt her.

As the meal progressed, I pretended I didn't notice that Arabella took forty-three bites of food and dropped ten pieces of meat onto the ground.

I pretended she didn't touch John three times, whisper to him eighteen times, and pick at the scab on her lip seventeen times.

I pretended she didn't take thirty-seven puffs of her pipe and forget to breathe four times.

Arabella was just so loud compared to everyone else. That was it.

She made a breathy noise of enjoyment as she bit into something, and I shivered as I adjusted my sweatpants.

Would she groan with pleasure as I dragged a knife across her flesh?

I knew I would.

And I couldn't wait.

It was only a matter of time. After all, she belonged to us.

CHAPTER 13

ARAN

CONFLICTS

The Legionnaire Games: Day 22, hour 19

Sitting on my bed, I tugged at the brush that was tangled in my hair. I yelped as a knot yanked against my scalp.

I hated pain.

Loathed it.

It was not my thing, and I was sick and tired of constantly experiencing it. Could one stupid thing in my life maybe not suck?

Each day last week I'd woken up and said my morning affirmation: "I am the victim."

The week had felt like it lasted a million painful years, but somehow it had all blinked by.

The first competition was tomorrow.

My life was a cycle of misery.

All I did was train, panic, eat, train, panic, avoid Sari's hateful gaze at meals, panic, try to sleep, smoke, maladaptive daydream about a hot fictional man loving me, eat, panic, and hang out with misogynists all day. Repeat.

When I tried to focus on any individual day, I could barely remember the details.

It was all a hazy blur.

Like a bad trip.

I wasn't ready for the psychological torment to begin tomorrow, because I was already tortured. Not to be dramatic.

Huffing with my arms burning (why was brushing your hair literally harder than hauling a granite slab?), I repositioned myself on my bed to get better leverage and pulled harder. Pain pinched my scalp, but the brush didn't move. My stupid curls were driving me wild.

I lived in hell.

Shadows from the fireplace refracted eerily across the gothic architecture. The heavy curtains had been drawn, and they blocked out the eclipse's red haze.

The rest of my legion snored softly, and besides the occasional sound of bedding rustling, the room was quiet.

Everyone slept peacefully.

Not relatable.

After ten minutes of fighting with my stupid brush, I yanked out a tangle of curls in defeat. This was what I got for trying to practice self-care. I got scalped.

I snarled at the brush and slammed it against my overly plush mattress.

The damn thing was like sleeping on a cloud. It was horrible.

I preferred to sleep spread-eagle on my stomach, and I swore the thing was giving me back pain.

Sure, the enchanted "WHORE" carved into my flesh and random surgical lines that Sadie said were parallel to my spine were likely contributing to the pain, but the mattress was still not helping.

Lately nothing was.

The drugs had lost their efficacy, and I couldn't blame my problems on a made-up monster in my head. Dissociating wasn't fun when you knew you were just pretending.

I couldn't even pretend that I wanted to pretend.

Shadowy walls collapsed around me.

A random chill made shivers crawl down my spine, so I pulled myself out of bed and lay in front of the large hearth with my blankets wrapped around me.

The flames warmed my cold skin as they screeched obscenities at me.

As I lay on the ornate carpet in front of the fire, the pounding in my temples intensified.

"Screw you," I whispered as the fire screamed.

I reached my fingers toward it. For a second, a strange tingling zapped between my shoulders.

Whoosh.

The fire disappeared, and darkness surrounded me. Embers glowed dimly.

I stared down at my shadowy hand with no clue what I'd done.

Shivering from the cold, I regretted my life choices. At least the darkness was comforting and my head had stopped pounding.

I lay on the floor wrapped up in my blanket cocoon.

The hard surface grounded me.

Closing my eyes, I enjoyed the quiet darkness because it was all going to be okay.

Whoosh.

Flames reappeared in the hearth, and they screamed even louder than before. I didn't need to speak fire to know they were shrieking obscenities at me.

Shadows expanded across the walls.

Jumped.

Taunted.

Nothing was okay.

I slapped both hands over my mouth, leaned forward, and screamed. Curling into a fetal position, I shoved my knuckles against my teeth to muffle the sound. The fire was warm, but I convulsed with shivers.

Pulling the blankets tighter, I squeezed my eyes shut.

Tasted copper as I silently screamed.

Wished I could disappear.

"Sweetheart." A tinkling, lyrical voice made me jump. "Are you okay?"

I dragged myself out of my blanket fort and removed the fist from my mouth. The endearment sent streaks of agony across my spine.

Orion was sitting up in bed with a concerned expression on his face.

Scorpius and Malum were curled beneath him, snoring.

The golden devil sat up from the pile of his mates with a bemused expression. Blond hair messy, red lips swollen, he was shirtless with gray sweatpants hanging low off his hips. His skin gleamed like gold metal as it pulled across his perfect Adonis belt.

He was indecent.

I whispered, "Don't call me that." My voice was rough from screaming.

"Sorry," Orion mouthed, and he held up his hands like he was talking to a wild animal. "Are you okay, baby?" He leaned forward with his hands

extended like he wanted me to climb into his arms.

His words and body language seemed sweet and caring.

There was just one problem.

They didn't match his eyes.

Uptilted warm brown eyes stared at me without blinking, and his gaze was penetrating. Harsh like a predator's.

I couldn't explain it, but there was a feeling in my gut that wouldn't go away. It had started after he'd kissed me like he wanted to consume me.

He'd whispered dark, possessive words.

I clamped my lips together to stop my teeth from chattering as another shiver made me convulse.

Something about Orion made me nervous.

Like *really* nervous.

Mentally, I was a slut. Physically, I was terrified of intimacy. Spiritually, I didn't like men.

I was confused.

He kept his arms out, and his lush lips mouthed, "Sweetheart, why are you cold?" Blonde hair gleamed silky in the firelight and highlighted the golden shade of his skin.

I shook my head at him.

Too cold to argue.

I blinked.

Orion was kneeling in front of me. *When had he climbed out of his bed?*

He gently pulled open my arms.

I blinked.

I was pressed against a warm male chest, and arms were tight around me. Orion was sprawled on the carpet with me and my blanket cocoon tucked against him.

Fingers played with my curls.

I closed my eyes.

Snuggled deeper into the warmth and inhaled chocolate and raspberries. My mouth ached with the urge to bite the muscular golden chest I was resting against.

Instead of tasting him, I dipped my head lower so he couldn't see my face and whispered, "I know you're not really super sweet and nice."

Images played in my mind: him snapping a man's neck, fighting ungodly like a machine, holding my legs while his mates pushed me under the water

in the bathhouse, whispering I was his toy after he kissed me.

I might act stupid, but I wasn't dumb.

Warm muscles went hard as steel beneath me, and a long moment passed, but Orion didn't dispute what I'd said.

Not that I'd thought he would.

He'd watched his mates force-feed me and choke me. He'd watched them punch me. Repeatedly. They called me their slave, and he said nothing.

You couldn't be a bystander and still play the sweet hero.

It didn't work that way.

His transgressions were piling up.

I shivered as I stared into his eyes with long dark lashes. He was so pretty that it almost hurt to look at him.

Even his beauty was scary.

Lately, I couldn't stop thinking about how he'd told me he wanted me to be his toy. There were red flags, and then there were giant glowing signs that said "beware, this man is not good for you."

Lush lips traced against my forehead.

I ignored the streaks of agonizing pain that exploded across my back.

Lips trailed gently across my eyelids.

Callused fingers tipped my chin, so I stared up into smoldering brown eyes.

His mouth pressed softly against mine.

A featherlight touch.

Orion breathed into my lips, "No, sweetheart, I'm not nice."

I didn't pull away and slap him across the face like I should have. I tipped my head back further and greedily pressed against him.

It made sense.

It was time to stop being self-aware, whatever I did was none of my business.

Unlike on the dance floor, Orion didn't kiss me like he was trying to consume me. His lips were painstakingly gentle like he was trying to make a point. Like he was trying to show me he could be the good guy.

I tasted the lie.

"Who are you really?" I asked midkiss, then swallowed a moan as his tongue dragged across my mine.

Instead of explaining himself, Orion whispered, "I think you already know," as he continued to melt my brain.

His cryptic words made my gut twist with premonition.

Because I did know, and I didn't like it. Although, maybe I did? I couldn't remember why I was supposed to avoid the villain.

Orion's gentle fingers tightened, and he squeezed my chin so I couldn't yank my head out of his grasp.

The sweet kiss turned ravenous. Angry.

Pleasure swirled with pain.

I wrenched my head out of his grip and turned my head to the side while I gasped for air. My breathing was uncomfortably loud in the quiet room. Even the flames had stopped screaming. The hearth crackled and popped beside us.

Loosening my grip on the tangle of blankets surrounding us, I scooted further away from Orion.

With another shaky breath, I glanced over at the quiet king.

His pretty features were sharp as glass, and Orion stared at me without blinking.

"That was a mistake," I whispered. My gaze dropped to his glistening lips, and my voice sounded unsure as I asked, "Right?"

He moved in a blur.

Fingers were tangled in my curls, and I was yanked forward aggressively.

Orion smashed my face back against his.

Our teeth clicked together.

This time, he didn't kiss nicely; he pressed his lips against mine with fevered intensity.

I blinked and found myself on my back in front of the fire with Orion pressed against me, pinning me to the ground.

Pleasure made my head swirl.

Pain made my back burn.

His hips ground against mine, creating the most delicious frictions.

For a long second, I lay still and enjoyed the overwhelming sensations. My head spun like I'd drunk a bottle of demon brew.

The haziness was worse than it had ever been.

I blinked.

Orion hovered on top of me and mouthed, "Sweetheart, my brothers may call you their slave." He ground his hardness against my core with so much force that I saw stars. "But we both know who you belonged to first."

Pain streaked down my back like I'd been shot.

Great. I was also a pervert.

I closed my eyes, then opened them.

“Enough,” I whispered between gasps as I tried to push him back.

His dark eyes were glazed with lust, and he kissed me harder.

I let him slam me back against the carpet.

Pretended his punishing kiss and the movement of his hips weren't sending me close to catatonic pain.

I pretended I was a normal woman.

He was a normal man.

He gripped my ass as he pushed his hard length against me like he was trying to fuck me through our clothes.

“Mine,” he whispered as his tongue slammed deeper into my mouth.

Bursts of pain made me twitch.

“No.” I gasped. “Enough.”

He tangled his hands in my curls and pulled my head back so he could nip along my neck. His teeth grazed across my sensitive skin, then his lips sucked like he was trying to mark me. Permanently.

My vision went glassy.

The pleasure was so intense that the pain became unimaginable.

I took a deep breath.

Then lashed forward and slammed the heel of my palm into his throat. I jabbed him in the kidneys and pushed him off me.

I leaped to my feet and pulled the blankets around me like a cape as I stared down at his prone form.

He was disturbingly pretty, like a god of lust.

I fisted my hands.

For a long second, Orion lay on the ground and stared up at me. He smirked and purposefully didn't move. Spread his legs wantonly and lifted his hips.

The invitation was clear.

“Get up,” I said forcefully like I wasn't seconds away from collapsing.

The pleasure and pain were gone, and I was left with a horrible empty sensation.

I felt like a shell of myself.

Like someone else was speaking.

Orion smoothly got to his feet and pulled himself back to his full height. He had a few inches on me, and he used it.

“If you want there to be anything between us”—I gestured between us

—“then you’re going to make yourself useful.”

Orion stared down at me silently. He didn’t blink.

I sighed, picked the brush off the floor where I’d thrown it, and dragged my fingers through my stupid curls as I asked, “Do you have any scissors?”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Because I need to cut off this rat’s nest.” I grabbed at my curls and pulled them forward to show how tangled they’d gotten. Trying to brush it had made it ten times worse.

Whenever I cut my hair it grew back immediately, but maybe it would grow back untangled.

Work smarter not harder.

I focused on my annoyance with my hair instead of the swollen state of Orion’s lips.

Mine throbbed.

I wanted to push him back onto the floor and impale myself on him. What was the worst that could happen? Death.

Maybe you should do it.

Orion’s features hardened, and he said, “No, you aren’t.” It was the loudest I’d heard him speak, and the lyrical sound sent a shiver down my spine. He looked angry.

It wrenched me out of my thoughts.

What was he freaking out about?

Bedding rustled behind Orion, and I prayed to the sun god that it wasn’t what I thought it was.

“What’s going on?” Malum asked as he rubbed at his face and sat up, his naked torso on glorious display.

I barely noticed that his dark-bronze skin gave him the appearance of one of the ancient statues that guarded the famed Library of Alexandria.

“Arabella’s trying to cut her hair off,” Orion whispered.

Malum shook his head and said, “No, she’s not.” Scarlet flames danced across his buzz cut in an imitation of his crown.

“I’ll do whatever I want with it, since it’s *my* hair,” I whispered loudly while glancing over at John to make sure he was still asleep. My friend needed his rest before the competition tomorrow.

I opened my mouth to explain that my hair would just grow back but smacked it shut. It was too fun riling them up.

If I was honest with myself, it was all I had to live for lately.

Hatred gave me energy.

When John didn't move, I whispered louder at Malum, "Maybe I'll get a buzz cut like you. I'd definitely pull it off better."

"Touch a strand on your head and I'll let Scorpius punish you," Malum snarled. "You're our slave, which means it's not your hair; it's our hair. We own you."

Scorpius sat up in the bed and smirked, and the expression was pure evil.

Glad everyone was awake.

Not.

Orion's posture was nonthreatening compared to his mates', but he didn't open his mouth to dispute Malum.

I was overwhelmed with relief that I'd stopped whatever was happening between us.

Orion didn't stand up for me to his mates.

He wasn't on my side.

Without thinking, I chucked my hairbrush across the room, and it smacked satisfyingly against Malum's hard chest and fell to the bed.

A red welt immediately appeared on his large pectoral muscle. He had bigger tits than I did.

There was a long moment where I debated the merits of buying him a bra and gifting it to him.

He must have read my mind.

Malum was across the room so quickly that I didn't see him move.

My head was wrenched backward as fingers tangled in my hair and held my neck to the side at a painful angle. He snarled, "You better watch yourself. Bitch."

I spat in his face, and a big goop of saliva slid down his cheek.

I smiled. "You've got something on your face."

The flames leaped higher on Malum's skull as he yanked my head downward with such force that I fell to my knees.

He towered above me, an amalgamation of harsh features, tattoos, bulging muscles, and rage. A dark god above his subject. Orion stood next to him and watched with a strange expression.

Goose bumps pebbled my skin.

Malum smiled, and it was the meanest face I'd ever seen a person make.

I held his gaze with mine. "Let me go, or I'll destroy you."

Malum slowly wiped the spit off his face and leaned forward.

Rich scents overwhelmed my senses as he pressed his face beside mine. He turned his head, and his stubble scratched harshly against my sensitive neck.

Unlike his mate, he didn't smell sweet. He reeked of tobacco and whiskey.

Pain scoured my back.

Orion ran his fingers across my forehead.

White streaks blurred my vision.

Malum's breath was hot against the shell of my ear. "Try to hurt me and I'll ruin you so thoroughly that you won't remember your own name." His rough voice rasped through me like lava.

Pleasure and pain streaked across my senses with such fervor that I could only do one thing.

I stood up and raised my knee.

Slammed it into his balls.

Then I slammed it again.

And again.

Malum grunted in pain, and I used the distraction to rip away from him.

I scoffed down at him. "You're an ass." Then I hacked another loogie onto his face and flipped my hair.

Dominance asserted. Check.

Straightening my sweatshirt, I shoved my pipe between my lips, took a long drag, and blew out Horse. The incorporeal crow landed on my shoulder.

Together we stared down at the pathetic devil moaning at our feet.

"What's going on?" John asked sleepily from across the room as he rubbed at his eyes.

"I'm just asserting that I'm the alpha over Malum," I said calmly.

Devils and fae weren't separated into alphas, betas, and omegas like shifters, but we all knew I'd be an alpha if I were a shifter.

"Go back to sleep," I said to John.

He gave me a sleepy thumbs-up. "Good for you." He pressed the pillow over his head and resumed snoring.

Malum mumbled something about a "motherfucking brat who needed to learn her place," but the effect was ruined because he remained in the fetal position, cupping his balls like a common degenerate.

I stared down at him and whispered, "Mitch."

His expression darkened and I held myself back from clapping.

Orion arched his brow as he stared at me, but he didn't move to help his mate. He licked his lip as he looked between the two of us like he was imagining something sordid.

More goose bumps broke out across my arms.

What do you really know about these men?

Scorpius untangled himself from the bed and stalked across the room like a panther, his seven-foot frame moving with a lazy grace.

"You think you can just act without consequences?" he sneered softly. "Such an idiot."

I ducked as he grabbed at me, but somehow the blind king anticipated my movement, and his long arm wrapped around my throat.

I tried futilely to break his hold. His long fingers were like steel.

"Do you have a neck fetish or something?" I asked through gritted teeth because lately it seemed like the blind devil's hands were always around my throat.

"You want to find out?" Scorpius asked darkly as his nails dug into my sensitive skin.

The pain that streaked down my spine answered the question for me.

A part of me did.

I needed immediate professional help.

CHAPTER 14

ARAN

FAMILY

The Legionnaire Games: Day 22, hour 19

Scorpius's callused thumb stroked slowly down the sensitive slope where my skin met my clavicle, where my enchanted Adam's apple used to be.

Did he wish I still had one?

I hadn't forgotten that he'd called me ugly earlier.

Scorpius's fingers tightened, and he leaned closer. The rich scents of bergamot and musk wrapped around me like a snake suffocating its prey.

Scorpius smelled like sin.

He smiled evilly and said, "Open your mouth, my turn." His milky eyes were focused on a spot over my head as he pursed his lips and made a squelching noise.

It took me a second.

"Don't you dare." I kicked and bucked against him, but with his long arm outstretched, I couldn't reach him.

He spat, and wetness hit my cheek. He said darkly, "Next time, you'll swallow like a good girl."

"Ew!" I squealed. "There will not be a next time, you disgusting pig." I kicked harder, not caring that I was making a ruckus.

Scorpius yanked me against him so quickly my head spun.

He chuckled. "Just repaying the favor, since you seem to be so into spitting. *Baby*." He said Orion's endearment like it was a nasty word.

He shuddered and closed his eyes like the thought of spitting in my mouth

made him want to lose control.

I shuddered, from concern for his mental state.

Orion adjusted himself in his pants as he licked his lips. His eyes were glazed over with lust.

Scorpius pulled me closer to him and pursed his lips, and the intent was clear. “I won’t miss this time. Open your mouth, slave.”

I slammed my heels into his shins as hard as I could and tried to turn my head to bite him, but he didn’t release me like I’d planned.

Scorpius moaned and tightened his grip on my neck.

My voice was weak as I snarled, “Gonna cut out your tongue.”

He laughed, choked me harder, and dragged his tongue slowly across the side of my face. “Promise?”

I gaped with shock.

The blind king that had antagonized me for the last few months and made my life a living hell had now licked me twice. I clawed at the hand around my neck and rasped, “You’re a sick motherfu—”

“*Everyone, shut up!*” Zenith roared as he sat up in his bed, inky black lines expanding under his eyes.

Scorpius dropped me.

I scrambled away from where Malum was still pulling himself to his feet.

The black lines crawled down Zenith’s neck. “We compete tomorrow, and you’re disturbing Vegar. If I hear another word out of any of you, I’ll give you the worst nightmares of your life. That’s a promise.”

Malum stood up with a low groan.

I pointed at him and said, “He made a sound.”

Zenith narrowed his eyes.

“Never mind,” I said. “Super quick, do you have scissors?”

Zenith didn’t look amused. “You have one minute to shut up, or I’ll make sure that everyone in this room is screaming and shitting in their sleep.”

With that comforting statement, he rolled over and gave Vegar a soft kiss on the forehead. I’d never seen the demons use their powers, and something told me I didn’t want to.

As I stood there wiping the spit off my cheek with disgust, because Scorpius probably had gonorrhea with how often he had sex, a solution hit me.

I pushed my way past the devils. “I’m gonna go to Sadie’s room to fix my hair.”

“You’re not going anywhere near her, slave. I forbid it.” Scorpius grabbed my arm in a steel vise.

As I stared back at the blind devil, I remembered I couldn’t go anywhere by myself because of the brand on my hip. A rushing sensation washed over my limbs.

I was trapped.

It was hard to breathe.

“Stop it,” Scorpius ordered.

“Calm down, sweetheart,” Orion mouthed. “I’ll take you.”

I bolted for the door before he could change his mind.

I needed space from the kings.

Orion trailed me down the silent hall, and when I finally got to the door that said, “Shifter Legion,” I told him, “Wait outside.”

When I entered, I expected the room to be dark and sleeping.

A creepy voice asked, “Who dares enter our lair?”

I jumped.

Jinx blocked the entrance. She tilted her head down so her dark hair covered her face as she looked up, and a ferret was draped across the back of her neck like a scarf.

He hung limp like he was dead.

“Ew, what the heck.” I poked at Warren’s boneless body.

Jinx smiled with her teeth. “You must pay the tax.”

Behind the young psychopath, Sadie and her mates were sprawled on the floor, playing a card game. On one side of the room, three of the beds had been pushed together to create one massive sleeping arrangement.

Sadie shot up with a squeal and ran over.

Jinx blocked me as I tried to pass. “Pay the tax. Ten gold pieces.”

“I don’t have money on me.” I huffed and debated the merits of drop-kicking a child.

“No one passes without the tax.” Her eyes darkened as she lunged at me.

I jumped backward. I’d never forget the way she’d unhinged her jaw and screamed at the don back in the beast realm. Not only was it weird, but I’d never heard of any species that did that.

According to Sadie’s sources (allegedly the moon goddess herself, but I had my doubts about that), Jinx was a half-breed.

The explanation made sense, but it also didn’t. It felt too much like a perfectly crafted story. My gut told me something else was going on with

Jinx.

Something was off about her.

I asked Sadie with confusion, “Do you really have a tax to enter your room?”

“Of course not.” Sadie sighed as she rubbed her face. “Jinx, sweetie, we’ve talked about this.”

“Pay. The. Tax. Also, I’m not your sweetie. Don’t push your pathetic abandonment issues onto me.”

Sadie blew her a kiss. “Whatever you say, cupcake.”

Jinx snarled like a rabid animal.

I took a step toward the door. “Uh, maybe I should go?”

Cobra sauntered across the room and pushed a bag of money forward. “Here’s twenty gold pieces.”

Who carried gold around with them? Everyone in the realms used the enchanted credit system.

Jinx’s scary expression transformed into a beaming smile. “Thanks, snake man.” She skipped off with the money and put it into an overflowing velvet pouch.

Sadie groaned and smacked at Cobra’s jeweled hand. “You have to stop paying her, or she’ll just keep doing it.”

The snake shifter shrugged. “She’s a business woman. I respect the hustle.”

“No. It’s extortion.” Sadie rubbed at her forehead.

“Exactly. She’s going to do great things.” Cobra looked over with pride at Jinx, who was now counting out a large stack of gold coins.

Warren, the perverted ferret, was no longer playing dead and had a gold piece in his mouth.

Sad.

I’d really hoped he was dead.

“So why are you all awake?” I asked as Sadie threw her arms around me in a hug and dragged me into the room.

“I’m just so excited for tomorrow I can’t sleep, and all the men agreed to stay up with me.” Sadie clapped and jumped up and down. “Plus, Jinx never sleeps, so party room, am I right?”

I relaxed into her tight embrace and said, “The energy in here is way better than my room. Our room had a lot of choking and spitting going on. Very creepy.”

Ascher coughed aggressively at my words, and all four men turned to stare at me.

Xerxes opened his mouth like he was going to ask for an explanation, but then he shook his head like he didn't want to know.

"Sounds fun." Sadie winked aggressively. "So why are you here?"

I pulled my tangled hair forward and showed her the knots. "It's a ridiculous mess. I tried to fix it for tomorrow, but I made it worse. I was hoping you could help?"

Sadie stared at my hair, then at my face. A wide grin split her cheeks. "I thought you'd never ask. Since you've given me makeovers, I've been wanting to return the favor."

"Please, we both know I'm already perfect-looking," I said seriously. "Meanwhile you had a unibrow when we first met."

Sadie laughed.

Who was going to tell her I wasn't joking?

Really, I wasn't in any position to judge. Lately I'd looked more like a rabid raccoon than a woman.

My eyes were so bloodshot they were more red than blue, and the dark circles below them complemented my sickly pale complexion.

Yesterday when I'd seen my reflection in the bathroom, I'd been tempted to bang my head into the wall. A little forehead blood would really round out the "I am mentally crumbling" vibe.

But I didn't.

It seemed like too much work.

Now I sat down on the carpet, and Jax and Sadie settled on either side of me.

Jax gave me pointers for curly hair as they both painstakingly untangled my knots with water and a comb. After the blue mass was detangled, they each grabbed a section of my hair and pulled it into a French braid.

They were extremely gentle, and I relaxed as Sadie went on and on about random topics.

At one point she sniffed my hair and said, "I forgot you smelled like icy death. It's a unique scent."

I yawned. "In a sexy way though, right?"

Sadie sniffed again and made a face. "Maybe? I need to get closer and smell you more."

Cobra whipped his head around. The jewels embedded in his skin turned

into shadow snakes and his eyes flashed with violence as he glared at us.

We both giggled.

After Sadie dramatically sniffed my neck to annoy her unhinged mate, I asked her how she felt about seeing Dick.

She smiled and reassured me she really didn't care. She felt nothing when she saw him and she'd made her peace with the events of her childhood.

I didn't understand how she could say that.

Maybe she was just a better person, but my gut cramped as she talked about him with nothing but forgiveness in her eyes.

She believed what he'd told her.

Sadie let the past go.

I dug my fingernails hard into the palm of my hands.

I didn't care what Dick said to explain himself. You didn't whip a child for the greater good. There was no such thing as casual abuse. He hurt her. Violently. Repeatedly.

Thick jagged scars marred her back and chest.

Dick had told Sadie that he'd beaten her to unlock her powers. He'd done it on behalf of the moon goddess, and if he hadn't done it to her, he would have had to do it to her sister, Lucinda.

The explanation was too neat for the situation. It didn't seem right that it involved gods and loved ones.

What Dick had done to Sadie was messy and depraved, and it was only logical that the reasoning behind his actions followed a similar pattern.

His story reeked of manipulation.

I'd tried to point that out to Sadie when she first told me, but she ignored me and said I was too blinded by rage on her behalf.

I gnawed on my fingernail as I debated the merits of once again bringing up my doubts.

Before I could decide, Sadie changed topics and rambled on about a book she'd read.

She was happy to forgive and move on.

With a deep breath, I let it go. Perhaps I was just a heartless revengeful bitch that refused to move on.

It wouldn't be the first time.

Sadie talked, and I nodded when it was appropriate. She smiled as she explained the plot, and I smiled back.

Warmth expanded in my chest.

I liked her constant chatter.

I liked how she moved her hands dramatically and leaned closer when she got excited.

I liked how she rested her head on my shoulder.

It felt as if we'd never been separated.

At one point, Ascher's phone rang, and it was Sadie's sister, Lucinda, and Jax's sisters Jess and Jala.

I gaped at the technology.

He explained that he'd spent a small fortune and gotten an inter-realm service plan so they could stay in contact. Jax's and Sadie's sisters were boarding at an ultraexclusive school in the beast realm with a whole battalion of the don's personal guards until the games were over.

"Are there any cute boys at the academy that I would like?" Jax's sister Jala asked me over the phone, and the others snickered.

Jax frowned, and Xerxes sharpened his knives with vigor.

I sighed. "Do you think seven-foot-tall monsters with no respect for women are cute?"

There was a long pause and what sounded like a scuffle. Then Jax's other sister Jess said, "Wait, they kinda sound interesting. Bad boy vibes."

"Tell them I'm single," Sadie's sister, Lucinda, yelled in the background.

Jax growled. "You're not allowed to date until you're three hundred and fifty years old."

Cobra scoffed. "You're not allowed to date until you're dead. You can date in the afterlife." His jewels transformed into shadow snakes and crawled over his skin. "In this life, I'll kill any man that touches you."

"Not fair!" Lucinda shouted, and Jax motioned for Ascher to give him the phone.

"Stop antagonizing Jax." Ascher laughed. "You better still be practicing your combat moves for when we get back."

There was a small spat where Jess tried to prove she was practicing her moves by attacking Jala and what sounded like an impromptu pillow fight.

"Love you!" the girls yelled over the phone, and we all yelled it back.

My cheeks hurt from smiling.

Ascher, Xerxes, and Cobra played the card game while Jax and Sadie braided my hair.

It was homey.

Peaceful.

Cozy.

I leaned against Sadie and inhaled her alpha scent of cranberries. The men's scents of chestnuts, frost, cinnamon, and pine filled the room.

They smelled like shopping with Sadie in the icy forest of the shifter realm. Back when we'd laughed so hard that Sadie had fallen off her Yukata Horse into a snowbank. The biggest threat in our lives had been monsters from a portal.

Those were the days.

Life had been blissfully simple.

"Time's up." Scorpius's voice cut through the tranquil ambiance and reminded me that life was anything but picturesque.

All three of the kings stood in the doorway, scowling. *I thought they stayed back in the bedroom?*

"Pay the tax." Jinx stood in front of them with her hand out.

Sadie bristled. "How dare you speak to Aran like that? You don't get to order her around."

I sighed and pulled myself to my feet. I'd explain the whole enslavement to her later. That wasn't a conversation for tonight.

Now that my hair was all fixed, exhaustion was hitting me like a brick.

"It's okay." I patted Sadie on the back and turned to the rest of the room. "Thanks for everything. Good luck tomorrow."

"Of course, baby." Sadie pressed a smacking kiss onto my cheek. "Come back whenever you want. You're always welcome in our room." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

I rolled my eyes at her dramatics.

Malum exploded into flames.

"What was that, *baby*?" Cobra's voice carried as I hurried out of the room.

I trailed the men down the hall.

With every step away from my best friend, emptiness flooded through me.

Scorpius scoffed, "Did you enjoy your dalliance with a mated woman? You're such a whore."

That word followed me.

I was reclaiming it. In a coquette, vintage sunsets, sparkly fae wine, soft music kind of way.

"Obviously," I drawled. "Also, I'm flipping you off right now." I didn't

bother to raise my fingers. It was too much work. “Now I’m sobbing violently,” I said sarcastically.

The blind king scowled.

I snickered at my little prank.

Malum ranted about how I’d never get to visit Sadie again, and Orion tried to touch my arm gently.

I pulled away from him, shoved my pipe between my lips, and fingered my braids. The warmth in Sadie’s room had been an escape from reality. Everything had been richer, and even the air had seemed warmer.

Now I shivered from a phantom chill.

Lightning streaked down the walls, but I didn’t blink.

The world was dipped in gray.

I had no memory of getting back to the room, falling asleep, and waking up the next morning with a stomachache. Almost no recollection of Orion tracing black war paint across my cheekbones. I didn’t recall pulling on the all-white spandex outfits that were delivered to our room.

I barely remembered choking down a plate of eggs for breakfast and drinking three cups of coffee in the silent hall.

I hardly recalled stumbling back to the room to wait for our instructions.

I barely noticed that Lothaire entered the room an hour later. He said a bunch of shit, and I didn’t listen.

“The gods have selected Arabella, Corvus, and Orion to fight in this first round for the academy legion,” Lothaire’s voice penetrated the fog.

Those words I heard.

My stomach plummeted, and adrenaline exploded through my neurons.

The world snapped back into horrible focus.

I missed the haze.

CHAPTER 15

CORVUS MALUM

FREE-FALLING

The Legionnaire Games: Day 23, hour 9

I pushed Orion behind me protectively as Lothaire led us into the center of the field.

Arabella walked a few feet away with a blank expression on her face.

The bags under her eyes were black. They blended with the war paint Orion had put under all our eyes.

She looked awful, and she had cherry-colored marks along the side of her neck. It hadn't escaped my notice last night that both her and Orion's lips were swollen. He'd marked her like she was his to claim.

I'd deal with my Revered later.

For now, we had to survive the first competition.

I scanned the lawn and cataloged our competition. Fourteen people had been chosen by the gods to fight: two male devils from the House of Dar; two female assassins; two shifters, Sadie and the man called Jax; three male leviathans; and three angels, the man with heterochromia and two women.

There was a thick dark cloud cover, and the sea churned aggressively. The wind howled as it battered against us.

Conditions were rough.

The towering posts along the field's perimeter cast looming shadows across the lawn. They jutted high into the scarlet sky, and the ends of the posts disappeared in the black clouds.

I flexed with anticipation.

A female student screamed, “Go kings! The royals love you!” There was a chorus of shouts and whistles of agreement, but the cheers were swallowed by the wind.

Arabella didn’t look at the crowd. She kept her eyes on the rough sea.

The entire academy was packed into the small bleachers. Competitors who hadn’t been chosen to compete sat in the first row. Behind them, the purple-clad royal students were crammed together on the left side of the bleachers and there was a foot wide space separating them from the green-clothed commoner students who sat on the right side.

Those who weren’t cheering for the competitors had their heads tipped backward, and they gawked at the platform floating hundreds of feet above them in the air.

The eclipse loomed behind the platform, and I squinted.

Two people sat on the floating structure: Lyla the witch and the angel Lothaire referred to as Dick.

Relief unfurled in my gut. The rumors that the gods themselves attended the event were false, and representatives came in their stead.

My shoulders relaxed.

I couldn’t face the sun god, not until we found our missing mate. He was waiting for us to complete our soul bond so we could patrol the realms and serve him directly.

His representative had told us in the devil realm that he was getting impatient.

As if to punctuate my thoughts, the two devils from the House of Dar sneered as they walked past.

I didn’t bother to engage with them; kings didn’t bother with peasants.

They were jealous because they were centuries old, yet we’d beaten them as eighteen-year-olds.

There were a million reasons the other mated Devil Houses hated us: we were too young, too inexperienced; we didn’t have control over our powers; Scorpius was blind; I had rage problems; and Orion didn’t speak. The list of our failures was long.

Lothaire stopped walking in the center of the lawn and signaled for the competitors to gather around him.

I cracked my neck back as I rested my hand on Orion’s shoulder. With our mating song gone, I constantly checked to reassure myself he was nearby.

He relaxed into my touch, and some of the flames dancing along my arms

extinguished.

“Let’s go, Corvus!” a high-pitched female voice shrieked from the student section, and there was a fresh round of cheers.

I ignored the distractions and focused on my Revered. He glanced back and gave me a faint smile. I squeezed his shoulder and nodded.

We had each other’s backs.

It was going to be okay.

Orion’s gaze flickered a few feet to my right, and it didn’t move back. He stared at Arabella.

She was hunched in on herself, arms wrapped around her middle to protect herself from the stiff wind. The look on her face was vacant.

She appeared softer with her curly blue hair pulled away from her face in braids—more like a fae princess and less like the wild, snarky creature who constantly pushed our buttons.

Although princesses usually didn’t have bloodshot eyes and empty expressions.

She was born of privilege. The fae realm was the largest and most famous planet out of all the realms the High Court ruled over. We’d grown up seeing art depictions of the mad queen and her beautiful daughter.

That same daughter stared at us with sunken cheeks and a defeated posture.

Sun god, she even looked dehydrated.

I made a mental note to force her to drink more water.

Dark-blue eyes glanced over at me and Orion. She raised her brow at my expression, and I wiped the pity off my face.

I glared at her.

She’s pathetic. A mere month of fighting the ungodly had almost broken her. I reminded myself that she was the same brat who hours earlier had cuddled up with Sadie in front of her mates. She was disloyal with no morals.

I wrinkled my nose like I smelled something gross.

She rolled her eyes and looked away.

If she touched my Revered after we were soul bonded, I wouldn’t let such a transgression fly. She’d be dead.

It already killed me that we had to have sex with other people to sate our urges.

When we found our missing mate and completed our soul bonds, I would shred anyone to pieces who tried to touch what was mine.

Devils didn't just love our mates; we owned them. Body, spirit, and soul. My mates were my destiny.

People like Arabella would never understand. It was pure devotion.

My gut punched with worry when I spotted Scorpius' large frame sitting alone in the stands. On the surface, he looked bored. But even from such a distance, I could see how stiff his posture was and his occasional flinches.

Students screamed noisily around him.

He didn't have us beside him to whisper about everything that was happening. Orion saw where I was looking, and he grimaced in agreement.

I forced myself to look away and not worry about my Protector.

He'd be okay.

It felt wrong to be preparing to compete without him beside us. We were a unit. My mates were an extension of myself.

I felt exposed without him by my side.

Lothaire swallowed a glowing blue pill and opened his mouth. His voice was broadcast loudly around the stadium, and he said, "It is my honor to kick off the first Legionnaire Games in centuries. For our first competition, the gods have a simple request for all the competitors."

He paused.

Raised his arm and pointed to the sky. "Each competitor must climb to the top of one post. Whoever does not make it to the top loses. You have one hour. Time starts now."

There was a second of stillness as everyone processed what he'd said.

Then the lawn erupted as competitors ran to one of the two dozen posts surrounding the field. There was more than enough for each to have their own, but an angel competitor shoved a leviathan competitor to the ground. A man from the devil legion ripped an assassin competitor off a post and said, "This one's mine, get your own."

The three of us ignored the crowd. We jogged to the far side of the arena away from everyone else.

Orion took the post to my right and Arabella was to my left.

I glanced back, and two angels unfurled their wings, flying upward with crazy speed. The third angel was a large dangerous looking man with two different colored eyes, and he stared at Arabella with his lips curled in disgust.

She didn't even notice.

I cracked my knuckles and made a point of glaring at him.

His eyes flashed over to me, and he spread his wings and shot upward into the air.

Agitation made my already tense muscles ache. Uncomfortable warmth spread across my limbs, and I concentrated on keeping the fever at bay.

It was hard enough looking after my Protector and Revered.

Arabella was chaos incarnate and seemed to attract trouble everywhere she went. Having her life tied to ours was a distraction I didn't need.

Ignoring the other competitors and students shouting encouragement, I turned to my post and focused on solving the problem.

My fingers trailed across the smooth material. It was a sturdy wood. The posts were the stalks of the mighty oak trees that grew hundreds of feet tall in the Olympus realm.

It was too broad to wrap my arms around and too smooth to rock climb up.

There was only one solution.

I focused on the enchanted metal that capped our ears and helped suppress our powers. A gift from the sun god.

Whoosh.

The metal ear caps floated upward above my head. Click. Click. Click. Shards pulled apart and formed a floating crown.

I grunted and tensed as the enchantment stopped concealing my power and the ache in my bones doubled. The sudden fever made me sweat, and my body convulsed in pain, muscles aching.

Flames exploded across every inch of my skin.

To my right, Orion's crown also floated above his blond hair. His head was tipped back, eyes open, and he silently screamed.

My instincts went wild.

Flames multiplying.

I wanted to help my Revered, but I was one second from losing control and burning everything and everyone.

Breathing roughly through my nose, I concentrated on thinking calming thoughts. *Your mates are healthy. Your mates are safe. You are in control.*

Surprisingly the thoughts worked, and the fever receded quicker than it usually did.

As I was wiping sweat off my forehead, someone choked to my left.

Arabella gaped at us.

She stared at my face, and I couldn't help but grin and flash my long,

razor-sharp fangs. I waved at her mockingly, and my long black claws clicked together.

When I spoke, my voice was a monster's growl. "Keep up, slave. Otherwise, it might hurt." I pointedly looked up at where the posts towered above us.

She grimaced and nodded as if she had realized our predicament.

We hadn't tested the exact bounds of the slave tattoo, but the top of the post was much further than the few hallways away she'd been when it had acted up.

"Want me to carry you, baby?" Orion's lyrical voice tinkled, and I turned around to glare at him because he knew better than to speak so loudly.

He ignored me and kept his attention focused on Arabella.

Luckily, the other competitors were spread out far enough away that no one had seen him speak. Good thing because he looked more glorious than usual with his gold crown floating above his head.

His handsome features were somehow more stunning with razor-sharp teeth and black claws on his hands and feet. He looked deliciously dangerous.

"You're not carrying her," I growled with annoyance. "It's too dangerous."

No way would I risk my Revered falling because Arabella wanted to play the role of a weak princess that needed rescuing.

"No thanks, baby. I'm good," Arabella said sarcastically, and I turned to her with suspicion. What was she playing at?

Then her eyes went midnight black and light-blue ice tipped the ends of her fingers in small claws. The sharp points were one third the size of ours and weren't on her toes too, but they were still surprising.

My jaw dropped.

It was more proof of what I'd always suspected. *Fae don't have black eyes or claws.*

What game was she playing at?

Before I could question her, Arabella dug her ice claws into the wood and started hauling herself upward with her toned arms. She pressed outward with her feet to generate some purchase, but most of her ascent came from her arm muscles.

After a few shaky pulls, she settled into a rhythm and climbed. Fast.

Respect unfurled in my gut. Her strength was impressive.

I shook my head to clear my ridiculous thoughts. *She's just lighter as a*

woman. *It's easier for her to climb, nothing to get excited about.*

Nodding at Orion to make sure he was good to go, I dug my finger-and-toe claws into the posts and hauled myself up. Fast as lightning, I climbed.

It helped that Arabella was in front of me.

My competitive spirit flared up, and I decided there was no way I was losing to a woman.

So I didn't.

When I finally pulled myself onto the top of the post, I was covered in sweat and panting from exertion. My arms were limp, and there was a sharp burning sensation stabbing my gut.

I easily ignored my exhaustion.

Balancing on my haunches, I knelt on the wide, flat circle of the post and smiled. This competition was going to be easy.

I marveled at our surroundings. We were above the clouds.

If I reached my hand out, it felt like I could touch the dark-red eclipse.

It was like flying.

The angel competitors were sprawled on the tops of their posts with bored expressions as they watched competitors pull themselves up.

From what I could see, almost everyone had breached the cloud cover and was close to finishing. It definitely hadn't been an hour.

"You good?" I called out to Orion, who was also squatting atop his post. He grinned back at me, and his brilliant smile was like a punch to the chest.

High above the world, he appeared more carefree than I'd seen him in years. The mischievous twinkle in his brown eyes was the same one that used to be ever present when we were teens.

He looked like he had before we'd learned the true extent of our abilities. Before we'd realized we couldn't find our other Protector.

"I'm doing great, thanks for asking," Arabella said with a huff as she pulled herself over the top of her post. She finished twenty seconds after me. I counted.

She sat down and kicked her feet back and forth over the edge of her post. Leaned forward over the edge like she was going to fall.

My stomach knotted.

"Lean back," I ordered with a shaky growl.

Arabella made eye contact with me, then slowly leaned forward so her body was seconds away from tumbling off.

I saw red.

She laughed as she finally lay backward on her post. Feet still dangling off the edge just to taunt me.

Orion huffed with relief.

Hands shaking with the urge to strangle her, I could barely articulate, “Fuck you.”

Sun god forbid she not wind me up every chance she got.

The three of us sat on our posts in silence.

A loud chuffing noise echoed, and a ginormous white cat creature with fangs as long as my arms climbed to the top of a post.

The cat shifted into a naked woman, and an annoying, scratchy female voice yelled, “Yay, you also made it!”

I looked away with disgust.

Arabella saluted her and called over, “Go team! Thank the sun god we both made it.”

“You’re on our team, not theirs,” Orion mouthed, then frowned with frustration because Arabella hadn’t seen him speak. His face pinched, and a familiar darkness flashed in his eyes.

My Revered’s powers drove him crazy, just like mine did.

We were all cursed men.

“Orion wants to remind you that you’re on our team,” I said loudly, then added with a growl, “Not hers.”

Sadie beamed at Arabella like she was in love and jumped up and down. “As the captain of the shifter legion, I appointed her an honorary member of our team.”

She blew a kiss, and Arabella pretended to catch it and pressed it to her heart as she said, “Aw, thanks, baby girl.”

Sadie tipped her head back and laughed. “Not you too. Xerxes is already ridiculous for that.”

Arabella stuck out her tongue and smiled back.

When she grinned at Sadie, she looked soft and young. Practically radiant.

Orion and I glared over at the shifter bitch.

A loud roar filled the air as a giant bear covered in armor pulled itself to the top of the post. It shifted into a black man with long braids and gold jewelry.

“Cover yourself!” he bellowed at Sadie, who was standing stark naked.

Arabella made a loud squeaking noise, and her face turned bright red as

she stared at the bear shifter.

Sadie fanned herself and pointed at the man. “You cover yourself, Jax. Sun god, is it hot up here?”

“Yeah, it’s super hot.” Arabella pulled at the collar of her shirt. “I can’t believe you—” She stared up at the eclipse.

Her pale face turned bright red.

What were they talking about? The air was thin, much colder than it had been on land. It was practically freezing.

“What do you mean? It’s cold,” I asked Arabella.

Sadie wiggled her eyebrows up and down ridiculously, and it took me a long moment to realize she was miming drawing a dick with her fingers.

Flames licked my skin.

“Really, Arabella?” I asked with annoyance. So what if the Jax man had his dick pierced? It wasn’t a big deal. “Grow up.”

Arabella didn’t look at anyone; she just stared up at the eclipse with a blush staining her cheeks.

Jax and Sadie laughed.

“It’s a lot to process,” she mumbled.

I clenched my fists and barked, “Well, stop fucking thinking about it.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m trying.”

Clearly, she wasn’t trying hard enough. I’d give her something to blush over.

Lothaire’s voice boomed loudly and startled me out of my ridiculous thoughts. I couldn’t see him, so he must have been standing on the lawn, speaking through enchantment. “All competitors have made it to the tops of their posts. We don’t have any losers.”

Cheers sounded, and competitors smiled as we looked around.

From the looks of it, the two other devils had used their claws to climb up the posts, and I hadn’t seen the two leviathans and assassins climbing, but they were all perched on their posts.

I let out a breath of relief. We’d gotten lucky this first round.

Lothaire’s voice echoed. “The representatives will now discuss the next steps everyone will take. Since we have no losers or winners, everyone will complete the punishment together.”

My stomach dropped, and I looked over at Orion. In my periphery, Arabella’s shoulders slumped, and the clenching sensation intensified.

I didn’t like this.

The silence was heavy with tension as we all waited for our fate.

Out of nowhere a floating platform rose above the clouds. Lyla and Dick stared at us with blank expressions.

Lothaire's voice boomed, "The gods have discussed and decided on a simple punishment. Every competitor must jump back to land. Now."

My heart pounded loudly in my chest.

The angels unfurled their wings and smirked at everyone as they stood up. With a salute, they stepped off and plummeted below the cloud cover.

No one else moved.

"Not fair!" a short leviathan man shouted, and his loud voice broke the heavy silence. "If no one lost, then why are we being punished? Also, the angels can just fly. How does that even make sense? This is stupid."

Lothaire's voice echoed loudly. "All competitors must jump now. That is not a request. It is an order. Failure to comply will result in elimination from the games."

The leviathan shook his head and sat down on the top of his post in defiance. "Screw the sun god. I'm out."

I looked back and forth between Orion and Arabella.

My heart beat so fast it slammed against my throat. It would take more than a fall to kill a devil, but Arabella looked weak as shit.

I struggled to breathe slowly.

All our lives are bound. We can't die.

Rationally I knew we'd all be fine.

I didn't feel fine.

"You got this. Trust me, I'm an old hat at this," Sadie shouted to Arabella. "The key is to suck in when you land. See you at the bottom." She winked and jumped, yelling, "Cats always land on their feet," as she fell.

In midair, she shifted into her impressive cat form.

Jax roared and shifted into a bear as he jumped after her.

"We'll all be fine," Orion mouthed at me, then turned to Arabella. "You'll be okay. Just concentrate on falling feetfirst to protect your head when you land."

Arabella nodded with an empty look in her eyes.

She pulled her pipe out of her pocket, stuck it between her lips, and exhaled a smoking crow.

Then she spread her arms wide and smirked over at us. "See you at the bottom, bitches."

She tipped backward off her post.

Pipe between her lips.

Headfirst.

My stomach tied into knots, and I couldn't draw enough air into my lungs.

"Wait!" Orion yelled loudly, but she was already below the cloud cover.

I screamed, "*Fuck!*"

We both jumped feet first after her.

The clouds were cold and wet, and the droplets were abrasive against my skin as I cut through the air quickly.

Dark-gray streaks turned to red as I left the clouds.

Air whistled in my ears.

The sea expanded in every direction like an abyss.

A green lawn approached.

It was covered in dots.

Was that Arabella's mangled body? Terror, rage, fear, and failure hammered my senses.

The lawn was close enough to touch.

I reached for Arabella's prone form.

Darkness exploded.

CHAPTER 16

ARAN

FIRST AID

The Legionnaire Games: Day 26, hour 23

I rolled over and tried to scream, but breathy moans were all my shredded throat produced.

Every inhale.

Every exhale.

Every muscle twitched.

Sent tendrils of stabbing pain across my senses.

With jerky movements, I searched desperately for what I needed. Panic and desperation made me a shaking mess.

I couldn't find it.

"Calm down, Aran." A pipe was pushed gently between my cracked lips. "The fact that this damn thing survived the drop is ridiculous."

Inhaling smoke, I sagged backward with relief and grinned through the pain.

Drugs made everything better.

All was well.

Yes, I was delusional. Next question.

A hand pushed gently against my shoulder, and John said, "No. You don't get to smile after taking years off my life like that."

I smiled bigger.

John huffed. "You crazy bitch. I promised myself I'd yell at you after you fell *headfirst* like an idiot. But I'm just so glad you're okay."

I grunted out smoke and nodded as I peeled open my blood-crusting eyes. John's face was inches from mine.

A huge grin split his face and showcased his cute dimples. "There are those pretty blue eyes. Did you know one of your eyes has a little gray in it? Kind of freaky."

He winked.

The bedroom warped behind him, and everything became a mess of squiggly lines as my eyes unfocused.

"Alert the realms, the queen has fully risen," John announced dramatically and flung his head down across my legs. "All must bow to Her Excellency!"

He kept bowing.

A chuckle burst from my lungs, but the noise that came out of my mouth was somewhere between a dying moan and a banshee's howl.

"How long out for?" I croaked.

John's smile slipped. "Three days." He stared down at me intensely. "Corvus woke up two days ago, and Orion woke up yesterday. We were all starting to panic about you."

I grimaced as I tried to haul myself into a seated position.

The scent hit me first.

Copper and bile.

The sight hit me next.

My eyes burned as I blinked away the crust and took it all in. The clean bedroom with the ornate cream carpets, crackling fireplace, and fluffy emerald sheets was gone. It was filthy.

The white carpets were stained pink in some sections and bright red in others.

Blood arcs had splattered across the wall.

Bedsheets were torn to pieces.

Of the eight beds spread along the walls for all of us, only three seemed to have survived the shredding.

Orion, Corvus, and Scorpius were piled in their usual bed, sleeping together. Similarly, the demons were cuddled together in their bed, snoring.

Everyone was asleep except for John.

The white mattress pads had been pulled off my bed and the one next to it. *RIP Horace. You will truly be missed. Gone but never forgotten. Always in our hearts and memories. Fly high, sweet angel.*

I choked on a laugh at my sarcastic thoughts.

Every day, I got sexier and funnier.

It took a little prodding the carpet with my fingers to discover that I was lying on pieces of a mattress.

A stiff green sheet was wrapped around me, preserving my modesty.

Two makeshift mattress pads were spread out next to me and soaked in blood.

Somehow the clothes I'd been given still covered my body. At least what was left of my body.

Mounds of skin were spread across—

I gagged and looked away.

“What happened to the room?” I asked John as I plugged my nose and tried to process what I was seeing. His hand on my back was gentle as he helped support me.

He sighed heavily.

“Apparently, it's part of the games. Competitors don't get access to Lyla or any medical supplies. Each legion has to make do with a single first aid kit and help one another heal. We called for the servants, but they aren't allowed to come in for five days after each competition. Something about not wanting people to have any outside assistance.”

Lothaire's strange use of the term *health management* during his little welcome speech suddenly made sense.

My voice was scratchy. “What happened? You guys scraped our carcasses off the lawn and brought us back here to heal?”

John winked and pulled at the stethoscope hanging across his neck.

“That's literally exactly what happened.” He raked his hand through his sweaty hair. “Witch John, at your service. As you can see, I sped up the healing process by helping push all your”—his smile wobbled—“pieces back into place.”

Since it felt like my arms were about to fall out of their sockets, I believed him.

“But don't worry, I fixed everything.” John pointed at my arm.

A small yellow bandage was placed over a tiny, centimeter-long cut on my hand. The yellow rectangle was next to a gaping wound that ran up my forearm. My sleeve was pushed up to expose it.

We both watched as I moved my arm and blood gurgled out of the open wound.

I wheezed, then made a serious expression. “Thank the sun god you put that on. What would I do without you, John?”

He flashed his dimples. “You’re welcome. No need to thank me. I live to serve.”

I prodded at the bandaged paper cut. “Yes, I can see that. Did you clean the cut first? I can tell. It looks great.”

A mischievous glint sparked in his dark eyes. “Actually, I just rubbed some dirt and spit on it.”

“Oh, perfect.” I nodded. “Very nice.”

John’s glint turned into a full-on sparkle. “Well, as your doctor, there’s only one thing left to do.” He leaned forward with his lips puckered like he was going to kiss my wound.

I debated causing a scene.

Too much work.

His puckered lips trembled.

I arched my brow. “No, please. Proceed. Kiss my bleeding wound, ye o powerful witch.”

John narrowed his eyes and got closer slowly, clearly waiting for me to call his bluff.

His lips gently touched my wound.

“Ew, you weirdo.” I jerked back violently. “I can’t believe you actually kissed it! Immediate no. You have just violated every rule of friendship.”

John smirked. “Don’t pretend you didn’t like my lips on you, Aran.”

My stomach clenched. Violently.

For a long second, I struggled to breathe. Finally I found my voice and said, “You’re a shit healer. Also, Sadie is my best friend, so you’re still in second place.”

Instead of frowning like I expected, John flicked my nose. “It’s so cute that you don’t think I’m going to eliminate her and take her spot.”

He had to be joking.

John smiled indulgently.

“You know you can’t kill my best friend and expect to just take her place,” I said slowly. “I’d never forgive you.” Those were words I’d never expected to have to say.

John laughed like I’d made a joke. “First, yes, I can. Second, you’d eventually forgive me because I’m so charming, bestie.”

I twirled my pipe with my lips and inhaled drugs.

Instead of responding to his inane statements, I focused my energy on what was important: I needed to find a student with access to demon brew so I could get fucked up.

High and drunk.

ASAP.

There were open wounds covering every inch of exposed skin that I could see, and I was not mentally ready to deal with it. At least my clothes were still intact, so no one had seen my back. It was a minor miracle.

I needed to know what type of fabric they used. Talk about durability.

John's gaze fell to my lips as I rolled the pipe back and forth with my tongue.

His Adam's apple bobbed.

I blinked.

He parted his maroon lips. "On a more serious note, rumor is that whoever's running this competition put something in the academy food so it takes longer for competitors to recover from injuries. Which is why you still look like that." He waved his hands at me and grimaced.

"Wait, what?" I stopped staring at my friend's neck like a creep and took stock of the injuries I'd been trying to ignore.

Streaks of pain let me know I had more gaping wounds under the sheet.

Now that I thought about it, after three days of sleep, my skin should have already knitted back together.

It hadn't.

"Don't worry," John said with a serious inflection that made me immediately panic. "The first aid kit had a needle and thread, so we'll just stitch you up. I've been too busy *positioning* your parts to help your natural healing, so now it looks like it's time for step two. The little bandage was just some comedic humor before I started sewing."

He winked and held up a needle and thread.

The blood coating his fingers to his forearms took on a whole new meaning.

"Oh my sun god, you're not joking?" I asked.

John nodded. "I need you to think calm, peaceful princess thoughts and ___"

I screamed and reared back as he stabbed me.

Instead of giving up like a sane person, John just rocked with me and kept sewing.

“Stop it,” I demanded with outrage.

The stabbing sensation sent pain exploding, but the pulling sensation that followed had my stomach rolling. John stuck his tongue out between his teeth as he concentrated.

He narrowed his eyes as he stared at my arm wound and mumbled, “You’re doing amazing, Princess, just about five hundred more little stabby stabs.”

“This can’t be happening,” I said as the horrible sensation washed over me.

John said calmly, “Corvus stitched up Orion, and then the demons helped Scorpius stitch Corvus. We think the string is enchanted because they healed about twelve hours after they fixed them.”

A part of me melted at the thought of Malum stitching up his mate while he was injured himself. It made my heart hurt.

The long silver needle glinted in the light, and I grimaced.

“Why aren’t they sewing me up, then? Are you sure you’re qualified?” I asked John skeptically.

John’s expression hardened, and his eyes flashed. “No one touches you but me.”

He stabbed me again.

I grimaced, then stated the obvious, “Slightly concerning that you just said that.”

John winked. “The truth hurts.” His posture relaxed as he stabbed me again.

“You’re so weird,” I groaned as the horrible sensation of thread pulling through flesh lasted for a couple of long seconds. “I’d prefer to bleed out slowly.”

John narrowed his eyes as he concentrated on closing my wound. He said, “I hate to bring this up, but neither Corvus nor Orion made a single noise of complaint while the demons stitched them.”

“I don’t care,” I huffed.

In reality, if I lost to them, I’d off myself.

John pushed the needle through my flesh and I didn’t make a single noise of complaint.

Instead, I lay backward on the makeshift cot and exhaled Horse. He hovered over my face, flapping, and stared down at me like he knew I needed the distraction.

I counted his feathers.

One at a time.

I inhaled as much of the enchanted drugs as I could and pretended I wasn't getting stabbed by my friend.

Time ticked by slowly.

The only sound was John whispering encouragements every few seconds.

"You're doing amazing," he praised. "You're so fucking strong and impressive." He started sewing up another wound and murmured, "That's it, just breathe slowly, Princess."

Everything was a jumble of pain.

Seconds bled slowly into minutes, then dragged into hours.

"Good girl, such a good girl," John mumbled under his breath absentmindedly as he worked on a gash on my forehead.

Suddenly, I forgot how to breathe.

A different type of pain streaked across my spine.

He's your friend, don't make it weird. You're just confused and have lost a lot of blood.

I was not falling for a man just because he was nice to me.

That was pathetic.

John's dark hair was messy, and my blood was streaked across his sweaty face. He smiled down at me tenderly and whispered, "I'm so proud of you. I just need to stitch your torso, then you're done."

His words had something foreign unfurling in my gut, something new.

A floaty sensation made my brain feel all fuzzy.

I smiled up at him and nodded because I wanted to impress him. I'd do whatever I needed if it made him smile down at me like I was his entire world.

Yep. I was officially pathetic.

I yanked my shirt up to my neck to expose my torso.

John's smile fell. "What the hell are you doing?" Before I could respond, he pulled my shirt down over my chest to protect my modesty.

"It's nothing, it's just a sports bra and boobs." I shrugged, too tired to care that my best friend was a prude.

Half my skin was hanging open, exposing my organs. It was a little late to care what I looked like.

John shook his head and said, "Our teammates could wake up."

"So?" I rolled my eyes.

He clenched his jaw, and a muscle ticked as he busied himself tying a new string around the needle. His olive skin pulled across the tight muscles of his torso.

“No one gets to look at you,” he murmured as he stabbed at the open skin on my stomach.

I didn’t get to respond because I jolted in pain. The sensation was ten times worse across my sensitive stomach.

I was so busy counting I almost missed it.

It took me a moment to register that he mumbled something else under his breath.

“If anyone looks at your naked body, I’ll kill them.”

“What?” I whispered. “What did you say?”

John flashed his dimples and patted my head. “Almost done, Aran. Just hang in there a little more.”

That wasn’t what he said.

When he tried to have me roll over to fix my back, I snarled and refused to budge.

“I’m fine, I can feel that there are no cuts on my back,” I lied through gritted teeth.

He made a face of disbelief and murmured something about an ungrateful, ridiculous woman but stopped fighting with me.

I was a master manipulator. Turns out I was my father’s daughter, after all.

Finally, a long, sweat-filled hour later, John threw the needle down and said, “You’re done. No more.”

His hands trembled, but he rubbed them together to stop the shaking.

My eyelids felt like they weighed a million pounds. “I guess I’ll sleep here.” The sheet was stiff around my legs, and I squirmed with discomfort, but tiredness outweighed my disgust.

I shivered with a sudden chill.

“No. You won’t.” Gentle hands tugged another shirt over my body, and I inhaled his sandalwood musk. John’s smell was more pleasant than the kings’ scent. Less aggressive. Warmer. It felt like home.

I tried to move my legs, but nothing cooperated.

“Stay still, let me do it,” John whispered against my ear as he lifted me.

Instead of laying me in a bed, he placed me gently onto cold tiles and ran warm water over me. I was still wearing his T-shirt and mine, but it didn’t

matter.

A noise of enjoyment tumbled from my lips.

The warmth was everything.

My eyes were too heavy to open, so I just sat limply and gave grunts of approval as John gently dragged the soap over me.

I hated being grimy.

I needed this.

As he gently washed me, my will to live went from negative ten to five. It was an improvement, but the scale was out of one hundred.

When John gently pulled apart the tight braids lying against my scalp, my eyes rolled back with bliss. He scrubbed suds against my scalp, and I tipped my head back further.

“Ohmysungod yes,” I keened to encourage him to keep going.

His fingers were magic.

He massaged my temples and skull with an expert pressure that was so amazing I barely noticed the streaks of pain lighting up my spine.

John chuckled hoarsely, but said nothing.

“Time to stand up, killer.” Hands grabbed me under my armpits and easily pulled me to my feet. Then he wrapped my hair up in a towel, and I shuffled with him unsteadily.

“Hands up.” John’s voice was soft with a slight rasp. “Don’t worry, my eyes are closed. Let’s just get you into dry clothes.”

“My eyes are also closed,” I said helpfully, and he rewarded me with a laugh as I put my hands in the air.

“How big is your head?” He huffed as he struggled to pull his sweatshirt onto me.

I purposefully flailed around and made it more difficult.

My hands smacked at his face.

“Did you just hit me? After I massaged your head?” John asked with fake outrage, and he clicked his tongue. “Guess you really are the scary queen everyone talks about.”

I giggled.

He used my momentary stillness to pull the hoodie over me.

It must have been the oversize one he always wore, because it hit me midthigh.

“Good enough,” John said.

Next thing I knew, I was being carried while pressed against a muscular

chest. Then I was placed on a fluffy mattress while the covers were tucked under my feet.

The bed creaked as John climbed in next to me.

He radiated heat like a furnace, and I snuggled against him.

“If you fart, I’ll kill you,” I mumbled.

John laid his arm over my shoulders softly as he struggled to position himself. The beds weren’t meant to accommodate two tall people. No wonder the demons and kings were always tangled together.

John’s voice trailed off like he was falling asleep. “Please, we both know which one of us has a farting problem.”

I buried my head under a pillow. “It was just that one night. Those tacos were killer.”

“Sure, Aran. The first step to getting help is admitting you have a problem.”

The last thought that drifted through my mind before sleep claimed me was, *he doesn’t call me Arabella like the kings. I like the sound of my name on his lips.*

CHAPTER 17

ARAN

BLOODY EYES

The Legionnaire Games: Day 27, hour 11

“Fucking slut,” a demonic beast growled as it ripped the warm covers off me.

There was a loud smacking noise as the bed bounced. The furnace I’d been pressed against disappeared.

I shivered.

Another demonic beast sneered, “Whore.”

They definitely didn’t mean it in a coquette way. Embarrassing for them.

“Oh, look,” I said as I squinted open my crusty eyes. “Three bastards with mommy issues and the emotional maturity of dead fish.”

“We don’t have mothers,” Scorpius snapped.

The jokes really wrote themselves.

Grabbing at the covers, I pulled them over my head and said, “Exactly.” Again, they were ripped away, and goose bumps erupted across my partially healed legs.

Someone had opened the room’s curtains, and the red light from the eclipse was too bright.

I pulled my hoodie up over my head and told my attackers, “You’re a bunch of soulless, demonic men.”

“Hey, that’s offensive,” Vegar said across the room.

I winced.

“Sorry, let me rephrase.” I waved my hands. “The Devil Kings in this

room are horrible pieces of shit. Everyone else is chill. I have no beef with the demon and pathetic human communities.”

John huffed. “Who are you calling pathetic, Princess? Because I know it’s not me.” His laughter was low and smooth. “If you knew what I was, you wouldn’t be saying that.”

I pulled the hoodie away from my eyes.

John was standing beside his bed in nothing but loose gray sweatpants.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked and pointedly looked away from his impressive naked torso.

John flashed a dimple and winked. “You don’t want to know.”

Keeping my eyes on the ceiling, I held my hands toward him. “Get back into bed. You’re like a giant heating pad, and I’m cold.”

I grinned as John immediately leaned forward to snuggle into my arms.

A flaming arm clotheslined him.

He choked and stumbled backward, then fell to his knees on the floor. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he asked Malum in between gasps for air.

The three kings stood in the middle of the room, and all their attention was on me.

“Take it off,” Orion mouthed and gestured at my sweatshirt.

I rubbed the blurriness out of my eyes and asked with confusion, “What?”

Orion was covered in bruises and stitches and didn’t look well. His golden skin was pallid, and he was panting loudly from the exertion of standing upright.

His lips were flat lines as he mouthed, “You’re ours. You don’t wear another man’s clothes.”

Oh, it all made sense.

The kings were lunatics.

Frankly, I was too depressed to deal with them.

Malum’s flames shot higher in the air. “Take it off now or I’ll burn it off you. Slave.”

There was that charming personality.

“No,” John growled from the floor as he massaged his throat.

Flames screamed in the fireplace. Curtains blew dramatically because the stained-glass windows were opened wide, presumably to help with the stench.

I’d have recommended a flower-scented perfume if I’d thought it would help.

I didn't bother to respond.

You couldn't reason with crazy.

Pressing my palms against my eyes, I crawled off the bed and stomped past the kings into the bathroom. My limbs ached, and I swore I could feel the blood rushing through my abused arteries.

I was in too much pain for their games.

Not that they'd ever see me flinch.

I donned the stony mask of the fae queen and stepped around the bloody pads and piles of gore that covered the carpet. The bedroom was still a crime scene.

"What are you doing? We ordered you to take that sweatshirt off," Malum snarled and stomped after me.

I slammed the bathroom door in his face.

Turned the lock.

I leaned against the bathroom counter and splashed cold water on my cheeks. Grabbed the toothbrush with my name engraved on it and scrubbed at my teeth until my gums bled.

Wiping my face clean, I winced at the tender green bruises that covered my face like a bad camouflage. A long, stitched-up gash sliced underneath my left eye.

Turquoise curls stuck out around my head in every direction.

Two black eyes completed the look.

I'd seen wanted posters for insane escaped prisoners that looked better than I did.

A foggy memory of landing face-first on grass played in the back of my mind, and manic laughter bubbled up my throat.

I'd jumped headfirst off the post like an absolute badass.

I stared into the mirror and laughed harder.

The only source of light in the bathroom was a small hexagon window. Maroon light cast spooky shadows around my reflection. I looked creepy.

I'd tipped off a post into open air with a pipe between my lips and Horse by my side, and the free fall had felt like exquisite freedom.

I smiled.

Oops. I was missing three teeth.

Sometimes I was cool as shit.

Leaning closer to the mirror, I poked at my eyeballs. They were no longer bloodshot; they were just bloody.

Masses of broken blood vessels surrounded my corneas.

I blinked, and a droplet of blood ran down my cheek like a teardrop. A pink streak was left across green-tinted skin.

Once again, absolute badass.

“John’s sweatshirt better be off your body when you come out.” Malum pounded on the door. “Remember who owns you.”

John yelled, “Don’t listen to him, he’s just jealous because—”

There was a loud grunt and the sound of men wrestling.

I ignored them.

Pressing John’s soft sweatshirt against my nose, I inhaled the woodsy deliciousness.

I officially had an olfactory kink. Another thing I didn’t need to know about myself.

Just to check, I sniffed my skin and choked on the pungent scent of gore.

I smelled like a dead rat.

Not all of us were so blessed.

For a long moment, I considered keeping it on just to piss the kings off, but then a wave of exhaustion made the world spin. I toppled over.

Knees pressed against the bathroom floor, I tried to calm my racing heart.

I wasn’t strong enough to fight with the kings.

I tipped forward and lay on the floor with my limbs spread. The tile didn’t feel cold, because I was already shivering. Lately I was always cold, and I didn’t know why.

After long moments of panting and trying mentally to pull myself together, I got back to my feet.

With stiff, achy movements, I reluctantly pulled off John’s cozy sweatshirt and folded it onto my shelf.

We each had our own cubby and hamper in the bathroom that the servants kept stocked with clean clothes. I needed to thank whatever female servant had added a new pile of underwear and sports bras. Only a woman would have included the shapeless, soft purple garments that flattened my boobs and completely covered my butt in comfy fabric.

Sorting through the pile, I could have sworn there were usually five pairs of underwear, but now there were only four. The last pair must have been unsalvageable.

Getting dressed seemed like a smart idea in theory.

In reality, my stitches pulled, and once again I fell over as I tried to pull

up my underwear.

I slammed my aching knees onto the tile.

Popped a stitch on my arm.

The lilac undergarments went well with my blue hair, scabbing red wounds, and green-black bruises.

I'd never looked so colorful.

Looking over the cubbies, I followed the kings' instructions. I pulled Orion's sweatshirt out of his cubby and pressed the chocolate-raspberry scent to my face.

Pulling on his sweatshirt was an exercise in mortal combat, and it snagged on my wounds.

When it was all said and done, I stared blankly at my clothed reflection. I stuck my pipe between my lips and puffed out Horse to complete the look.

He cawed and settled his smoking talons onto my shoulders.

My new aesthetic was cozy, drug-dependent swamp monster.

Not to brag, but I nailed the look.

Shuffling forward on aching joints, I leaned my head against the bathroom door and counted to ten. Inhaled drugs.

In an alternate universe, my fictional lover was out of his mind with concern that I'd been injured. He was on the other side of the door, ready to pamper me and make sure I didn't lift a finger. He was waiting to coddle me and give me sweet kisses.

"Get your ass out of the bathroom!" Malum shouted.

I exhaled smoke.

In this universe, I suffered.

I pushed open the door with my shoulders back and asked calmly, "What's the plan for the day?" Straightening my shoulders, I tried to project competence.

The three kings stood outside the door, waiting for me.

Orion raised his eyebrow when he saw what I was wearing, and a smile curved his lips. He looked like a cat with cream.

Malum glared like usual, and tiny scarlet flames danced across his exposed bronze arms. He wore a black T-shirt that clung to his bulging muscles like a second skin.

Steel eyes traced over me slowly.

He clenched his jaw as he recognized whose sweatshirt I was wearing but he said nothing about it.

I arched my brow at him tauntingly.

I also did *not* notice the network of veins that decorated his forearms. Nope. Didn't see them at all.

I did notice that he wasn't bruised, and compared to mine, Orion's marks were minimal. There were a few angry gashes across their exposed skin, but otherwise they looked healthy and unaffected by the fall.

Not relatable.

Scorpius's head tilted in my direction like he was listening to every breath I took. Orion whispered in his ear.

Malum dragged his hands over his buzzed hair and said, "Since we only have seven days until the next competition, we're going to ramp up our training. First, we go to lunch." Silver eyes narrowed on me. "Everyone needs to focus on eating as much as possible during meals so they're fueled and ready."

I saluted him with my third finger and said sarcastically, "Yes, sir."

"Good," he snapped and draped both his arms across Scorpius's and Orion's shoulders. They melted against him.

But they didn't move.

Their large bodies were positioned to take up a maximum amount of space, and they had me pinned with the bathroom door behind me.

My voice was raspier than usual as I spoke. "I get that I'm perfect and you're obsessed with me, but could you give me a little space?" I flipped my wild curls over my shoulder. "Thanks."

Flames sizzled as they trailed down bronze forearms.

John pushed past the kings. "Nah, you don't get any space, bestie." He flung his arm over my shoulder and half led, half dragged me out the door while the demons and kings followed us.

His eyes narrowed as he looked down at what I was wearing, but the expression disappeared so quickly I convinced myself I'd imagined it.

He smiled down at me softly.

Horse flapped with outrage and repositioned himself on top of John's arm.

"What are you doing?" I tugged against John's hold.

Lightning struck the walls of the busy hall, and my hair crackled. It reeked of burning ozone.

The academy students, royals and commoners alike, scrambled out of our way as we passed. Some bowed at us, while others openly gaped like we

were mythical creatures.

I rolled my eyes.

John's fingers tightened on my shoulder, and his minty breath was hot against the side of my face. "Relax, dude. I'm just trying to keep you alive. I didn't stitch you up for hours just for you to get bonfired by Malum."

"I'd like to see him try." I huffed as I tried to turn around to glare at Malum.

John grunted and tightened his hold so I couldn't turn. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Stop poking at Corvus. He's our captain, and we need his cooperation to get through the games."

The fight drained out of me. "He enslaved me. I can't let that go. He's so disrespectful."

Dimples flashed in my peripheral vision. "Worry about what you can control. We'll deal with that later."

"Easy for you to say." I pouted, hurt that my friend wasn't more concerned for me. My fictional lover would have been all over Malum's ass for how he treated me.

"Hey, no moping." John pulled me closer and ruffled my curls. "When it's time to handle the kings, we will. You just gotta trust me."

"Fine," I said even though I didn't believe him. "You better not be just saying that."

"I'm not." John ruffled my hair harder. "Now let's feast. I don't know about you, but I could eat a horse."

Horse cawed with alarm and pecked at John's eyeballs. My delusional friend just laughed and swatted at the incorporeal crow.

"Get him, Horse. Eat his brains," I encouraged, and John just chuckled harder.

When we entered the hall, two things stuck out to me: (1) Sadie and her men were all sitting at a table looking healthy, and (2) a body was crucified to the tree.

"Um." I stopped and pointed.

Hundreds of stakes pinned a carcass to the trunk of the sacred tree. They shook as a head lifted.

Not a carcass, a man.

I stumbled because holy sun god, how was such a gory mess alive?

"Ignore that," John said casually like he was used to it as he led me toward our table.

Some students fell silent as we walked by, while others yelled congratulations and clapped like someone wasn't being tortured a few feet away.

I leaned closer to John, and he tucked me under his arm protectively.

As we passed the tables of the other legions, Sadie flung herself out of her seat and gave me a sloppy kiss on my cheek. "You look like shit, Aran. What the heck!" Her raspy voice filled with concern. "I thought you were supposed to be all-powerful."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why do you look completely fine?" She didn't have a single bruise or cut on her. She looked great.

Sadie whispered dramatically, "Rumor is they spiked the food to halt our healing, but for some reason it doesn't work on me." She pointed over to the table where Jax's dark skin was a crisscross of stitched-up wounds similar to ours. "I think it must be my blood powers or something. Someone said it has to do with our souls. Maybe it's the thing with me and the moon goddess?" She shrugged. "I guess I'm just special."

I tipped my head at Jax in solidarity.

From the mangled state of the other competitors at the other tables, it seemed like Sadie was correct. Two of the assassins were missing from their table, and the leviathan men looked like somebody had died.

Something itched at the back of my brain. Something was different about Sadie, but I didn't feel like the moon goddess was the reason.

My head ached, and I stopped worrying about it.

Turning back to my friend, I stared down at her. "Whatever it is, I'm glad it didn't work on you." Gratitude that at least she wasn't suffering welled in my heart.

Sadie was okay.

The scars covering her exposed chest were testaments to what she'd already been through, and if anyone deserved to catch a break, it was her.

"Yeah." Sadie smiled and pointed to the tree. "Plus, we didn't end up like that guy."

"Who is..." I trailed off as I realized why I recognized the figure on the tree.

It was a man from the leviathan legion.

The competitor who'd refused to jump.

My jaw dropped. "They only said you'd be removed from the games, not *that*."

“Oh, he’s removed all right,” Sadie joked.

Holy sun god.

Guilt stabbed my gut. That could have been our fates if we hadn’t jumped, and I hadn’t even been worried about Sadie when I’d woken up.

I’d been so concerned with my pain and dealing with the kings.

“Sorry for being a shitty friend,” I whispered and pulled her against me with one arm. Since John’s arm was still thrown over my shoulder, it ended up being a weird three-way hug.

“You’re not,” Sadie mumbled as she pressed her face into my sweatshirt.

John dwarfed us both with his larger size.

Warmth exploded in my chest because I was sandwiched between my best friends and we were all okay.

I squeezed.

Then our three-way hug shifted as Sadie kicked John in the knee and he elbowed her spine. I pretended not to notice.

“I love you guys,” I whispered. “Like seriously so much.”

“Aw, Aran,” Sadie said sweetly. “I love you more than anyone else ever could.”

John made a noise in his throat. “Please, bitch. I love her the most.”

Comfort washed over me like the rays from the two fae suns.

I’d stupidly assumed that because John was a guy, he wouldn’t be able to express his emotions.

Sun god I was so lucky to have not only one but two amazing friends.

I squeezed with all my might and ignored the popping sound of a stitch breaking on my arm as I said, “I’m going to do everything I can to make sure we all make it out of this alive.”

“Same,” John and Sadie chorused back.

Fae sunshine kissed my soul.

For a second, the world seemed brighter.

“Stop humping each other. You’re causing a scene,” Malum growled roughly from nearby.

Scorpius sneered, “Fucking whore.”

Moment over.

The world was dark.

CHAPTER 18

CORVUS MALUM

FRUSTRATION

The Legionnaire Games: Day 24, hour 4
Three days earlier through present.

I woke up on the floor of our room.

I was alone.

The clock on the wall struck 8:00 p.m. *The rest of my team must be at dinner.*

Groaning in agony, I rolled over, and all the breath left my body.

On the rug beside me, my Revered and Arabella lay in pieces.

Like broken dolls.

Fractured bones stuck out through torn and ragged skin. They were a mess of blood and gore, and their mangled chests were barely breathing.

Their hands were outstretched like they were reaching for each other.

I moved toward Arabella.

She looked so small and pale, helpless. *Who was protecting her?*

Kneeling next to her, I gently brushed the matted curls off her forehead. I needed to help her. I needed to save her.

Make this right.

She should never be in such a horrible state. It wasn't right.

I rubbed the blood off her desperately as I stared down at her unconscious figure. I grabbed at her flesh and pushed pieces of her back together.

No. She needed to be okay.

She should never look like this.

I was the team captain, and she was the physically weakest person on the team. It was my job to protect her, and I'd failed.

Long moments passed as I tried desperately to put organs back into place to speed up the healing process.

Guilt punched me, and I stumbled away from her like she was poisonous.

I'd gone to her first and not my Revered.

It must be the slave tattoo influencing me.

I wanted to puke.

As an Ignis, my actions were sacrilegious.

Ignoring the girl, I turned my full attention to Orion. Found the needle and thread in the healing kit and knelt atop him.

With wounds gaping, I began stitching.

I tried to make it up to him. Showed him my devotion. Gave him everything I could.

Exhausted.

Head spinning with blood loss.

With painstaking precision, I sewed him back together.

I was fully focused on my Revered, but I couldn't stop myself from glancing over every few minutes to make sure Arabella's chest kept rising.

When it didn't for too long of a moment, I had a mini panic attack and lit a pillow on fire.

Her chest rose, and I exhaled with relief.

I didn't like the woman. She was annoying. But I'd gotten used to her surly presence and ridiculous sarcasm.

It was just a captain thing. She was my teammate; that was why I cared. Nothing more.

Arabella stopped breathing again, and I moaned as anxiety twisted my gut.

When her chest rose, I nearly passed out.

I stitched up my Revered with half my attention on the curly-haired woman.

I was in hell.

Hours later the rest of my legion returned to find me covered in blood as I stitched up my Revered.

"Let me help," Scorpius offered.

I growled like a wild animal and used my body to shield Orion from his view.

I was his Ignis. He was my responsibility. My everything.

He was mine to fix.

Against my will my eyes wandered over to Arabella. *She is also mine to fix.* I shook my head to dislodge the inane thoughts the tattoo was putting in my head.

She looked so pale.

Small and vulnerable.

I turned back to Orion with renewed dedication.

Scorpius must have understood what I wasn't saying because he knelt beside me and wiped sweat off my brow as I worked.

John fell to his knees beside Arabella, and the urge to scream at him bubbled up my throat. A needle snapped beneath my fingers as I stopped myself from shoving him away from her.

Scorpius handed me another one silently, but his jaw was also clenched tightly.

I turned back to Orion.

I pretended I wasn't watching John struggle to put her pieces back together again. "Be careful with her," I snarled at him when he was a little too jerky with his movements.

She was too mangled to stitch, with all the gore hanging out of her.

No. Focus on Orion.

Yet again I ripped my gaze away and focused on the most important person in my life. I lost myself in helping him.

At some point, Lothaire came into the room to check on Aran. He pulled at his braid and flexed his fingers as he repeated over and over that he couldn't intervene and help her or we'd all be disqualified and punished.

His words rubbed me the wrong way, and I bristled as I stitched.

If he cared, he would have done something.

Scorpius agreed with me, because he said some choice swear words under his breath.

His daughter was lying in pieces as John pushed her back together, and Lothaire stalked out of the room while mumbling that he couldn't interfere.

Flames leaped across my shoulders.

As he left, Lothaire slammed the door with unnecessary force that made the floor vibrate.

The needle jostled, and I poked Orion's arm.

I growled with frustration and fought the urge to run after him and punish

him for being a shit father.

My thoughts were completely irrational.

After a few deep breaths, I kept working.

Twenty-four hours later, my Revered was stitched up to my exacting standards.

Fingers cramping, I dropped the needle.

My vision blurred.

My untreated injuries had been exacerbated over the last few hours. Orion was covered in more of my blood than his own.

I sat there staring down at him.

His eyelids fluttered open, and he coughed.

I collapsed with relief.

Scorpius shouted for the demon's help, and he hovered over me. Darkness consumed me.

I groaned as I blinked.

Disoriented.

Someone had moved us both. I was tangled with Orion and Scorpius in our bed. I pulled the sheets back, and Orion's wounds were partially healed. Someone had stitched up all my wounds. Both my mates were safe, and my Revered looked much better.

He snored softly and cuddled both of us closer.

Relief hit me like a bullet.

The invisible pressure evaporated off my chest, and I relaxed into the soft mattress and rolled over.

But the tension returned as I looked around the room.

The demons were in their usual bed, but that wasn't what made me stiffen.

No, I was taut because of what was happening in the other bed.

Arabella was sprawled across John's naked chest, and the fucker was propped up on his pillows, holding her. She was covered in stitches and looked a million times better than the last time I'd seen her.

John scowled at me and nuzzled the top of her head.

He shouldn't have been the one to fix her. She is ours.

I didn't consciously make the choice to move, but suddenly I was across the room, ripping Arabella out of John's embrace.

She dared to sleep in his arms while wearing his sweatshirt when she was *our* slave? After everything we'd been through, she taunted us with her

promiscuity.

A small, rational part of me understood my thoughts made no sense.

I knew the brand on my hip was addling my brain.

But knowing didn't make a difference.

I was so angry that I almost missed the fact that Arabella wasn't just stitched up; she was also clean.

She scrambled out of bed in John's sweatshirt.

Had they showered together?

I saw red and stalked her across the room like a wild animal. Seethed as she locked the door and ignored me.

Calmed myself by punching John.

Finally, Arabella emerged from the bathroom with a bored expression on her face. Like she was completely apathetic to having almost died. Like she didn't care that she'd touched another man.

It made me homicidal.

She walked by and Orion's scent filled my nose. My lips curled upward, and satisfaction warmed my blood. She was wearing my Revered's sweatshirt.

For some unfathomable reason, I liked that she was wearing his clothes. I really liked it. *Unacceptable. She's a disgrace.*

I forced my lips downward.

Scowled.

Focused on my anger. The emotion grew as I followed her and John down the hall.

Students stared up at our table. Tongues moved, heads bent close, and fingers pointed. They gawked at us.

She looked terrible, and everyone was whispering about it.

Even the other legions abandoned the pretense of eating and gawked at her.

The large man from the angel legion with two different colored eyes glowered like he had a personal grudge against *our* slave.

He hadn't earned the right to hate her. But I had.

The room's buzz faded into the background as Arabella embraced Sadie and John.

Eerie silence prevailed.

The *nothingness* of our missing mating song was becoming more prevalent. The silence felt cold.

Dust particles drifted.

Goose bumps prickled across my arms as the phantom chill enveloped me.

The gnarled shadows from the sacred tree drifted back and forth as if the branches were in tune with the quiet. I raked my hand across my shaved head and tried to physically dislodge my ridiculous thoughts.

Was I cracking under the pressure? Maybe they were right and I was too young to be the leader of the kings.

My Revered squeezed my shoulder, and his touch grounded me. My Protector dug his nails into the nape of my neck, and I leaned back into the pain.

I needed to focus on the problem: Arabella.

Instead of sitting down and eating like every other competitor, she hugged John and Sadie.

Why couldn't she keep her hands to herself for five fucking seconds?

The plan was to go to the dining hall and eat a meal. How difficult was that to follow? For one sun-god-damned minute, it would be nice if everyone just obeyed me.

I was the captain.

I was supposed to be the one calling the shots.

Yet once again Arabella defied me.

John's wide body completely dwarfed the women as the three of them basically mounted one another in public. They were all over one another.

Only pathetic children hugged like this.

It was embarrassing.

John's chin rested on top of blue hair, and for a split second, he stopped making pathetic eyes down at our slave and glanced at me.

Hooded dark eyes narrowed.

Slowly, the corner of John's mouth pulled up in a smirk as he made a show of nuzzling his chin against her curls.

I saw red.

It wasn't from the eclipse.

He pulled Arabella tighter against his chest, and his lips moved as he whispered something only she could hear. His eyes didn't leave mine.

John was staking his claim.

My top lip curled up with disgust because he could have her. She was *nothing* to us. Nothing.

Arabella let him haul her closer and melted against his chest.

My flames shot higher.

Scratch that. John could have her when I gave her away.

I'm in control, I repeated as I took a deep breath.

It was a lie, and I knew it. The slave brand controlled me.

John tilted his body to the side, and Arabella smiled up at him as he spoke. She looked at him reverently.

It was obvious what was happening.

The House of Malum was bound to a slut.

Scorpius stiffened next to me, and his breath caught as his expression became glacial like he'd heard something upsetting.

"What did John just say?" As I asked, my chest tightened because I didn't want to know the answer.

Scorpius gritted his teeth. "He told her he loves her."

The pressure in my chest became an avalanche.

Love. A made-up word that males used to manipulate women. A childish delusion. A joke.

It meant nothing.

Loyalty and devotion were tangible actions that could be shown. Soul bonds were real.

Love was not.

It was just a word.

I stomped over and snarled at them, "Stop humping each other. You're causing a scene."

They pulled apart, and I pulled out my chair roughly, the wood creaking as I threw myself down.

The rest of my team followed my lead and sat down.

I pulled out Orion's seat for him and concentrated on fussing over my Revered. His usual golden skin was pale as he stared at where John still had his arm hanging over Arabella's shoulder. He was probably saying more meaningless words.

I cleared my throat loudly.

Finally, John and Sadie pulled away.

When Arabella settled into her seat across from Scorpius, the ache in my muscles didn't relax.

The tension mounted.

Because every few seconds, Arabella flashed John a wide, toothy grin.

She practically radiated bliss. Laughed. Smiled.

Like she didn't have a care in the world.

Like she hadn't been in mangled pieces two days ago.

And since today the universe was conspiring to test my patience, three male students approached our table.

From their green clothes, they were pathetic commoners.

And because the universe was conspiring to make me lose control and go on a murdering rampage, the three men stopped in front of our slave.

Orion made a sound of disgust and leaned over to describe them to Scorpius. "Three men just approached her. All of them have their hair dyed blue. They are wearing caps on their ears like they want to be fae. From their pathetic statures, they're a minor species from the Olympus realm."

Scorpius scoffed.

In a turn of events no one saw coming, the three fae wannabes fell to their knees and bowed before Arabella. "Your Highness, we wanted to welcome you formally to the academy. Where we are from, we worship the fae."

The royal students, whose table was closest to our table, turned to stare at the spectacle.

Arabella turned bright red. The color clashed horribly with the green-and-blue bruises covering her face.

"Um, thanks, guys," she said awkwardly.

Next to her, John put his hand over his mouth and shook with laughter.

The fake fae idiots smiled at her words like she was a goddess.

They spoke in unison and said, "We give you our service. The throne of death has turned black for you for the first time in centuries. You are even more powerful and ruthless than your mother and are the only ruler we will accept."

Arabella blanched.

"Well, th-th-that's good," she stuttered and stared down at her plate like she was desperate to be anywhere but talking to them.

They smiled like puppies.

One man grabbed Arabella's hand and pressed his lips aggressively to her still-healing fingers.

John stopped laughing and glared at him.

I made a mental note to remove the man's lips.

"Get your filthy mouth off her," I snarled, and Orion nodded. Scorpius bared his teeth as he realized what was going on.

The fake fae idiot didn't move. He just stared at Arabella like I hadn't even spoken.

I released a little pressure.

His lips lit on fire.

I smirked as he yelped and stumbled backward while slapping his face.

"Really, Malum." Arabella rolled her eyes. "Was that necessary?"

The other's eyes widened. "Our Highness defends us to the kings. She is not only powerful but kind."

"Um." Arabella pursed her lips. "Sure?"

"Don't forget she's also gorgeous!" Sadie yelled from the table next to ours.

The royal students who were following the unfolding spectacle chuckled.

I hated the red-eyed bitch. Could she not keep her mouth shut for five seconds?

"Of course, Our Highness is the fairest of them all." The third blue-haired idiot nodded. The fact that they'd clearly dyed their hair to match hers was beyond ridiculous. Who did that?

Arabella covered her face with her hands and sucked aggressively on her pipe.

I scoffed. "She's covered in bruises and looks like shit."

It was the truth.

She'd never looked worse.

"She's *strong* and beautiful," the idiot whose lips were still smoking snarled at me.

"It's not your place to say," Scorpius sneered. "A pathetic commoner like yourself should shut his fucking mouth and learn his place."

Both my mates leaned forward like they were going to leap across the table and attack.

"Leave, you're causing a commotion," Vegar snapped at the men as black lines expanded under his eyes.

I nodded in agreement.

Lately the demons seemed to be the only rational people.

But of course, the three men ignored him and kept staring at their queen.

I debated the merits of lighting them fully on fire. No one would care if they were gone. I could tell.

"Thanks for—" Arabella waved her hand in the air. "—whatever this was. But you can go back to your seats. I, uh..." She trailed off like she was

searching for the right words. “Appreciate your devotion to the crown.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” They dropped into a fresh round of bowing. “We will defend your honor to the school.”

Finally, they walked away and left us.

The rest of the meal was a test of my already frayed patience.

John cracked jokes about Arabella’s honor while she laughed back and made comments about finally getting the recognition she deserved.

When the debacle of a meal was finally over, I nearly screamed with relief.

I’d said earlier that we needed to train, but from the way Orion and Arabella both swayed on their feet, what we needed was more rest.

As we passed the other legion tables on our way out, the angel with heterochromia muttered something under his breath.

Scorpius leaned closer. “He just called her ‘sinful blood.’ Any idea what that means?”

I shook my head and made a mental note to question him.

Did he know something about Arabella, besides the tattoo, that would explain why our mating song was quiet?

“What are we doing now?” Vegar asked me when we were in the hall.

“Rest,” I said.

Arabella sighed. “Thank the sun god.” And John high-fived her.

With every step back to our room, I regretted my decision.

Crack.

Lightning illuminated John and Arabella. Arms thrown over each other’s shoulders, they walked in tandem. Leaned on each other. Whispered in each other’s ear.

Had they always been this insufferably close? I remembered them hanging on to each other during training in the sea, and I knew they’d shared a cot, but I hadn’t realized they’d gotten so close.

It didn’t escape my notice that waiting for us in the room were only three beds because the other mattresses had been ripped into makeshift cots on the floor.

The two of them were going to be cuddling all night.

My ire mounted.

When we got to our door, I put my hands out. “Change of plans.”

Arabella tripped, and the demons looked at me warily.

I smirked. “We’re going to let off some steam.”

The other men relaxed as they realized my meaning, and they grinned back at me. Arabella was the only one who tensed.

“I’m going to the library,” she muttered and pushed past me.

I reached out and grabbed her arm. Tightened my hold so she couldn’t pass. Leaned forward and inhaled.

Her scent was sharper than usual. Colder.

Like breathing in dry ice.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins.

“No. You’re not.” My smile grew as her face registered the horror of her predicament.

The slave brand kept her close.

She turned to my Revered with big eyes and pouted. “Will you come with me to the library?”

Before Orion could fall victim to her manipulation, Scorpius grabbed him by his neck and slammed their lips together.

My Protector owned my Revered.

Consumed him.

They groaned and melted against each other.

To anyone else, it looked like two men consumed with desire for each other, but their sounds weren’t of pleasure.

They were of pain.

Two men who wanted to be together more than they wanted to breathe. Yet they couldn’t be together. Not yet.

The longer they kissed, the more my own frenzied need increased. Flames screamed in my blood for release. A fever boiled my blood.

I imagined someone softer beneath them. Wild, curly hair.

Usually, I could ignore the urge to fuck my mates because I knew it only ended in misery. The need was stronger than it had ever been.

My cock ached. The urge to rut was so overwhelming that my thighs and abs cramped.

“No, he will not.” I snarled and pressed the button on the wall that called for servants.

A man immediately appeared in the door, and I spat at him, “Tell the students the kings are willing to fuck. Only women for us. What do you want, John?”

John’s mouth opened and closed as he glanced down at Arabella quickly.

I jabbed the enchanted button harder. “John will take whoever,” I

answered for him.

Arabella gaped at the door as the man hurried off. “We have a servant call button? How did I not know about this?”

No one answered her.

She muttered angrily under her breath and threw herself into her bed as the rest of us showered, put on cologne, and got ready for the night.

The women arrived quickly.

Hours later, I was pistoning my dick into the ass of a buxom royal student as Scorpius took her mouth. It was already the fourth woman we’d taken. He had a knife pressed to her throat, but his eyes were closed like he was imagining someone else.

I grunted as I snapped my hips and slammed the belt across her ass.

I kept going soft and had to stop and imagine pale skin, curly blue hair, and wide blue eyes.

Usually, I barely noticed the women under us.

They were tools that helped keep the fire in my veins from consuming me.

Their obedience was all I wanted.

For the fourth time tonight, annoyance sparked in my chest as the hips moved back against me. The woman was too short, and her boobs and ass were too big. She didn’t have any muscles.

I wanted her to be stronger. Taller. Less endowed. With more muscles. Sassier.

I wanted her to fight me, which was completely irrational because I’d always liked my women soft and pliable.

Meek.

None of the women we’d fucked had felt right. There’d been something wrong with each one of them.

I was losing my mind.

My erection began to deflate, and I focused my attention on the corner where Orion had a woman pressed against the wall. He was pounding into her like he had a grudge.

All afternoon he’d been rougher than usual.

Practically feral.

My deflating cock swelled as I watched his passion.

I slammed my hips harder into the woman beneath me, but when my balls pulled up and the familiar tightening had my ass clenching, I stopped

watching my Revered.

Turned my head.

Arabella was lying upside down on John's bed. Fully clothed with her hoodie up over her head.

John lay beside her, shirtless with his pants low on his hips.

They were taking turns blowing smoke animals and watching her deranged crow fight them.

She smiled broadly like she didn't have a care in the world.

It seemed innocent.

Two friends hanging out.

But two hours ago, John had had his sweatpants down around his knees as a girl choked on his dick.

It hadn't escaped my notice that Arabella had watched.

After he'd come down her throat, John had refused to do anything else with the woman, even as she begged him for it.

He'd never once refused someone, male or female, because his lust rivaled ours. And now he was lying next to our slave, looking positively chummy as he ignored the stream of men and women that came asking for his dick.

I didn't like it.

Toxic emotions swirled in my gut as I pistoned my hips harder and focused on the way Arabella's lips wrapped around her pipe.

She leaned her head back with her eyes closed and a grin on her lips. Her delicate neck was extended over the side of the bed as she blew out smoke.

Did she know what she looked like? What that position made me want to do to her?

I wanted to destroy her.

Orion turned his head to stare at her. The girl beneath him slapped against the wall harder.

Arabella exhaled smoke slowly, bee-stung lips hissing, and Scorpius swore as he came.

Bloodshot eyes opened.

Her gaze locked on mine, and she smiled broader.

My stomach cramped because I could tell she was faking it.

She was clearly in pain, yet she masked it. She put on a front for everyone.

For some reason the fact that she was pretending pissed me off.

She used sarcasm as a shield.
I slammed the belt down as hard as I could.
I fought the urge to grimace with disgust at the person beneath me, and I turned to glare across the room.
Arabella studied her palm with a confused expression like she found something interesting on her hand.
Then she flipped up her middle finger and glared.
Dark-blue eyes were cold as ice.
Emotionless.
I bared my teeth at her, and she smiled back at me mockingly.
My lips curved up in a genuine smile, and I couldn't stop the chuckle that burst out.
The woman beneath me moaned annoyingly loud.
I stopped laughing.
Arabella raised her brow and shook her head as she took a long drag from her pipe. Smoke curled slowly out of her ridiculous mouth.
My balls tightened as a jolt of pleasure streaked down my spine.
Leather cracked loudly as I slammed it down.
Arabella flinched but her congenial expression didn't fall.
I smiled back.
My expression was as fake as hers.

CHAPTER 19

ARAN

SECRETS

The Legionnaire Games: Day 30, hour 11

The haze lifted.

For a few blessed hours, the world was a warm, bright place filled with Sadie, John, and warm hugs.

I laughed with John as three fake fae lunatics bowed and kissed my knuckles.

For once, everything was going my way.

I had an overwhelming urge to light scented candles and gossip with Sadie about how stupid the kings were. Go for a nice breezy jog. Paint my nails red and put on lip gloss.

In my mind I was fashionable and carefree.

In reality, there was no reality. I played pretend.

Malum even retracted his earlier statement and said we could rest. Blessings were truly raining down around me.

I shuffled down the lightning-streaked hall, leaning against John. To an outside observer, it would seem like we had our arms across each other's shoulders in a friendly embrace.

John was fully supporting me.

Whatever they'd done to slow our healing was really screwing up my joints.

I hobbled. Stabbing pain shot through my hips and knees as cartilage popped and snapped.

Sweat dotted my brow as John leaned to his right so he was basically carrying me.

“Dude, I’m fine,” I said casually and tugged away from his grip.

John smirked. “Sure, dude.” His grip tightened, and he didn’t release me.

I didn’t fight him.

How did I get such loyal friends?

John had hauled my ass out of the freezing ocean, fought next to me in battles, matched my pace on runs, and helped me get away with murder. And Sadie had almost started an inter-realm war in her quest to save me from this academy.

I was lucky.

My heart was full of warmth.

So lucky.

Malum stopped in front of our door, and his harsh features pulled up into an evil sneer. “Change of plans. We’re going to let off some steam.”

His meaning doused me with a bucket of cold water.

Then Malum grabbed my arm and said I couldn’t go to the library.

My spirits sank further.

I was bound to them and couldn’t leave.

Then, to add insult to injury, Scorpius devoured Orion’s mouth and distracted the only devil that might have been on my side.

I ignored the streaks of pain that lit up my back as they kissed. And I didn’t dwell on the images of Orion and Scorpius kissing while I lay between them, which flooded my brain.

I needed a bottle of unidentified enchanted pills and a week of therapy. ASAP.

When Malum asked if John wanted a man or a woman, a horrible feeling crushed my chest. I felt sick, which was completely irrational. John was just my friend. I didn’t care who he had sex with.

You’re still so lucky, I reminded myself as I climbed into John’s bed.

A few beds down, the demons crawled under their sheets as they attacked each other with kisses. Proof that romance wasn’t dead for everyone.

Just some of us.

The door opened, and four women entered the room in a cloud of perfume.

They were a gaggle of smooth, unblemished skin, bright eyes, long glossy hair, shiny lips, and expertly applied makeup.

They sparkled.

From their coy smiles and effervescent laughter, they still possessed a will to live. I made a mental note to ask them after the party where they got their energy from.

Was it journaling, drinking green juice, or hitting men that kept the light shining in their eyes?

I'd try anything.

I pushed my pipe between my lips and turned my hands over.

Swollen knuckles and gnarled fingers stared back at me. Raw cuticles and ravaged nails. A long gash snaked across the top of my hand and trailed down my forearm. It puckered grotesquely.

Green-and-black bruises.

The sick sensation twisting in my lower stomach intensified.

I pulled my hoodie up. Covered my wild curls. Tucked my knees under so I was cocooned in soft fabric and tugged the sleeves over my hands.

Hid myself.

Leaned back against the wall.

I inhaled twice in rapid succession, then exhaled slowly.

Sixteen, twenty-five, thirty-six, forty-nine, sixty-four, eighty-one, one hundred, one hundred and twenty-one, I counted upward in square roots.

I held on to that feeling of being lucky with bloody nails.

You are blessed.

The demons writhed under their sheets, and each king had a woman beneath him. Grunts, slaps, and moans echoed.

The men fornicating was nothing new, but something felt different, and it wasn't that I was no longer disguised as a dude.

I tried to look away.

Tried to not stare.

I failed.

I watched with morbid fascination.

Everyone was naked but John. He still wore his T-shirt, but his sweatpants were pushed down his muscular thighs.

A black-haired woman with curly hair knelt in front of him, and her impressive boobs were pushed up in a lacy bra.

She was small and curvy. Excessively pretty as she gagged with half his dick down her throat while John's hands fisted her curls.

His face was barren of dimples.

His jaw clenched, his dark eyes hooded, and the muscular lines of his neck strained. He didn't look like my happy-go-lucky friend.

John pulled the woman back and forth on his dick.

He looked intense.

His pace was slow, almost torturous, and it was a stark contrast to the kings', who pistoned their hips like it was a race.

John leisurely wrung out his pleasure with smooth, hypnotizing movements.

Look away. You're staring at your friend like a creep. What are you doing?

John's tongue snaked out and licked his surprisingly full lower lip. He groaned softly as he dragged his hips back and forth.

Fireworks of pain exploded down my spine.

I meant to look away, I meant to study my cuticles or stare at Horse, I meant to do anything but watch my friend have sex.

But I didn't.

Minutes stretched.

Now that I was staring at them, men were kinda ugly.

I couldn't look away.

Goose bumps erupted across my skin, and I shivered. My flesh chilled. The blinds were still open, but the room twisted in shades of grayish red.

I picked my lip and tugged at the fine layer of skin.

Pulled it off. For a long moment, I debated selling it for money to my fae worshippers. Then I remembered I was rich and stopped wondering how much I could charge for my skin.

I forced myself to focus on the room.

Such a stupid thing—sex—just two bodies wringing pleasure from each other. Not a big deal, just a natural bodily response.

One I could never do without pain.

My head throbbed with the beginning of a tension migraine. The weight of an imaginary fae crown was heavy on my skull.

The word *whore* crushed my spine.

In my mind, I took the place of the leviathan competitor, and I was crucified to the sacred tree. Bleeding out slowly, I whimpered as people talked and chatted around me.

Sun god, he was being tortured a foot away from me as I'd laughed while feeling lucky.

Sari's expression of disgust flashed through my mind.

I shivered harder.

She wasn't wrong.

John glanced up, and his dark eyes pinned me as his mouth opened in ecstasy.

He held the woman's face still as he found his release. Cum spilled out of the corner of her lips.

John tucked himself back into his pants, and he looked around the room. His expression went from pleased to concerned as he gave me a questioning smile.

I tried to return it, but I couldn't.

My facial muscles didn't work.

The haze was back.

"You okay, Aran?" John asked as he climbed onto the bed beside me.

He smelled like sweat and sex.

Sick burned my throat as I rasped, "Sure."

He pried the pipe from my icy fingers. "Here, let's play a game. I've been wanting to do this." He blew out a smoke eagle. "Now we'll see who wins."

His dimple flashed.

"Sounds fun." My voice was far away, like I was speaking down a long, dark tunnel.

John pitted different animals against my crow, but each one lost the fight. Of course they did. Horse was named Horse for a reason. He was a majestic beast.

After a few rounds, John randomly blurted out, "I'm sorry." He dragged his hands roughly through his messy brown hair.

"For what?" My voice had no inflection. "Everything's fine."

"Aran, I—"

I held my hand up. "Give me the pipe. I want to see Horse take on a dragon."

John narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth like he was going to say something else.

With every ounce of strength I possessed, I forced my lips to curl upward and laughed. "Seriously, don't be weird. I'm fine. Just tired."

A long moment passed, then John grinned. "Okay, dude. All my money's on the dragon."

He draped his arm across my shoulder.

“You’re on.” I kept smiling until my cheeks ached.

Hours later, Malum’s silver eyes speared me as he bellowed his release. Because who didn’t love coming while staring into the eyes of their enemy? Normal people.

If John was smooth, then the fiery king was savage.

Brutal.

Wild.

He smiled at me, flashed white teeth-stained pink from where he’d bitten the woman beneath him. Scarlet flames trailed across his shoulders like a cape.

I studied my palm like I found something interesting, then flipped him off.

His head tipped back, bronze muscles tensed as he laughed.

Creep.

I shivered but didn’t let my cheeks pull downward as I matched his expression.

Two monsters. Acknowledging each other.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I pulled my hood lower.

I sank deeper into a state of fugue.

And my smile didn’t fall as I slept. It didn’t fall when we went for a fifteen-mile morning jog. It held as we stretched and did a circuit of push-ups, sit-ups, and burpees. It stayed in place for every. Single. Meal.

Even when I searched the great hall and found Sari glaring at me like I was repulsive.

I smiled wider.

Her lips curled with disgust, and she looked away as my heart cracked in my chest.

The grin was plastered on my face as Sadie and Jax rebraided my hair while we talked to the girls on the phone.

I spent days in a trancelike haze with a fake grin on my lips, thinking I’d fooled everyone.

I was wrong.

After my hair was sorted into two perfect French braids, I excused myself to use Sadie’s bathroom.

With the lights turned off, I splashed water on my face and hyperventilated at the sink. Let the darkness comfort me.

The door squealed, and I looked up.

Jinx's midnight-black eyes hovered inches from my face, and since I was hunched over, we were the same height.

"Pull yourself together," she ordered.

"Why are you in here?" I forced out a carefree chuckle. "Also, what are you talking about? I'm fine."

Crack. A palm smacked my face.

"Ow, what the fuck?" I clutched my already bruised jaw as it throbbed in time with my heartbeat.

Jinx rolled her eyes. "You need to stop feeling sorry for yourself. At least pretend you have a shred of emotional maturity."

"Hmm." I tapped my lip like I was considering it. "Get away from me before I murder you."

Crack. She smacked me again.

"Horse, attack the small, malnourished bitch," I snarled.

My crow didn't budge from where he was perched on my shoulder. In fact, I was 99 percent certain he rolled his eyes at me. He'd never refused to obey me before.

I grumbled at him, "I'm renaming you Rat."

Jinx leaned forward so our noses almost touched.

She whispered forcefully, "Concentrate, woman. This is serious. A lot is at stake right now, and you're falling apart like you've earned the luxury to mope. You need to focus on acting righteously, starting post hoc."

"Grow up," I scoffed with disbelief. "There's no such thing as righteousness. Name one thing in this realm that's morally proper. Go ahead. I'll wait."

Jinx's pale features seemed pointier in the darkness, and I had the sudden urge to look away because it was like staring into the uncanny valley.

Something was off, and I couldn't put my finger on it.

She snarled, "If I had to tell you, then it wouldn't be justifiable good. It would be you mimicking virtue to prop up your overinflated ego and hollow sense of self."

I rolled my eyes.

"You think you're so smart because you read Nietzsche and philosophers." My laugh was raspy and harsh. "But you know nothing about the real world. I don't take advice from sheltered little girls."

Jinx grabbed the front of my hoodie with surprising strength. "You will listen or you will perish. I'm all you have. I'm all you've ever had, but you're

too blind and self-centered.”

“If you’re all I have”—I let her pull me closer—“then why would I care about righteousness when I’m already damned?” I scoffed. “Talk to me when you’ve suffered a tenth of what I’ve gone through. Until then, leave me alone.”

A noise that sounded suspiciously like a growl rumbled in Jinx’s chest.

She quivered with anger as she whisper-yelled, “You wouldn’t survive a day in my body. You have no idea what I’ve done or what’s at stake.” Her voice dripped with desperation.

I’d never seen her lose control like this.

I opened my mouth to argue back, then paused because she was a thirteen-year-old girl with a loving family. “What’s at stake? What’s wrong with your body?”

Since I was part of that family, it was my job to protect her.

“Forget I said that.” Jinx released my clothes and took a step away.

There was something she wasn’t telling me.

“No.” I grabbed her arm and pushed her back against the wall. I used my much larger body to intimidate her. “Explain yourself right now. What are you hiding from us?”

“I wasn’t planning on doing this, but,” Jinx mumbled under her breath.

The blacks of her corneas expanded until they consumed the whites of her eyes.

It was like staring into the vacuum of space.

I needed to look deeper.

If only I could search the depths, I’d discover things I’d never known.

My subconscious brain wrenched my head to the side before I’d consciously recognized that I needed to disengage.

“No, look at me. Don’t look away,” Jinx implored.

I stared at the tile floor as I gasped for air. My eyes also went black when I was enraged.

Are we somehow connected? Is she also fae?

My analytical mind whirled as it struggled to put together all the pieces. So many possibilities.

None of them good.

“Jinx, did you also go into the bathroom? Everything okay?” Sadie called from the other side of the door.

“Yes. We’re fine!” Jinx yelled back in a fake singsong voice.

Keeping my eyes averted on the ground, I gritted my teeth and whispered, "You have ten seconds to explain yourself or I will scream for Sadie and let everyone know that you have an ability you've been hiding from us. Also that you're apparently suffering every day. I'm sure that won't make everyone freak the fuck out."

Jinx whined, "Friggin' hell."

"Did you just say 'frig'?" I asked incredulously.

"Swearing," she said coldly, "is the sign of a weak mind."

"Well, you're about to be grounded for the rest of your life, so you have five seconds to explain." My voice rose as I spoke.

"Shut the hell up," Jinx whispered.

"I'm pretty sure that's a swear word. You're a hypocrite. Also, you have two seconds."

"Fine!" Jinx paused, then said, "I-have-the-ability-to-make-people-forget-things-if-they-look-into-my-eyes."

I gaped.

Let her words sink in.

She can make people forget things if they look into her eyes.

I paused because she'd acquiesced way too easily.

Slowly I said, "And you're telling me this because you still plan on making me forget this conversation. Correct?" I shook her back and forth, and her silence was damning. "Well, checkmate, little girl, I'm never looking at your face ever again."

Jinx kicked the wall. "You're a fool. You have no idea what's going on."

"Explain why I need to be righteous. Explain what's going on." I gasped as it dawned on me. "Oh my sun god. What else have you made me forget?"

Jinx said too quickly, "Nothing, just evidence that I'm in pain. Forget about this please. I'm begging you."

I body-slammed her, pseudo-gently, into the wall.

She was lying.

"Sadie, I have something to tell you!" I whispered loudly as I kept my eyes averted.

"No, please, please, please," Jinx begged, sounding for the first time in her life like the child she was.

I exhaled slowly and infused my voice with sincerity. "Just tell me why you need me to act a certain way and I won't tell them anything. I promise."

There was a long, silent moment.

Finally, Jinx's voice broke, and she said, "I can't. I really wish I could, but I swear on Sadie's life that I can't. It's forbidden. All I can do is try to guide you into making the *right* choices. If I explain things, then your motivations are muddled. I swear."

I released her.

Nodded and said, "Okay."

Jinx sagged against the wall and said in a small voice, "Thanks for being a good friend, Aran."

I screamed, "*Sadie, Jinx has been erasing all our memories! She can look us in the eyes and make us forget things! She's probably been doing it her whole life and is hiding things from us! Also, she's apparently in pain every day!*"

"WHAT?" Jax roared.

There was a loud cracking noise as the bathroom door was torn off the hinges. Five shifters crowded the space.

I shrieked, "*No one look her in the eyes!*"

Jinx whispered brokenly, "I'll never forgive you for this."

"Oh, please," I scoffed. "I didn't buy your pathetic 'woe is me' act for a second." My voice dripped with sarcasm as I threw her words back at her, "And I'm trying to do the right thing. Keeping secrets isn't right."

Jinx emitted a high-pitched war cry as someone constrained her.

Ten minutes later, Jinx was tied to a chair with bed linens and was facing the wall.

She'd refused to talk until Jax promised he'd voluntarily withdraw from the competition and get strung up in the tree.

He wasn't joking.

Even I was intimidated by the threat.

Jinx had never cried, and the full-body shudders that racked her weren't acting. You couldn't fake grief like that.

Everyone was silent.

Finally, Sadie asked softly, "What can you tell us? Why are you in pain? Please explain?" Her voice cracked.

A long moment passed.

"I don't use it often, I promise," Jinx replied weakly.

Jax alpha-barked, "Tell us. Now."

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as he used his persuasion and words were ripped from Jinx's throat.

“I suffer,” she gasped. “Every night. That is all I can say.”

Jax roared like a wounded bear.

The awful sound tore through the room and made the hair on my neck stand up.

Jax alpha-barked, “What have you made us forget?”

Jinx whimpered, “So much.” She gasped and shuddered like she was in pain. “I’ve been enchanted to not speak of it.” Tears streamed down her face. “That is all I can say.” Her voice broke. “I promise.”

She trembled violently.

Her tiny figure was racked with anguish as she cowered before her family.

Jax’s hands trembled as he leaned forward and hugged Jinx’s tied-up figure.

My mind was buzzing with new information.

My breathing was ragged.

Bile burned my throat.

Jinx suffered, and she clearly wiped anyone’s memory who witnessed her episodes. Who knew what else she’d taken from us?

As she convulsed with pain, I remembered with startling clarity the first day I’d learned suffering.

Surprisingly, it had had nothing to do with Mother lighting me on fire.

When I was fourteen years old, the tutor at the palace had me take a five-hour-long written intelligence test. It was all questions about analytics and problem-solving.

I’d thought it was easy.

The next day, I’d been pulled out of the few classes I got to take with other children.

My tutor had never looked me in the eye again.

Palace aids had whispered as I passed in the halls. Mother had stared at me strangely during meals, and even the servants had refused to talk to me anymore.

I’d never received the results from that test, and whenever I’d asked about it, people acted like they didn’t know what I was talking about.

They’d lied to me.

Everyone had.

The collective betrayal had hurt worse than Mother lighting me on fire. Before then, my young brain had decided Mother was the villain and

everyone else was nice. After I'd taken the test, the illusion disappeared.

Everyone could betray me.

Maybe it had been the increased isolation. Maybe it had been a chemical imbalance in my brain. Either way, after a week of everyone acting strange, I'd woken up to melancholy.

The world had been gray.

Ornate drapes had been pulled wide open, and two suns had filled the sky; rays had streamed across the lavish fabrics of my bedroom.

But my teeth had chattered from cold.

Everything had been steeped in shades of ashen blue. Colorless. One-dimensional and flat.

Servants' faces had blurred around me as they spoke, and their words had been lost, because for the first time in my young life, time had warped and distorted around me.

Depression hadn't slowly crept up on me like a wound left untreated. It hadn't festered.

The haze had hit me like a bullet.

Numbness had ensconced my existence in a layer of impenetrable ice.

It had never left.

Back in the present, Jinx's narrow shoulders shook back and forth as she sobbed in her brother's arms.

When I was about her age, I'd also learned to suffer.

It was like staring in the mirror.

The acknowledgment made me feel profoundly uncomfortable in ways I couldn't understand. There were limits to the conscious experience.

It had been a few hours in Sadie's room, but it felt like days.

I stumbled away into the hall on shaky legs and barely noticed when Orion stood up from where he was waiting for me. He lunged for me.

Orion's grip on my arm was the only thing that kept me from face-planting into the lightning that streaked down the walls.

I'd been so obsessed with my pain that I'd missed the signs.

A child under my care had suffered horribly, and I'd done nothing but whine about myself.

I keeled over and heaved liquids onto the marble floor.

Orion held my braids away from my face as he rubbed my back.

I pulled away from his touch.

The haze was becoming a vortex, and it was pulling me under.

Deeper.
Into the black.

CHAPTER 20

ORION

SWEETHEART

The Legionnaire Games: Day 32, hour 24

Arabella vomited on her hands and knees.

It was late, and we were the only ones in the hall. Everyone else was asleep, getting as much rest as they could before tomorrow's competition.

"Please, let me help you," I whispered as I reached down, but she pushed and kicked to get away from me.

I hated seeing her like this.

Broken.

Suffering.

She needed someone to protect her. I wanted to be that person.

A few hours ago, she'd entered the shifter legion's room with wild hair and a smile on her face.

She'd left with braids and a haunted expression.

Now her movements were jerky and her eyes wide, unfocused, and sightless like she was far away.

"What happened, sweetheart?" I asked as I approached her with my palms up in a nonthreatening position.

I'd read a book about the psychology of body language.

Appearing approachable was important to fostering trust with someone.

The book had also said that if you stared into someone's eyes for over a minute, chemicals would release in their brain that mimicked love. Attachment. Dependence.

I kept my eyes on Arabella every chance I got.

Problem was, it wasn't working.

Now, as I approached her, either she couldn't hear me over the sound of her retching or she didn't care to answer.

"Sweetheart, are you okay?" I asked softly.

She pointedly turned her head in the other direction.

I scratched at my throat as the urge to scream tightened my chest.

Gasping for air, I couldn't breathe.

I needed her to look at me, but I couldn't do anything but whisper quietly, and I couldn't get her attention. Sometimes I wished I couldn't speak at all. At least then, words wouldn't feel so close. Like I could taste them.

Eternally taunting me.

Losing your ability to speak was painful, but having the ability and being unable to use it was torture.

Every day.

Every night.

Every moment of my life.

I was trapped.

And there was no escaping it. No solution. No way out.

Just suffering.

And it was driving me to madness. My mates had recognized the signs and tried to coddle me to protect me from myself, but it wasn't working.

Nothing was.

Slowly but surely my ability to cope was eroding around me.

More often than not, I woke with my mouth open on a silent scream. It was bubbling under my skin at all times, and all it would take was a little impetus and boom.

I'd explode.

All I wanted was to open my throat and scream until my vocal cords were shredded and my body vibrated with the pleasure of letting go.

As a teenager, I'd have sworn I'd never lose control. I wasn't a monster, so I'd never release my voice unless it was absolutely necessary.

Now it was not a matter of if; it was only a matter of *when*.

The years hadn't been kind.

Every day, I woke up and wondered if today would be the day I'd do the unforgivable and push myself and my mates into total damnation.

Would it be in a crowded room? In a city surrounded by millions of

unsuspecting sheep?

Someday I'd lead them all to slaughter, and the release would taste so sweet that I wouldn't care.

Pain had a funny way of tearing you to shreds, piece by little piece.

And I was at my breaking point.

"Please, baby," I whispered as loudly as I dared without using the full power of my voice.

Arabella shivered on the marble floor and didn't turn her head to acknowledge me. She gave me nothing.

I took a step forward and touched her arm. Gently.

She scrambled away from me. Knees clacking against stone as she gathered herself to her feet and stumbled down the hall.

She ran.

Away. From. Me.

I slapped my hand over my mouth as I hurried after her, words burning my tongue and begging to be released.

As she sprinted down the halls, my vision wavered like it did when my tattoos activated. I felt the petals drifting down my neck and across my collarbone.

Arabella wasn't supposed to run from me.

I'd been so nice to Aran. To her.

I was the one who kissed her lips.

I was the one who held her tenderly.

I was the one who told the men to back off.

I played the part of the good guy so she would run *to* me, not away.

I called her nice names and looked her in the eye and kept my body posture nonthreatening.

All of that work.

For her to run away like I hadn't already claimed her as mine.

Would it be different if I could talk? Would she fall against me and melt at my pretty words?

I'd thought my lack of voice didn't matter to her.

Arabella was the first person besides my mates who could read my lips.

She was the first person who seemed to actually see me and not just want me for my voice.

For the last months, she'd watched me constantly.

In class, at meals, in our room, pink had stained her cheeks as she stared

at me when she thought I wasn't looking. Her attention had been a balm to my frazzled soul.

Arabella provided the perfect distraction from the pain slowly eating me alive.

There was only one thing that kept me from remembering how trapped I was in my own skin.

One thing I used to cope—obsession.

Infatuation was too pleasant a word to describe it.

I was overwhelmed by a frenzied need to own, taste, and know everything about another person. To climb under their skin. To possess them so fully they didn't know where I ended and they began.

It had started years ago with Corvus and Scorpius, and to this day, I still watched them compulsively.

I thought about them constantly.

Every second of my life was filled with planning. I planned how I would touch them. Defile them. Own them. Make them irrevocably mine.

But I couldn't touch my mates without pain, not yet.

For years, my poison of choice had been outside my grasp. Thinking about them but not being able to act on my urges was damnation incarnate.

So I'd unraveled.

At the seams.

Until about two months ago when I'd found someone new to obsess over. Someone I could actually taste. I could ruin.

For the first time in forever, I'd had a purpose and a distraction that actually worked.

It had all been going to plan.

I'd played the part of the nice guy.

Smiled when Aran needed it and stuck up for him so he would see *me*.

I'd offered him comfort when he needed it most. Manipulated him into caring about me back.

In a dangerous, violent place, I'd given him what he needed. Someone nice.

Still, sometimes I'd forgotten to play the part.

Like when Aran was gasping for air beneath us as we'd held him underwater and I couldn't stop pushing his head under. His helplessness was intoxicating. The noises he'd made were so exquisite. The way he'd fought and snarled against the overwhelming strength of my mates.

Would he fuck the same way?

I'd been dying to know.

When he'd glared at me with a wounded expression afterward, I'd fallen apart, convinced I'd ruined everything I'd worked so hard to create between us.

But all my worrying had been for nothing because Aran had still been interested in *me*. He'd seen behind my mask and still forgiven me.

After that, my interest in him had become a full-blown obsession.

And when Aran had turned out to be the most stunning woman I'd ever seen in my life...my interest had become mania.

I liked to play games.

I liked to collect treasures.

I already had two perfect men: two dragons that made the House of Malum crest proud. Scorpius and Corvus.

Now I had a sweetheart.

A fearless, blue-haired, doe-eyed woman to add to my collection.

Where their strength was overwhelming and in-your-face, hers was quiet and unassuming. It was still impressive. And she was just as manipulative as I was, disguising herself as a man.

She'd played us all.

Where my mates' darkness was a loud explosion that destroyed the world, her darkness was a quiet implosion that pulled the world into her.

Arabella was a composition of mesmerizing turquoise: soft features, smoking lips, and haunted eyes.

She was a jagged construction of paradigms; she radiated strength, yet she was broken.

I wanted to know every single thing that made Arabella tick.

What did she think about that made her stare off into the distance?

Were her thoughts dark?

Why did she smoke so much?

Why did she avoid sex?

Why had she killed Horace?

Why did her eyes sometimes glaze over when she stared at fire?

Why did she constantly itch her back?

Why did she sometimes revel in violence and, at other times, hate it?

Why did she pick at her lip?

Why had we only seen her create two ice daggers if she was a powerful

fae?

Why had she eaten her mother's heart?

Why did she look away when I stared into her eyes?

Why did she keep pushing me away when we kissed?

Why did she seem more comfortable when she was masquerading as Aran than as Arabella?

She was a puzzle, and I wanted to solve her until I knew the consistency of every breath she took. I'd been so close to figuring her out and pulling her into my web.

With centimeters to go, she'd pulled away.

The slave tattoo had put a wedge between us, and she no longer gave me coy glances. All I got were shuttered stares. The enslavement had destroyed any trust I'd earned, and it wasn't fair.

But it would all be okay because Arabella didn't realize that trust was never hers to give.

It was mine to take.

She thought she could just *choose* not to be my sweetheart. A laughable idea.

That wasn't how this worked.

I'd already decided she was mine because she kept my madness at bay. Kind of. Mostly she just gave me something else to fixate on, and that counted. Right?

Now I just had to catch her.

Stained-glass windows refracted rainbows through the empty halls. Arabella sprinted down them with impressive speed.

Her bare feet slapped loudly against the marble floors.

I pounded after her.

I was larger and faster, but she was frantic and had gotten a head start.

Arabella looked back over her shoulder, and her bloodshot eyes widened, horrid bruises standing out against her skin as she blanched. Sinful lips parted.

Her face contorted with fear, and she whipped her head back around, blue braids flying as she sped up.

My heart rate increased at the sight of her wounds.

She turned the corner, disappeared from view, and I pressed my hand harder against my lips to hold back a scream.

If she'd just calm down, I could take care of her. Fuss over her. Make

sure nothing harmed her ever again. I'd protect her from the world if she just let me.

Instead, she ran from me.

Rejected my help.

If she didn't want the good guy, then why should I give her that? I'd already decided she was mine.

When I'd kissed Aran's mouth and promised him he'd be my toy, it was Arabella who had melted against me like butter.

She'd agreed.

We'd both tasted it.

And there were repercussions to my ownership.

The petals drifted faster down my neck like whispering silk. If this was how my sweetheart wanted to play it, then she'd get what she was asking for.

I pulled my fingers away from my lips.

Lightning cracked.

Blinding light exploded.

Our footsteps pounded like thunder.

She could run, but I'd always catch her. Drag her back to me.

She would never get away.

Because you couldn't run from your destiny, and I'd already decided she was mine.

Arabella lunged toward our room. "*Orion is about to lose it, do something!*" she screamed as she entered.

Oh, I'd lost it all right. She'd find out how unraveled I was.

I opened my lips.

If she didn't want me when I was nice, then I was done pretending.

Gold metal clicked as it floated off my ears and separated into the shards of a crown above my head.

I sucked in air.

Opened my vocal cords.

And began to si—

Oomph. Two bodies slammed against me. A hand slapped over my face, and my arms were restrained and pinned behind my back.

"What are you doing?" Corvus snarled, silver eyes frantic as he stared at me with horror.

I tried to push Scorpius off me, but his grip was rock-solid, and he used the couple inches of height he had on me to wrench my arms back further.

There was nowhere to go.

My mates boxed me out and blocked my view of Arabella as the door slammed. She'd disappeared inside our room.

I wanted to scream.

My sweetheart was so close but still out of my reach.

Corvus's face shattered. "Are you okay? Is there something we can do to help you? Was it the fall? Did it make you worse?" Flames danced atop his skull, and he crushed me against his chest.

Corvus trembled against me while Scorpius stood stiffly.

"I'm fine," I mouthed as I forced myself to relax. "I'm fine. I just got a little worked up. It was nothing."

I let my head lull forward and nuzzled it against Corvus's chest tenderly. I gave him what he needed.

Melted against him.

I gave him my obedience.

Corvus slowly relaxed against me and whispered, "Thank the sun god."

Scorpius's punishing grip turned into a firm embrace, and my Protector and Ignis stopped constraining.

They clung to me desperately.

I'd done the right thing.

Ever so slowly, I forced my vocal cords to untense and rebuilt my mask. The crown clicked back onto my ears. I pretended for my mates' sake that this was what I wanted. All I needed.

Sometimes I felt like the worst Revered in history.

Like I was playing a role I couldn't fulfill.

How was I supposed to provide balance and calm for others when I was untethered myself?

Corvus squeezed my torso and whispered against my temple, "It's all going to be okay. We're going to find our fourth."

I nodded back like I cared about the faceless Protector I was also supposed to bring peace to. How could I?

I was struggling to help my Ignis and Protector even though I'd known them all my life. Even though my life purpose as a Revered was to help them.

But my sweetheart didn't need me.

She wanted nothing from me and rejected my attempts to help her. She was independent in a way I could never be.

Arabella fell apart daily, yet she didn't want anyone to pick up the pieces

for her. She did it herself. She didn't *need* me, and that fact alone made her mine. Period.

Fingers curling with anticipation, I trembled.

All it had taken was a few seconds in a lightning-streaked hall. Everything had changed between us.

She could run, but I could hunt.

A male devil was possessive of those he cared for. But a devil king from the House of Malum hoarded his treasure and breathed fire on anyone who dared challenge his affection.

I'd massacre cities just to make her smile.

From the haunted look in Arabella's eyes, it would come to that.

I wouldn't hesitate. Not when it was for her.

Anything for her.

CHAPTER 21

ARAN

DUDE

The Legionnaire Games: Day 33, hour 2

Overwhelmed by all the horrible things I'd learned about Jinx, I sprinted down the empty halls.

It was late at night, and everyone at the academy was in their rooms.

The quiet made the realization so much worse.

"So much," Jinx had said brokenly about how much she'd made us forget.

My memories had been erased. I no longer knew what was true.

What was I if not a collection of my remembered experiences? I was a fractured being. A soulmancer, one of the rumored beings of darkness.

I ran because I had to do something. Otherwise, I'd fall apart.

I ran from myself.

But when I glanced behind me, something very real was chasing me down the gleaming hall.

Lightning flashed and highlighted veins that bulged out of a tensed neck. The beast ran with his hand pressed over his mouth.

A devil hunted me.

He was chasing after me like he wanted to hurt me; he was sprinting like a predator that wanted to do horrible things to its prey.

In the empty hall, there was nothing left of the man I'd thought I knew.

The soft, pretty man was gone. Dead.

He was still breathtakingly stunning, but he was cruel. Sharply edged.

Dangerous.

Had he ever existed?

A sharp bolt of pain streaked down my spine, and I pointedly ignored the implication.

Heavy footsteps slapped against the chilled black marble floor like gunshots.

A towering being barreled after me, and his expression was pure evil.

Pumping my legs with all my might, I ran faster than I had when I was missing an arm and ungodly chased me in the desert.

I ran faster than I had after I'd eaten my mother's heart.

Being chased down the halls of Elite Academy was the most frightened I'd ever been.

Like my subconscious knew I was running from something terrifying.

My breath came out in short, painful bursts, and my heart pounded erratically in my chest.

Crystals clinked as chandeliers swayed from the vibrations of his steps.

Just one more hall.

Turning the corner, I lowered my head, pumped my arms, and drove forward with my legs. I didn't need to hear him to sense how close his presence was.

Goose bumps erupted down my arms as I threw myself through the bedroom door. I screamed for Malum and Scorpius and didn't stop running until I'd locked myself in a shower stall.

Hyperventilating under icy water, I stared at the floor and sucked on my pipe.

Felt nothing.

The haze was back, but it was soaked with terror. Distorted. It was worse than ever.

The day had passed in seconds, but the hours felt like weeks.

Forehead pressed against the tiled wall; icy spray soaked my clothes. I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a casual shower.

After Mother began lighting me on fire, I'd shower in scalding heat to chase away the bizarre chill that seemed to burn me from the inside out. It lingered after each session.

I'd sit under the scalding spray writhing in agony until my skin was red.

Then I'd start scrubbing.

After I'd run away to the shifter realm, my habits had changed. I'd started

showering to remove the microscopic dirt, the grime I couldn't see but knew coated every inch of my body. Running was cowardly. It had left me feeling dirty.

In my twenties, the anger had arrived, and freezing cold water was the only thing that washed away the violent thoughts.

Now I showered to try to clear the haze.

Maybe if the water was frigid enough, it would shock me out of the muddled darkness?

It wasn't working.

Everything was muted and twisted, and I shivered, but it wasn't from the cold. Lately, it was never from the cold.

I got dressed in a blur.

In a moment of lucidity, I panicked over the fact that I couldn't find a single pair of underwear. The moment passed, and I quickly forgot about it. I was too tired to care as I pulled on my dry clothes.

Peeking out the bathroom door, I was relieved to find the bedroom dark. All my teammates were sleeping in their beds.

With chattering teeth, I tiptoed across the rug toward my friend. John snored softly as he faced the wall.

Climbing into bed beside him, I resisted the urge to curl up against his warmth.

John belonged to the pretty girl who'd sucked on his dick.

He wasn't mine to touch.

Pulling my hoodie up over my head, I squeezed myself into a ball under the covers and, through lowered lashes, looked across the room at the bed I'd been avoiding.

Orion's arms were draped casually around Scorpius and Malum. They clung to him like they were afraid he would disappear.

All traces of the crazed man that had chased after me were gone.

His stunning, almost too-pretty features were relaxed in sleep, and he looked like some type of whimsical fairy-tale creature.

I knew better.

The dying fire caressed his golden skin like a lover.

Long lashes fluttered, and dark eyes opened wide. Orion turned his head to the side and looked directly at me. His pupils expanded.

A shudder shook through me, and I bit down on my lower lip to stop my teeth from chattering.

I pulled the blankets up to my chin and scooted back closer to John.
Orion kept staring. He didn't blink.

In the darkness his eyes had a slight green sheen to them that reminded me of a cat's.

I hid my face under the covers and breathed raggedly. After counting to one hundred, I peeked out and looked over.

With his face angled forward, high, arched cheekbones made Orion look wicked.

The harsh lines of his expression looked positively depraved. Uptilted eyes were wide and staring directly at me.

It hit me how stupid I'd been.

Just because a monster was prettier and quieter than the others, it didn't make it any less terrifying.

It made it worse.

I stared back, unable to reconcile the quiet man who'd kissed me softly and smiled gently with the one that had chased after me. It seemed wrong that his mates were clinging to him like he was their salvation.

Did they know the extent of his madness?

Perhaps I wasn't the only one who'd been living a lie.

Time ticked by slowly, but I couldn't close my eyes. My brain refused to shut off and relax. I couldn't sleep while a devil was watching me with gleaming eyes.

So I didn't.

Seconds became minutes. Hours passed.

Orion never looked away.

Neither did I.

By the time morning came around, my back was fully plastered against John for support, and my jaw ached from gritting my teeth.

My eyes were bleary from staring.

When Scorpius and Malum woke, they stretched and smiled at Orion. Wrapping their arms around him tiredly, they pressed kisses along his jawline and neck while whispering to each other.

Finally, Orion tore his eyes off me, and his expression softened.

He smiled back at his mates and relaxed like he hadn't been lying stiffly for hours in their embraces.

I stumbled out of bed and ran to the bathroom.

I took another cold shower. Scrubbed my skin raw.

Stumbled down the halls.

At breakfast, I rubbed the bags under my eyes and pushed my eggs back and forth across my plate. Students murmured with excitement, but for the most part, the hall was quiet with anticipation.

It was the day of the second competition. *Two of four. After today we're halfway there.*

I rubbed my hands over my arms and tried to convince myself everything was fine.

Next to me John smiled and made a bad joke about a chicken crossing a street as he chowed down on the mountain of food that was piled high on his plate.

Across the hall, the man crucified on the sacred tree opened his mangled lips. He said something, but the sound didn't travel. None of the students sitting near him acted like they heard him. He was ignored.

John flung his arm across my shoulder and made another joke.

I forgot to laugh.

At the commoner table, a familiar-looking woman stared longingly at John. She was uncommonly pretty, and I realized she'd sucked his dick a few days ago.

I pulled John's arm off me and scooted away.

"Don't make me chase after you, Aran." John's smile fell.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me back beside him. He mumbled under his breath, "You don't get to leave my side."

I looked up at him with confusion, but he was grinning and eating like nothing had happened.

Maybe I'd imagined it?

It wouldn't be the first time.

Across the hall, the pretty woman's expression was shattered. A tear streaked down her face. A few feet away at the other table, Sari glared at me with disgust.

I turned my head in the other direction.

Sadie was slumped forward with a scowl on her face. All the shifters stared at the thirteen-year-old girl who sat perfectly straight as she cut the crust off her bread, with a ferret around her neck.

I looked away from Jinx with shame. *A child under my care has suffered.*

I pushed my fork slowly back and forth across my plate.

"Eat, Arabella," Scorpius ordered.

I jolted at the name.

“You’re so terribly weak.” Mother tsked and clacked her nails against her chalice. “How sad that you’ll never amount to anything.” She smirked, and blue flames engulfed me.

I sobbed. Drooled onto the floor as agony ate my nerves.

Why did her blue fire have to be so unique? Why did it hurt so badly without burning? Why was she so powerful, yet I was so weak?

Malum’s gruff voice broke through the mirage. “Arabella, are you listening to him? Pay attention when your betters address you.” His voice was warped and distant. “Don’t test us, because we’ll gladly shove food down your throat.”

I dug my fork into the eggs.

Mashed them into my lips beside my pipe and smacked my gums loudly. Held the food in my cheeks.

Time bled away like sand in an hourglass.

My teammates talked.

I forgot that I was supposed to listen.

“Meal’s over,” Malum said loudly.

He clapped his hands in front of my face. I jumped, *where was I?*

Malum gestured to the door. “Lothaire will come by our room and tell us who’s competing soon. Everyone needs to be ready.”

Chairs pushed back with a loud scrape.

I leaned forward, stuck out my tongue, and spat out all the gross eggs. They tasted like baby chickens.

In my periphery, Malum lunged for me, but Orion held him back. I didn’t mistake his action for kindness.

Scorpius sneered something about me being the problem.

Obviously?

John wrapped his arm around my shoulder and dragged me forward.

Three blue-haired students bowed to me as we passed them in the crowded halls. I saluted them and mumbled, “Thank you for your service.”

One of them burst into tears because I’d addressed them.

I tried not to laugh.

Students jostled one another as they tried to make a pathway for the legions, but everyone had exited the hall at once, and it was cramped.

Lightning flashed, and someone screamed because they didn’t move fast enough away from the wall. *Electric.*

John yanked me forward as he scoffed at my bowing supporters, and the momentum made me bump into some students.

A woman whispered loudly, “What’s wrong with her? Why is she stumbling like that?”

The man next to her grimaced. “She’s clearly not well. How embarrassing.”

I was tired of pretending to heal, I was going to start traumatizing everyone back. I blew a cloud of smoke in their direction.

They coughed.

I lunged at them aggressively and they stumbled away in fear.

“Ignore them,” John said roughly and pulled me under his other arm so he shielded me with his body from the crowd. “They know nothing.”

He breathed heavily like he was agitated by what they’d said.

“I mean, they’re not wrong,” I said.

John tucked me harder against his warm chest, and I ignored the jolt of pain that zinged down my spine.

In front of us the crowd was blocking the hall. Malum shoved a student to the ground who didn’t get out of his way, and Scorpius kicked him. Orion stepped over him like he wasn’t there.

The demons followed and ignored the fallen student, who scurried backward on all fours into the crowd.

Who was more afraid of the demons than the kings?

Idiots. That was who.

Someone jostled John, and I winced as my still-healing leg buckled under the sharp movement.

“Shit, did they hurt you?” John asked with concern.

Before I could say I was fine (which I was definitely not), Scorpius was standing in front of us.

He snarled at the students who bumped us, “Move out of the fucking way. Touch my legion mate again and you’re dead.” His milky, blind eyes flashed with violence.

Legion mate. Interesting term.

I was surprised he hadn’t said “slave.”

Students fell over themselves running away.

Malum imitated a bonfire behind Scorpius, and Orion scowled while, you guessed it, he stared at me without blinking.

Whatever. I leaned harder against John.

We made it the rest of the way down the hall without incident.

Well, there was just one teeny, tiny moment where Malum snapped a woman's wrist because she touched Orion's hair without permission.

The girl sobbed, and Scorpius told her to "shut the fuck up."

You gotta love men who empower women.

Very inspiring stuff.

When we finally got back to the room, I collapsed onto the bed like I'd run thirty miles. I stared at the black hole in the ceiling like it contained the meaning of the universe. Plot twist: it didn't.

Horse flew around the ceiling and cawed aggressively at everyone in a show of pure might while I sucked on my pipe until the room spun.

"Make him shut up," Malum snarled as he stretched on the floor.

I shook my head. "Horse is not a filthy male like you. Don't lump him in with yourself."

Horse cawed louder because he was a genius.

"You just called him a he," Malum said as he leaned forward and touched his toes. "Idiot."

"You're so fucking toxic," I muttered as I resumed smoking. Sure, I called Horse a he, but that didn't mean he identified as a man. Malum was the idiot. *Sun god* he sickened me.

Suddenly, Lothaire was standing in our doorway, speaking. "The competitors chosen this round from your legion are John, Scorpius, and—"

He paused.

He should have read the third name, but he stopped speaking. Lothaire swallowed thickly, and he hesitated like it pained him to read the last name on his sheet.

Wonderful. I knew exactly where this was going.

"Arabella," Lothaire finally whispered, and his voice dripped with regret like he was overwhelmed with emotions.

Not relatable.

John jolted up from where he was sitting next to me on the bed and said, "That's not fair. She competed last time."

I sighed heavily.

Life isn't fair, and only the lucky few die.

We already knew this.

I wasn't lucky.

Lothaire scowled as he said, "The gods have spoken. But I agree this is

unusual.” He turned to leave. “I will speak to the representatives.”

“Don’t,” I said.

Lothaire stopped at the threshold, his large frame full of tension as he looked back at me.

I nodded like I’d come to a decision. “I want to fight. Don’t say anything to anyone. I want to compete.”

The deep lines around Lothaire’s eyes crinkled. “Are you sure?” He looked at me skeptically. “You’re still covered in bruises and cuts from the last competition. The cut under your left eye looks bone deep.”

I shrugged with a nonchalance I didn’t feel. “It’s all cosmetic and appears worse than it is. Let me fight. Let me prove myself.”

He stared at me with a sad expression, and I could tell he was trying silently to tell me he cared.

I telepathically told him I wished I were adopted.

Personally, I was doing a good enough job ruining my life without a father speeding up the process.

There was a long moment where I thought he’d argue, but Lothaire sagged his shoulders and nodded curtly. “Very well,” he said. “Good luck, daughter.”

Then he walked away.

If that wasn’t a metaphor for my life.

I rolled my eyes and flipped off the door after he left. It helped. A little.

Malum said something derogatory under his breath as he looked down at me with an expression that was close to pitying.

“You don’t want to do this, do you?” he asked softly and clenched his fists. Like for the first time, he viewed me as a person and realized I was suffering.

I looked away.

My silence was answer enough.

He made a pained noise behind me.

Rubbing at my chest, I tried to ignore my disappointment over how quickly Lothaire had believed my lies. Of course I didn’t want to compete. I wasn’t an imbecile.

Did I look like a try hard? No.

I preferred to be a try soft. Life on easy mode was what I was looking for. Sadly, I had not found it yet.

Case in point, my injuries were not cosmetic.

Bones were broken, and my bruises ran deep.

I just didn't care enough to argue over the injustice of it all. According to Jinx, I was being tested, and it made the most sense that it was the gods who were responsible.

They wanted me to act righteously.

Well then, I was going to be the best person there ever was.

Maybe.

Eh, honestly. Probably not.

Would it be cowardly to kill the kings and feed my heart to someone before the tattoo revived me? It sounded superb about now.

I sucked harder on my pipe.

"Come on, let's get ready," John said with his trademark smile as he pulled me away from the wall, toward the bathroom.

His fingers were warm as he stroked black paint across my cheeks.

"I'll keep you safe, Aran." He leaned into my personal space and touched my face.

His thumb traced little patterns across the tops of my cheeks.

John's dark eyes sparked with something I'd never seen directed my way.

Pain lanced my spine.

I exhaled loudly and pulled away from him.

"Don't be weird, dude." I laughed shakily.

John flashed his dimples. He bopped my nose with black paint and winked. "Whatever you say, dude."

I scrunched my nose and scrubbed at it as I looked away and tried to hide the flush I felt warming my cheeks as I grinned.

Fireworks of pain exploded across my back.

My smile fell.

I was born to suffer.

CHAPTER 22

ARAN

SOUND

The Legionnaire Games: Day 33, hour 10

John, Scorpius, and I trudged forward to meet our fate.

Malum and the demons headed toward the stands, while the three of us headed toward the side of the arena where the other competitors were waiting to begin.

Lothaire stood on the side of the arena. He gestured for us to stand on the edge of the lawn.

Across the arena, students waved their arms and opened their mouths, but the sound didn't travel.

The academy loomed behind them like an evil specter on the horizon.

Even the wind was quieter than usual.

Around us, posts jutted into the dark cloud cover, and the usually gray-red sky was almost black. It looked like it was going to rain, which hadn't happened since I'd been in this realm.

"Students are speculating a storm is coming, and I think they might be right," John said as he gestured toward the sky.

Everybody thought they were weathermen these days.

Personally, I had bigger problems to worry about than the clouds. But maybe that was just me.

John looked grim as he tipped his head back and stared at the gloomy sky. "But I hope they're wrong. No one wants that."

"Oh yes, I can practically taste the increased humidity in the air," I said

sarcastically. “Very concerning.”

“You can feel it too?” John asked excitedly. “I thought the dew point was higher lately, but I wasn’t sure.”

Sometimes it was hard to be a good person.

Lothaire shouted, “Line up competitors behind this white line.” He pointed down at paint that was streaked across black rocks right before the lawn began and nodded up to Lyla and Dick.

The representatives sat on their platform, which floated above the stands.

After he was satisfied we’d all lined up behind the line, he walked around the perimeter of the lawn toward the other side of the arena.

Why wouldn’t he just walk across?

Lothaire seemed to take forever.

Nervous apprehension bubbled in my gut as I tapped my foot, picked at my lip, and waited for the hammer to fall. I hated not knowing what we were about to do, and my knees and feet ached more the longer I stood still.

I wanted to take a nap.

My breath was slightly uneven, and we hadn’t even begun. Great.

As we waited for Lothaire to make his way slowly around the arena, I studied the other competitors. Upsettingly, I was the only person who’d also been in the last competition.

Sadie’s mates, Cobra and Ascher, stood beside John and me.

Ascher gave me a friendly thumbs-up, and I tipped my head to him in solidarity because I was too nervous to return the gesture.

Next to him, Cobra mimed slitting my throat in the universal “you’re dead” symbol.

I mimed grabbing his balls and ripping them off.

Ascher glared at both of us.

Instead of being intimidated, Cobra took it as a challenge. With a few well-placed hand and feet movements, he graphically depicted shooting me in the forehead. Then he mimed stomping on my corpse.

I rolled my eyes at his lack of creativity.

Last time I took a man seriously, I lost my will to live. Yes, it was my tutor when I was a child. No, I still had not gotten over it.

My personality traits were: (1) spiteful, (2) bitch.

When Cobra started making another explicit hand gesture, Ascher smacked him and turned to me. “Sorry about him. He’s not house-trained yet.”

The look Cobra gave him would make lesser men faint.

Ascher just grinned and patted him on the back with a tattooed hand, his smile not dropping even when Cobra's eyes gained slit pupils and the jewels in his skin flickered to shadow snakes.

It was still one of the great mysteries of the realms how my darling Sadie had seen the psychotic snake bastard and thought, *That one's mine, I love him.*

It was one of the main reasons I insisted she go to therapy.

Since she hadn't left him yet, the therapy was not working. Sure, they were fated mates with a soul bond connecting them or something disgustingly sappy like that. I understood exactly what that meant.

She had the perfect opportunity to crush his spirit.

He'd be so devastated.

Cobra opened his mouth and began to say something vulgar, but John forcibly turned me away from the shifters.

He had a strange, pinched expression on his face. "Ignore them. It's all going to be fine."

John switched positions with me so he was next to the shifters and I was standing next to Scorpius.

Scorpius sneered, "No, it will not be fine." And I jumped as he spoke. "Stay behind me when we start," he barked.

I blinked.

Then blinked again.

Did he really think I was going to hide behind him for protection? Did he really think I was that type of woman?

John grunted in disagreement at the absurd idea.

Although, I had to go with the evil blind dude for the first part.

You could taste it in the air.

You could see it in the dark clouds.

You could hear it in the unnatural silence.

Something awful was about to go down, and we were caught in the middle of it.

Lambs to the slaughter.

The silence from the normally loud student section made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

My skin prickled with warning.

I crossed my fingers and my toes as we waited to hear what the challenge

would be.

Please let it be physical combat. Battle I could handle. Hell, a little adrenaline-driven bloodshed might even be therapeutic.

Or maybe it was a race? That would also be nice.

Finally, Lothaire stopped walking around the perimeter of the area. He stood directly across from us in front of the bleachers, and his voice boomed like he was speaking from directly above us.

“The last person to cross this line loses.” He pointed to a white line on the rocks at his feet.

I exhaled with relief.

It was a race.

Easy enough.

Lothaire continued, “Anyone who remains on the lawn after five minutes will perish.”

I choked.

Well, if that wasn’t ominous.

Huge black numbers appeared, floating in the air above Lothaire: “5:00.”
Five minutes.

“BEGIN!” Lothaire’s voice boomed from above.

There was no time to process what was happening. All of us bolted forward off the white line and—

Pain.

As soon as I stepped onto the lawn, I fell to my knees like I’d run into a wall.

I writhed.

Gagged and grabbed the sides of my face.

My neck burned like it had been set on fire and pumped with bullets. At the same time.

My eyes watered.

Muscles tensed.

Brain ached.

Bodies contorted on the ground around me.

Hyperventilating for what felt like an eternity, I saw a glimpse of the timer through my throbbing eyes. *Four minutes, forty seconds.*

My senses struggled to process just what was going on. I reached shaking hands forward but didn’t feel a physical barrier.

Somehow it *hurt* to move forward.

Around me blurry competitors tried to crawl.

Pain. Pain. Pain.

I blacked out for a second, then opened my eyes. *Four minutes, ten seconds.*

The worst pain was on the sides of my neck, and my stomach churned as I pushed my fingers against my skin. I pressed harder, and the pain lessened for a second.

My hands crawled upward to my ears. Something warm and sticky was pouring out of them.

Nausea, dizziness, muscles cramping.

It was too much.

Face pressed into the ground, I sobbed as once again I blacked out.

Consciousness returned in a tortured rush.

Squirming, I continued writhing on all fours, desperate to ease the discomfort.

Wrenched my neck back to look forward. *Three minutes, thirty seconds.*

I pressed my finger into my ear, and the pain went from a one thousand out of ten to 999.

Sound.

It's sound.

My thoughts were like sludge, like I was squeezing them through a tiny straw, but some subconscious part of my brain put the pieces together.

There were dark enchantments that violated the Angel War Crime Convention. Enchantments that broke the sound barrier and incapacitated entire cities during war. Broke eardrums and ruptured arteries in brains.

A painful way to die.

The enchantments were activated in a closed environment, then air particles were accelerated until they reached the speed of sound.

The effects were horrific.

And I was experiencing the trauma firsthand.

Liquid streamed down my face as I looked up to see Cobra hauling Ascher forward across the lawn in front of everyone.

The jewels embedded in Cobra's skin had transformed into hundreds of shadow snakes. He glanced back at me, snake eyes flickering.

He mouthed, "Get up and move."

Snakes didn't have ears. Was that helping him? He seemed unaffected.

Meanwhile it felt like I was dying as I tried to move forward.

Cobra's ascent proved it was possible.

I clapped my hands over my ears and staggered to my feet, moaning at the agony of moving. The ultrahigh sound pounding against me was so horrendous that it felt like wind was pushing me back.

My skull vibrated, and everything trembled.

The decibel level was so extreme that it had physical properties.

I whimpered. Knowledge of what was going on didn't change the reality that I was vibrating in the middle of a field with blood gushing from my burning ears. It didn't lessen the agony.

John was writhing on the ground next to me.

Slapping at his hands to get his attention, I showed him my covered ears, and he mimicked me. Nodding in understanding, he dragged himself up.

The timer counted down mercilessly. *Three minutes.*

All around us, competitors were hobbling to their feet and trying to pull up their teammates.

Cobra and Ascher were the only ones who had made any progress. They were already halfway across the lawn.

Two minutes, fifty seconds.

How was time going by so fast when every second felt like hell?

I swallowed down my panic and shuffled forward. The finish line was about a hundred yards away, and we would have to walk fast if we were going to make it.

I took three jagged steps forward, then glanced back.

As my neck screamed in pain at the jerky movement, my eyes widened.

Scorpius was passed out with a large pool of blood spreading beneath his head. His large pale body was completely lifeless, blind eyes wide open, staring at nothing. Even the eye tattoo on his neck was shut tight.

Tara stared at me with sightless eyes; Horace gurgled as he went still; Sari glared at me with disgust.

Fuck.

I looked back at the timer. *Two minutes, thirty seconds.*

Other competitors were trying to help up their teammates. Some were puking blood, while others sobbed and refused to move.

The vibrations shaking through my bones were making it hard to see. Thick wetness poured down my face, and I knew it wasn't tears.

My already weakened knees screamed in protest as I moved.

If I tried to carry Scorpius, I might not make it.

A headache split my temples like an ax was being bashed against my brain.

There was no time to plan.

I trembled with adrenaline and pain.

John motioned for me to move forward, then grimaced when he saw what I was staring at.

Two mammoth furry creatures hobbled past. They had wiry gray hair, long snouts, and mouths full of jagged teeth. They dragged themselves on all fours across the field. The leviathan competitors.

I ignored them and strained every pulled muscle in my body as I staggered toward the pale devil. Fell on my knees beside him.

Vision wavering.

Head splitting.

Arms shaking.

I dragged Scorpius's arm across my shoulder and hauled us both upward.

It was like lifting three boulders at once. Stitches popped, and blood gushed down my limbs. We vibrated together, and his immense, muscled physique was the heaviest thing I'd ever supported.

He was dead weight.

Vomit dribbled from my lips.

His blood mixed with mine.

I squeezed my thighs for power and dragged his heavy body forward. One step at a time. Toward the other side of the arena.

One minute, fifty-nine seconds.

Dark spots dotted my vision.

I could barely make out competitors walking forward in front of me like they were fighting through an invisible wind.

Cobra carried Ascher across the white line and collapsed on the far side of the field.

That was the last thing I saw before I closed my eyes. It hurt too much to see.

I just concentrated on one step.

At a time.

I shoved us through the vibrations that hurt like pain but blew like wind.

The weight leaning against me lessened. Either Scorpius started walking or John was helping me. I didn't open my eyes to check.

As I pushed forward, my toes cramped, then my calf muscles, then my

quads.

Each step was like stabbing my foot down across metal spikes.

Everything hurt.

The vibration got worse.

Sweat, blood, and tears poured down my face.

I trembled.

Just wanted to collapse and give up, lay myself across the lawn and accept death.

Why did I want to live so badly? I couldn't remember.

Hands dragged me forward, and if it weren't for the support, I would have fallen to my knees in misery.

It was like walking underwater, but the water was lightning electrocuting my cells, a thousand hits per second.

I couldn't do this.

"You should quit. You're nothing but a pathetic, whiny child. Prove me right," Jinx's voice sounded in the deepest recess of my agony-rendered mind.

Fuck you, I snarled back.

I wouldn't quit, just so I could show her she knew nothing about me.

I spat an unknown substance out of my mouth.

Darkness pressed all around.

But I didn't stop.

I'd show Jinx.

Step.

By.

Step.

An eternity passed.

How have we not crossed the line yet?

I blinked my eyes open furiously, white patches sparking in my vision.

We were about twenty yards from the finish line.

Twenty-nine seconds.

I turned my head. John was next to me, holding up most of Scorpius's body weight.

We weren't going to make it.

Faster. Muscles as hard as bones, vibrations slamming my teeth together, I leaned forward and hauled the dead weight as fast as I could.

John moved faster next to me.

Fifteen seconds.

We weren't going to make it.

John started to run, and he dragged me along.

My ears and neck burned like they were being shredded to pieces.

Ten seconds.

So close, but we were still too far.

John ran quicker.

Five seconds.

A few more steps.

Too many steps. We wouldn't make it.

Three seconds.

The weight lifted off me as John threw Scorpius's body across the line.

Two seconds.

The momentum carried them both past me. John turned around midair, and his eyes widened.

As if in slow motion, he reached his arm backward and grabbed the fabric of my shirt.

One second.

John's momentum pulled me forward.

The timer read, "0:00."

The agony stopped.

I was lying on hard rocks.

I'd made it.

We made it.

I blacked out.

Consciousness returned as my muscles cramped. The pain refused to let me have a single moment of respite.

Lifting my trembling fingers, I wiped at my face, and my fingers came back streaked with red.

A ringing noise echoed, and muffled sounds battered all around.

Everything was a blur.

Suddenly, Lothaire was hauling me to my feet and wiping blood with his shirt. John stood next to him and stared at me with worry as he tried to tell me something.

I couldn't hear what he was saying.

Everything spun as I looked over his shoulder. A lone figure was slumped on the lawn.

Holy sun god.

My stomach plummeted.

Long angel wings were spread beneath him.

He'd been left by his teammates.

Gore exploded across the field as the body exploded.

He'd been left to die.

I looked down at where Scorpius was stirring at my feet. That could have been him.

Muffled screams with a horrible high-pitched feedback noise had me covering my ears.

Around us, every member of the angel legion fell to their knees and covered their ears. They bowed their heads.

The angel captain, who had two different-colored eyes, twitched violently. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he mouthed like he was speaking to someone in his head. "I accept the punishment."

He convulsed on the ground like he'd been electrocuted.

I was in too much pain to care about what was happening to them. After all, he'd left his teammate on the field.

Lothaire stopped holding me up, and I staggered to support myself. John said something as he leaned down into my face, but he didn't make a sound. Blood poured out of his eyes and ears.

He looked heinous.

Lothaire's enchanted voice boomed so loudly that it broke through the high-pitched noise that was ringing in my ears. Still, it sounded like he whispered, "Arabella was the loser of the competition."

Goose bumps erupted across my arms as my knees gave out. John lunged forward and caught me before I collapsed.

"The gods have ordered her punishment. She is to..." Lothaire trailed off and didn't finish.

The ringing feedback made me wince.

I broke out in a cold sweat.

There was the sound of a scuffle, and someone shouted, "No!"

Lyla's smooth voice replaced Lothaire's, and she said, "For her punishment, the gods order Arabella to have penetrative intercourse with her legion mate John on the field until completion. Now."

No.

John pushed me away, and I fell to my knees.

Cold rocks stabbed against my numb skin.

“Failure to comply will result in her being removed from the competition,” Lyla said with no inflection.

Please. No. Not this.

“Begin.”

I vomited up partially digested eggs.

CHAPTER 23

ARAN

DARK CONSEQUENCES

The Legionnaire Games: Day 33, hour 10

Everything was numb.

I couldn't feel my arms or legs.

Someone pushed John and me forward, and we stumbled onto the blood-soaked lawn.

The sound barrier had been restored, and it was eerily quiet.

Vision blurry, I barely made out the carnage coating the far side of the field where there was a pile of mangled wings and legs.

A buzzing sensation burned my ears.

I wiped at the substances caking my face, fingers shaking as I tried to compose myself.

Then I turned slowly to my only true friend at the academy. The man I'd cuddled with and laughed at every day.

The half a foot of height he had on me was suddenly overwhelming.

I couldn't find the will to tilt my head up and look at his face.

I couldn't face him.

Wind screamed as it whipped with a fervor, and I shivered. Dark clouds moved in an unusual pattern and cast the realm into shadows.

They'd said a storm was coming.

But it felt like it was already here.

Behind us the ocean roared as it crashed against the obsidian rocks of the shoreline. Salt and sulfur stained the air. Light from the eclipse tinted the

world in shades of scarlet.

I reached slowly into my pocket, shoved my pipe between my lips, and inhaled smoke like it could save me. My teeth chattered around the pipe. I wasn't cold.

We had to do this, or I'd be skewered on the sacred tree.

I took a deep breath and reached my shaking hand toward John.

To touch him.

I took a step toward him.

Nausea rose with such visceral force that I dropped my hand and took a step back, head spinning as a cold sweat dotted my forehead.

I couldn't breathe.

Felt weaker than I'd ever felt in my life.

Closed my eyes.

How could I even consider doing the unthinkable to my friend? How dare I sacrifice him for myself? How could I be so selfish?

I was just like Mother.

"No," I croaked out roughly. Swallowing thickly, I fell to my knees and turned my face upward to where the representative watched us on a platform.

"No, I remove myself from the comp—"

A hand slapped across my lips.

It squeezed my cheeks.

John fell to his knees in front of me, and his dark eyes were intense as he leaned forward. Blood and tears stained his cheeks. Our faces were inches apart.

He opened and closed his jaws like he was trying to pop his ears, then he said, "Don't you dare." His voice was gravelly like he'd swallowed nails, and it sounded like he was talking underwater.

Black war paint was smudged down the side of his neck, and his dark hair was messy.

He looked ferocious.

A warrior.

I opened my lips to argue.

John pressed his hand harder against my mouth so I couldn't say anything.

"You will *not* sacrifice yourself because you think you're saving me," he said roughly.

I shook my head.

Tried to tell him with my eyes that we couldn't do this. That I didn't want to. That it wasn't worth it. To hell with the gods. He meant more to me than a little crucifixion.

John slowly leaned forward and pressed his mouth against my ear.

Underneath the sweat, copper, fear, and pain was the familiar rich scent of sandalwood. I breathed in deeply.

Even with the buzzing in my ear, John was so close that there was no mistaking what he said. "It won't change anything between us, and I promise I consent. The only question is whether you're okay to do this. If you want to refuse and fight the gods, then I'll fight beside you. But don't you dare refuse because you think you're protecting me."

He pulled back and flashed a dimple.

At that moment, I wished I could cry.

I wanted to sob.

John gently pushed matted curls off my forehead, his expression tender.

I kept expecting him to do his Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde routine and go quiet on me. Instead, he just kept smiling down at me like he'd do anything I asked.

He wrapped his arms around me and pressed me against his chest in a warm hug.

I squeezed him back with all my might as I trembled.

Who offered to defy the gods for their friend?

My body shook desperately.

I didn't deserve him.

We knelt together on the grass.

"I'm willing to..." I trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. "But everyone's watching," I whispered weakly as I glanced back at the stands.

I blinked to clear my fuzzy vision; the entire academy was staring at where we knelt. Watching us.

The three kings stood closest, on the edge of the arena, with scowls on their face.

Scorpius had his eyes open, but his knees were bent, and the other kings were holding him upright.

"You're nothing but a dirty whore. I always knew there was nothing good about you. You're more damned than me." Mother laughed as she snapped her fingers. *The world exploded into blue flames that hurt but didn't burn.*

I squeezed John tighter to me.

If only Mother could see me now.

My life was unfolding just like she'd predicted. Was it all just one big morbid self-fulfilling prophecy?

Existence was a cosmic joke, and I wasn't strong enough to survive it.

As I knelt in the center of the arena, clinging to John, I prayed for the haze to return. Prayed it would fast-forward time and make everything a fuzzy blur. Wished desperately for reality to become muddled.

I scrunched my eyes shut and waited.

Seconds passed, but it felt like years.

The haze never came.

I was hyperaware of every breath that expanded in my friend's chest. The way his fingers traced circles against my back. The warmth that radiated off him.

I opened my eyes and whispered brokenly, "I can't do this with so many people watching us."

As I stared at the crowd, my shaking became full-body convulsions.

On the edge of the arena, Scorpius said something to Malum.

Even from afar I could see that Malum's expression hardened as he looked at his mate, then looked at me.

He nodded.

Flames exploded.

I flinched back, and John jumped beside me, but the scalding pain never came.

The temperature skyrocketed.

It took my trauma-racked brain a second to realize that it wasn't my mother's flames playing in my imagination.

A tangible wall of red fire burned in the center of the field and formed a circle around John and me. It towered at least ten feet into the air.

No one could see us.

I tightened my grip around John's neck.

Malum had given us privacy.

The pressure behind my eyes intensified. No tears fell. My heart cracked with pain as the heat warmed my sweat-soaked skin.

A part of me was grateful for the privacy, but a larger part was terrified because there were no excuses left.

The pressure on my chest became a mountain.

It felt like I was dying.

John pulled me flush against his body and our hearts beat against each other.

Friend cradled friend.

Soft lips trailed across my blood-soaked neck. John kissed me gingerly like I was made of glass. Precious.

He fingered a bloody curl with his red stained fingers.

We bled the same.

“I’ll take care of you, Aran, I promise,” he whispered reverently as he touched me like he wanted to.

Streaks of pain lanced across my spine.

“Do it quickly, please,” I begged, hyperconscious that the more pleasure he gave me, the more pain I’d experience.

If we were going to do this, it needed to be quick.

I knew what was to come. It was going to be agonizing.

I trailed my fingers down the outside of John’s tight black shirt, and the ridges of his stomach muscles tensed beneath my fingers. I paused when I neared his waist.

Sun god, I can’t do this.

John kissed along my jawline and nibbled at the sensitive skin. Spots blinded my vision.

Then his lips pressed against mine.

They parted.

He exhaled softly, the minty taste of his toothpaste familiar and welcoming.

His tongue swept forward, and I opened wider.

Callused hands cradled my face like I was precious. The softness of his kiss made my head spin.

It was like we were kissing away our last breaths.

My tongue swept tentatively against his, and he groaned into my mouth like I’d done something horribly wanton.

His thumbs swept up and down over my cheekbones. He traced the outline of my eyes, and my lashes fluttered against his fingers.

The ringing in my ears intensified, and everything became clearer as pleasure and pain spiked in concert. The world was crisp around me.

A wall of fire danced around us.

The flames warmed the chilly air and made the temperature comfortable.

John kept tracing his fingers across my eyelids like he was caressing a

lover. Like we weren't faking it for a competition. Like he adored me.

He kissed me passionately.

The urge to cry intensified.

"Please, quickly," I begged and fisted his shirt.

John's hands trailed downward to my waistband, and they lingered on my lower belly. I made a noise in the back of my throat as I wanted something I'd never known.

Can he tell I have no idea what I'm doing?

My ears rang.

My vision clouded.

John breathed roughly as he spanned his hands across my lower waist and gripped me tightly.

Pain and pleasure lit my neurons.

Losing your virginity was supposed to be painful, but this seemed like another level of hell.

John yanked and he tore the front of my pants so they hung off my hips. Since there'd been no underwear in my cubby this morning, I was fully exposed before him.

John stared down at me with his pupils blown.

He grabbed my hips, and he made a low noise in the back of his throat, something between a growl and a moan.

I buried my face against his neck.

Unable to look at him.

Was it weird that I had blue curls? Didn't men want their women fully shaved?

I was embarrassed. Ashamed. Afraid.

Fingers tipped my chin up so I couldn't hide.

"Your beauty is otherworldly." John's dark eyes were intense, but he flashed a dimple like he knew I needed his smile to put me at ease.

I couldn't stop myself from making a face.

Mother had been stunning, one of the prettiest women in all the fae realm, and she'd been awful.

I didn't want to be pretty.

I wanted to be powerful.

I wanted to be scary.

John shook his head like he could read my thoughts, and he grinned down at me. "You're also a curmudgeon, an angry beastie who I just want to scoop

up and protect. You're like a cute Chimera that fights for her friends and feels sympathy for her enemies. You're my little Smurf. What did I tell you when I first met you?"

My cheeks flushed, and I tried to look away with embarrassment, but he held my chin tightly so I couldn't.

I mumbled back self-consciously, "You said we were going to be best friends."

John's breath tickled my cheek as his eyes darkened. "I lied."

"What?" I tried to pull back to look at his face, but he wouldn't let me pull away.

John whispered, "I took one look into your psycho blue eyes, and I knew you were going to be mine." He pressed a soft kiss to my lips and said into my mouth, "I just didn't want to scare you away."

I huffed as his tongue stroked against mine. "But I was a dude?" I asked unsurely.

"Yeah, a stunningly pretty dude," John said with a grin, and I narrowed my eyes.

He nipped at my lower lip with his teeth. "Don't be coy. You know I'm bisexual. I was playing the long game. Friendship first, then dirty amazing sex."

A laugh burst from my lips, and he swallowed it greedily. His tongue plundering my mouth.

"So you're not my best friend?" I asked, still slightly confused about what was happening.

John ripped his mouth away, his chest heaving beneath my hands. He growled. "No, Aran. I'm still your fucking best friend."

I tried to hold it back, but a smile split my face. "In your dreams."

John kissed my temple as his callused thumb stroked over my hip bone. His fingers crept lower, then he cupped me possessively with his hand.

"Who's your best friend?" he asked roughly.

I gasped as he held me intimately.

I couldn't speak.

John flashed his dimples. "That's what I thought." His fingers dipped into my core, and I moaned with pleasure.

Bent forward as my back spasmed with agony.

John pressed his lips against mine, rubbed his fingers against me, and said, "Such a perfect, scary little princess."

It was too much.

Ecstasy mixed with agony.

It was overwhelming.

I didn't know what to feel.

"Please just get on with it," I said desperately.

John was trying to make it good for me, but he didn't know it wasn't possible.

I begged, "Please, now."

I scooped my hips forward so my core was pressed against his hardness. Practically sitting on his lap, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and buried my face into his chest. I couldn't look at him.

"Are you okay with this, Aran?" John whispered. "We can always fight them to the death." He winked.

"I'm okay, if you're okay?" I mumbled into his skin.

"Oh, I'm okay." John pressed featherlight kisses to both my temples. His voice was a gravelly rasp. "Lift up your hips, bestie."

I relaxed against him and obeyed.

This was my friend, and I was safer with him than any other man in the universe. That mattered.

"So perfect," John praised.

A hardness was pressed against me.

I breathed roughly and bit down on the fabric across his chest. John moved both his hands until they grabbed my butt. He squeezed, and his nails dug into my skin as he supported me like I weighed nothing.

John moaned against my neck, "Fuck, Aran, you're so precious." He kissed and nipped at my sensitive skin.

I trembled with ecstasy, then shuddered as stabbing pain streaked down my back.

And I just knew.

It was going to hurt so badly.

John slammed his powerful hips forward, and I bit down on his pec to hide my scream.

The pleasure was so good.

The pain was so much worse.

It felt like he was splitting me in two.

John immediately stopped moving. "You okay?" He peppered kisses against my closed eyes, my nose, then my cheeks.

I bit down on my lower lip as shock waves rolled through me.

“Please, you’re killing me.” He kissed the corners of my mouth. “Speak to me, Aran.”

I shivered as he said my name like it meant something special to him. Like he was devoted to me.

“I’m fine, dude,” I said shakily as I tangled my fingers in his messy hair. “You can keep going.” *Please get this over with quickly.*

John groaned roughly, “No. I need. Let you. Adjust.”

The overly full sensation of him seated deep inside me made it feel like someone was dragging a knife down my spine.

Pain blinded my vision, and everything went fuzzy.

It was agony.

John’s arms were wrapped around my shoulders protectively.

It felt like a hot knife was being jammed into my shoulder blades and twisted until my skin ripped off.

I was in hell.

“Just go, please. Finish it quick,” I gasped and tried to convey with my tone what I couldn’t put into words.

John must have heard the desperation in my voice because his arms tightened, and he pistoned his hips and moaned with pleasure.

I bit down on my lip to stifle a scream.

“Fuck, how are you this perfect?” he moaned as he bounced me roughly on his lap.

I tasted blood, and it took everything in me not to fall apart and shove him away.

It was so painful.

John shuddered and held me tight as he pulsed deep inside me. Wetness flooding between us.

Thank the sun god. It was over.

“Aran,” John moaned as he rubbed circles on my lower back.

He didn’t say anything else, and neither did I.

The white spots receded from my vision, and the sensation of being skewered alive slowly dissipated.

The intimacy of the moment was overwhelming.

“Are you okay?” John pulled himself out of me as he kissed my forehead, his arms still wrapped around me. “Please talk to me.”

I panted and whispered a shaky, “I’m fine.” My face warmed as I

whispered, “was it good for you?”

John made a pained noise as he peppered delicate kisses across my nose. “It was perfect. You were perfect.”

His fingers traced a soothing pattern across my back, which was having the unintended consequence of causing little blips of pain.

It hurt but I didn’t tell him to stop because I didn’t want him to.

His fingers stopped moving.

He stiffened.

I pulled back to see what had made him pause.

I followed his gaze.

He was staring down at his lap, and it was covered in streaks of pink.

Mortification churned my gut, and I prayed a pillar would randomly fall over and crush me to death.

John slowly looked up at me. “*Aran.*” His dark eyes hardened as he realized what I’d given him.

All traces of a smile slipped off his face.

He looked enraged.

No. No. No. This can’t be happening. Is he mad at me? Pissed that I was a virgin?

I smacked him on the arm casually and forced myself to laugh. “Don’t make it weird, dude.”

It’s weird. I could feel him dripping out of me.

“I’m going to kill the gods,” John muttered, then took a deep breath and tucked a stray curl behind my ear.

“These things happen.” I shrugged with a casualness I didn’t feel.

John’s expression was intense. “No. They don’t. Not like this. They never should have made you do this.”

I grimaced and stared at the ground.

Great, now he definitely thought I’d been a virgin loser saving myself for marriage or something embarrassing like that.

“Seriously, it’s not a big deal.” I cleared my throat awkwardly. “I would have done it with tons of other men, but things got in the way. So, seriously, don’t make it weird.”

“Things” equaled an enchanted knife. “The way” equaled my back.

John stiffened. “Tons of other men, you say?” he asked with feigned casualness.

I grimaced. Maybe I’d laid it on a little too thick. Still, there was nothing

to do but double down. “Oh, please, you don’t know what kind of seduction skills I have.”

John raised one eyebrow. “I hate to point out the obvious, but clearly not great ones, seeing as you were...” He waved at his lower half.

I smacked his chest as John grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me back and forth.

Great. John was having an episode.

He said dramatically, “I’m quaking at the sight of these seduction skills.”

Something warm and gooey exploded in my chest because he was treating me like he always did.

I laughed as he shook me and said, “Big talk coming from a guy who came in two minutes.”

“Hey, you told me to.” John’s olive cheeks flushed pink as he stopped shaking me and mumbled under his breath, “You felt insane. You have no idea how hard it was.”

“That’s what she said.”

A long moment passed as we both processed the fact that I’d repeated a ridiculous, childish joke. I blamed Sadie. There’d been a span of three weeks where that was the only joke she told.

“Really.” John shook his head like he was disappointed in me. “I thought you were more mature than that.”

We stared into each other’s eyes.

I cracked first.

Giggling like a maniac, I smacked him on the arm, and he smacked me back harder.

After a light spat of hitting each other, I wiped red-and-black streaks off John’s face and said, “Seriously, thank you so much for doing that. I can’t tell you how much it meant to me.” I paused. “Bestie.”

John smirked lasciviously. “So you agree I’m your best friend.”

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t say that—”

Lyla’s voice echoed loudly through the arena. “The punishment is complete.” She sounded annoyed, like she couldn’t believe she was having to make an announcement.

John and I grimaced at each other and pulled our clothes back into place.

I’d forgotten we weren’t alone in the middle of a random field, just having fun together.

He was the only person who could make me so comfortable.

Sun god, I'd forgotten I was experiencing the most embarrassing moment of my life. Who did that?

We sat together and waited, but the wall of fire shielding us didn't go away.

John stood up with me in his arms (I was impressed with his core strength), and he yelled, "Corvus, cut the flames!"

There was a long pause.

"I can't," our captain shouted back, and he sounded embarrassed.

John swore under his breath.

The next thing I knew, John was sprinting forward with me in his arms. He leaped through the wall of fire and tilted his body in midair so he protected me from the heat.

Somehow, we landed on the other side mostly unscorched.

I patted out a small flame kindling in John's hair.

He turned so his back was to everyone and they couldn't see me.

Servants ran past us, toward the fire, with buckets of water.

Over John's shoulder, the academy students, legions, and judges stared at us.

"Fuck them," John said under his breath.

I gripped his shirt and nodded. "Fuck them."

We didn't say another word as we rejoined our legion, and I didn't look anyone in the eyes.

Even the kings had nothing to say.

And it felt...

Like everything had changed.

CHAPTER 24

SCORPIUS

HELL

The Legionnaire Games: Day 33, hour 12

My head throbbed as I opened my eyes.

For a second, the world was disturbingly silent, then sounds rushed back louder and sharper than they'd ever been.

Everything had a high-pitched quality.

"Thank fuck," Corvus said shakily as warm fingers traced over my face. Orion smoothed hair off my forehead and massaged my temples.

I lay still and let my mates fuss over me.

Slowly I became aware of the rocks poking into my back and the overwhelming number of small noises that let me know I was near a crowd of people.

"What happened?" I croaked out as I licked my uncomfortably dry lips.

The last thing I remembered was standing on the edge of the field, waiting for the competition to begin.

Then everything had gone dark.

A long moment passed, and neither of my mates said anything.

Orion swallowed thickly, and there was the scraping sound of Corvus dragging a hand over his buzzed head.

"Tell me," I demanded, panic rising in my throat as I thought about everything that could have happened while I was out. Was Arabella hurt? The thought made it hard to breathe.

I'd told her to stand behind me, but she'd charged straight ahead.

She was so bold.

She was too brave for her own good.

Who was protecting her from herself?

A tight, uncomfortable sensation pinched my gut.

Corvus exhaled with a loud whoosh. "They used an illegal enchantment that broke the sound barrier in the arena. You passed out immediately. Arabella and John dragged you across the field, and you all made it in time. One of the angel competitors was left on the field, and he was killed."

Arabella saved me?

It was no secret that there was no love lost between us.

A warm feeling unfurled in my gut.

No one but my mates had ever stood up for me and saved me from my tormentors when they'd beat me for being blind.

No one else had ever cared about me.

The warmth spread.

Orion shifted back and forth like he did when he was nervous, and I narrowed my eyes. If that was all that had happened, then why were they both acting guilty? "What aren't you telling me?"

I needed her to be all right.

Corvus didn't respond.

My irritation grew, and right when I was about to snap at them, Orion whispered, "Arabella was the last to finish, so she has to perform a punishment."

I dug my nails into my palm as something foreign welled up inside me.

Nothing could have prepared me for his next words. "The gods ordered her to have sex with John. They're in the middle of the arena right now, hugging each other and talking."

Something sizzled, and it took me a moment to place that Corvus's clothing was on fire.

"Why would they have her have sex with him? How is that a punishment?" I spat as I pushed myself up into a seated position. My mates grabbed under both my arms and helped me to my feet.

The warmth was gone, and I was freezing cold.

She was being punished for saving me. It was so wrong.

"I don't know," Orion whispered.

His teeth gnashed as he clenched his jaw.

Corvus made a low growling noise in the back of his throat. "They're not

making love, they're fucking. It's not a big deal."

Orion whispered, "I'm sure it means nothing."

Tension strummed among the three of us as we silently contemplated just how messed up this was. None of us liked it or believed it was just sex. It wouldn't have been a punishment if that was all it was to her.

Locking my knees together, I struggled to stand taller.

My mates lifted me higher, and both their grips were punishing as they channeled their energy into helping me and not going on a killing rampage. Both of them trembled like they were close to losing control.

"She's my sweetheart. Mine," Orion whispered miserably to himself.

The sizzling sound got louder as Corvus burned more of his clothes off his body.

This wasn't good.

I tilted my head to the side and concentrated on filtering out all the background noise from the students. Finally, I located the familiar breathing pattern that had a small hitch every third breath.

My shoulders lowered with relief.

"I'm willing to," Arabella trailed off, and it was obvious what she was referring to. "But everyone's watching." Her voice cracked, and she sounded despondent.

She choked, then stopped breathing.

Pressing my fingers to the top of my nose, I counted to ten and tried not to lose it as she continued to not breathe. Could no one else tell how unwell she was? Why did she do this to me?

"I can't do this with so many people watching us," she whispered to John shakily.

Once again, she stopped breathing.

At this rate, she was going to pass out and do some serious brain damage.

I dug my nails harder into my palms.

"Corvus," I said harshly. "Make a protective circle of fire around them. Now."

Both my mates stiffened.

"Do it," I ordered. My tone was unwavering and left no room for argument because I wasn't talking to him as Scorpius.

I was speaking to him as his Protector.

Corvus snapped his fingers.

Flames whooshed into existence in the center of the arena and surrounded

Arabella. Through the crackling flames, John promised to take care of her, and she begged him to make it quick.

“Tell me,” Orion whispered against my ear.

Nails pulled chunks of flesh out of the bottom of my palm.

John said horribly sweet things.

Orion yanked me harshly against his side. “Tell me now,” he demanded softly.

“You don’t want to know.” I tried to focus on the blood dripping down my fingers, but the pain wasn’t soothing. Not at all.

I was a sadomasochist, but even I had my limits.

This was it.

“*Tell me!*” Orion said loudly, his lyrical voice causing people to go still around us. Feet shuffled over rocks as students gravitated toward him.

Corvus grabbed the back of our Revered’s head. “Shut the fuck up.”

I’d never heard him speak so roughly to Orion.

Orion whispered against my ear like Corvus wasn’t about to lose his shit. “Tell me now, Scorpius, or I swear to the sun god I’ll start singing.”

I faced it head-on.

My voice sounded dead as I said, “John told her he’s always viewed her as more than a friend. He said he knew she was going to be his the first moment he saw her. He called her perfect and precious as he stuck his cock inside her.”

Orion’s knees gave out, and we both tumbled forward.

Corvus caught us. He held us each up with one of our arms as he stood stoic and tall. His skin was feverishly warm.

Our Ignis gritted his teeth as he concentrated on keeping his flames at bay.

Sweat dripped off him onto me.

It was taking all his concentration not to engulf John and Arabella in fire. His problem wasn’t creating flames; that had never been an issue.

His problem was stopping once he started.

Control.

He barely had any.

Sounds filtered through the crackling of burning grass, and I almost wished they hadn’t.

If I were a better man, I would have stayed silent.

But I was a sadist.

“He’s fucking her, and she’s begging for him to hurry. Now he’s coming inside her.”

Orion trembled.

Corvus’s already flexed muscles went taut, and it felt like he was made of steel.

“Now John’s angry, and she’s talking about how she would have fucked other men?” I tilted my head, confused what they were talking about. Then. I realized. “Oh fuck.”

I fell silent.

Emotions coursed through me with such intensity that I couldn’t even begin to sort through them.

“Tell me,” Orion said loudly.

Corvus didn’t bother to admonish him as more students gathered around us. He held his breath like he was also waiting to hear.

I bit down on my lower lip.

They were still my mates, and I didn’t want to hurt them.

This one would hurt.

“Tell him,” Corvus said roughly, and the unspoken *tell me* hung heavy in the air between us.

I tipped my head back and rested it against my Ignis’s warm arm. “She bled. That was her first time with a man.”

Corvus’s skin sizzled as fire danced off his skull. He clenched his jaw and breathed roughly.

“Corvus, cut the flames!” John yelled across the field.

A long moment stretched.

My Ignis shook with rage and barked back, “I can’t.”

He trembled. He was losing control.

I put my hand on his shoulder to offer comfort, but my fingers shook. I felt the same way.

A few seconds later John jumped through the flames with Arabella in his arms. His footsteps rustled the grass as he walked toward us.

Corvus grunted.

There was an insidious crackling, then a loud fizzle. Half the lawn exploded into flames.

Somewhere behind us Lothaire swore and shouted at servants to put it out. He knew about Corvus’s inability to control his flames.

None of us said anything as they approached.

When John walked past, Corvus and Orion followed him toward the academy.

Fire spread across the arena, and it sounded like the world was burning.

You didn't mess with my Ignis.

The ancient House of Malum was revered for a reason.

More and more circumstances were spiraling out of our control, and nothing good ever came from us and disorder.

You didn't trap us.

We killed our way out of a corner.

A dark feeling stabbed my gut, and I dug my nails into the back of my Ignis's neck to reassure myself. Orion grabbed my hand with his to offer comfort.

It didn't work.

As I rubbed at the tattoo on my hip, I had an awful feeling.

This would not end well.

THE LEGIONNAIRE GAMES: METAMORPHOSIS

“Great power comes from great suffering.
No exceptions.”

—The Gods.

CHAPTER 25

ARAN

DESTINY

Metamorphosis—Day 34, hour 5

None of my teammates said anything as John carried me off the lawn of the arena. Students and competitors gawked at us as we passed.

Everyone was staring.

They were obsessed with me.

“Impure slut,” an angel sneered behind John’s back. The angel winced and grabbed at his head.

I looked back at him with a saccharine smile. “I prefer whore.”

My smile fell.

As we walked forward, the crowd of judgmental stares made me rethink everything that had just happened with John. It morphed into something else.

My stomach tied into knots.

Had John really agreed or had I just wanted him to and pressured him into it?

The ringing sensation in my ears was making it hard to think, and my memories were a jumbled mess. I bit down on my lip and squeezed my eyes shut.

When we finally got back to the bedroom, John put me down, and I ran into the bathroom.

Threw the lock on the shower stall.

Turned the spray to scalding and stumbled in with my clothes still on. I was too tired to take them off.

I laid down on the chilled tile.

I'd planned to spend thirty minutes under the water while I pulled myself together.

That'd been the plan *before*.

Before the pain.

At first, I'd thought I was having your run-of-the-mill panic attack. I'd quickly realized that what I was experiencing was definitely not mental.

It was physical.

And it had come out of nowhere.

From the intensity of the suffering, I knew I'd never be the same.

Hours later, tears streamed down my face as I contorted on the shower floor to try to relieve the torment.

It felt like my spine was snapped in half and poking out of my skin. Like my bones, jagged and sharp, protruded from my flesh like gruesome spines.

But when I patted my skin desperately, all I felt were the gashes of a slur. Normal.

Yet things were cracking and shifting inside me.

Have I not suffered enough? What did I do to deserve this? I asked the sun god.

He didn't answer.

Choking on a watery sob, I was too delirious to care that after twenty-four years of dry eyes, I was finally crying.

Tears fell like rain.

All I knew was anguish.

My brain was empty of thoughts as bright lights and colors twisted behind my eyelids.

Time didn't exist.

At some point, John banged on the locked stall and shouted, "Aran, please get out of the shower. It's time for lunch. We're all worried about you."

My back was arched, jaw cracked wide and throbbing from the force of my silent screams.

A part of me knew what was happening.

I was being punished for what I'd done to John. I should have refused to do it. I should have removed myself from the games and accepted the consequences.

I was a coward.

The pain quadrupled.

I shoved my knuckles between my teeth and bit down until the water ran red. Kicked my legs and convulsed, desperate to relieve the sensation.

Panting quietly, I garnered every ounce of strength I possessed to sound normal and yelled back to John, “No, just let me be. I need this.” My voice cracked. “Please leave.”

Silence.

Finally, footsteps echoed as John walked away.

I sobbed harder and gagged. How could I live with what I’d done?

I’d taken advantage of my friend.

I could have fought harder, but instead I’d violated him, and this was my penance.

I deserved it.

As if to punctuate my thoughts, a loud CRACK echoed through my skull, and my back bowed at an impossible angle.

Something snapped in my back, but only I could hear it.

I choked on water.

Everything went black.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

I woke up to the sensation of bones shifting in my back, and the crunchy noise echoed against the tiles.

My stomach churned and rolled until bile mixed with the tears that poured down my face.

I bawled.

Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack.

Yet again the world went dark.

Nonsensical words and situations spun through my head.

“You’re damned like me,” Mother whispered.

A towering man pressed on my eye.

Jinx screamed as she spasmed on my bed in the manor.

I shivered after Mother set me on fire. Lying on the floor of the fae palace, I hugged myself as my teeth chattered from the cold.

Hot spray pounded me.

Crack.

My back bowed.

I was free-falling through the air, arms spread wide with a pipe between my lips. It felt like freedom.

Crack.

I vomited.

Whimpered.

There was a loud bang and swearing.

A ringing sensation in my ears made it warp and echo.

“What is wrong with her?” Malum asked, his voice like whiskey and broken glass.

The ringing sensation intensified.

Orion’s lyrical voice said, “We have to help her.”

“Aran, what’s wrong?” John asked. “Is this pain from the challenge?”

Hands started to pick me up.

Scorpius’s cruel voice sneered, “Don’t touch Arabella. This is your fault. Why the hell would you let her run and hide afterward? We should have given her medical attention first, you fucking idiot.”

The hands pulled away.

Crash.

Grunts.

Swearing.

I tried to move, but my limbs wouldn’t cooperate.

As I was paralyzed, splayed on my back, hot spray splattered across my skin. The grunts and slaps became more fervent like the violence was intensifying.

Somewhere far away, gods watched as men fought beside my broken figure.

Did the gods know how tired I was?

Did they care?

I opened my mouth to tell everyone to shut up, but my jaw cramped, and a spasm racked my body. I convulsed from the effort.

My eyes rolled back in my head.

I tasted copper.

Darkness swallowed me.

Whole.

CHAPTER 26

ARAN

HONOR

Metamorphosis—Day 34, hour 20

I fluttered my eyes open.

The first thing I noticed was the high-pitched ringing sensation that burned my ears.

The second thing I noticed was that I was laying in John's bed, under the covers. Dark-red light filtered through the open windows, and a fire roared in the hearth.

The third thing I noticed was that I had not passed out in the middle of a shopping trip in the fae realm and hallucinated the events of the last two years. Shocking and upsetting.

Tensing, I held my breath and waited.

I blinked.

There was no pain.

"She's awake!" John yelled, and the ringing in my ears intensified.

I grimaced as a damp, wet cloth was dabbed against my brow.

"What happened in the shower, Arabella?" Malum snarled as he stood up from where he'd been sleeping on the floor, with his head resting at the end of the bed where my feet were.

"Nothing," I croaked out. "It was an aftereffect from the challenge. I think the pain in my ears made me seize."

I tried to prop myself up and look casual.

The magnitude of the lie burned my lips.

It felt like the universe shook its head in disagreement because something had happened in that shower. I knew it.

Bones had broken and *moved* inside my back.

It didn't take a genius to figure it out.

The fae law of Occam's razor—"plurality should not be posited without necessity." There was no need to speculate when a simple truth existed.

Here the truth was obvious: Enchanted words were carved into my back. Mother's rare enchantment must be mutating. It was the only thing that made sense.

I was. So. Screwed.

Malum's eye twitched as he stared at me like he knew I was full of shit.

I stared back with a bored expression.

He burst into flames.

I sighed heavily. Men were exhausting.

"What's going on?" Scorpius asked, sleepy as he pushed himself off the bedroom floor next to my bed. Orion mumbled and sat up with him.

For some reason, all three of the kings had been lying on the floor near John's bed while I slept (*sleep* being a generous term for *coma*).

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" Orion mouthed, and his angelic features scrunched up with concern.

For a second, I wanted to shake my head and say no. I wanted to tell him about Mother and the word carved into my back. I wanted to seek shelter in his beauty and the kindness he was offering.

I stared into his warm, inviting eyes and forgot to breathe.

"Baby," he mouthed as he reached his hand forward and trailed it across the side of my face.

Chocolate raspberries filled my nose, and I closed my eyes. Rested against his golden fingers and let him hold me.

He stroked me softly.

A lover's caress.

My lashes fluttered against his palm.

"Sweetheart, why were you convulsing in the shower?" he whispered softly, his lyrical voice wrapping around me like a cocoon of warmth.

The words were on the edge of my lips.

He pressed a soft kiss to my forehead, and I leaned against the touch.

I let myself pretend.

That he hadn't stalked me down the hall like he wanted to hurt me.

The former without the latter was hot. The former *with* the latter was serial killer shit, and not the endearing fictional kind Sadie was always going on about.

It was the energy of the real-life male serial killers that were hunted down by the High Court and disemboweled publicly as a crowd cheered. While it was true that sometimes even modern-day killers had fans, I'd always made it a point to cheer extra loud as their intestines spilled out.

As the great Olympus philosopher Razarith had said, "The ends always justify the means. No exceptions."

If Orion hunted women, then I'd hunt him. No exceptions.

I pulled my head away from his lips.

For a second, he grabbed the back of my head and held me still like he wasn't going to let me go.

It was the reminder I needed.

He was breathtakingly stunning, but he wasn't gentle.

It was a mirage.

Why did I keep forgetting?

I yanked away from him roughly and pushed at his chest until he took a step back from the bed.

Orion's eyes widened, then narrowed as he realized I was rebuffing him.

He fisted his hands.

His chest heaved as he pulled at his blond hair and stared at me. Like he could hypnotize me with his gaze.

I looked down at the covers.

What did he expect? My fictional lover would never chase me. Not like that.

Was it too much to ask for a man to fall on his knees at the sight of me and treat me like a delicate doll that would break if she wasn't protected because he thought I was perfect?

John pushed past the kings and held a cup to my lips. I gulped the refreshing water, grateful for a distraction from the devils. I choked as I inhaled too fast.

"Aw, there's my special girl. Can't even drink water correctly," John said as he patted my head like I was an idiot.

I glared up at him.

Orion made a wounded sound as I refused to look over at him, and Malum growled like he was protecting his mate.

I choked harder on the water.

The three kings crowded by the bed, and the weight of their attention was heavy on my shoulders.

I didn't look up at Orion. I didn't breathe, because Scorpius was listening. Sweat dripped down my face from the heat of Malum's flames. I didn't wipe it away.

As much as I tried to ignore them, the kings' presence was overwhelming.

"Good girl," John whispered as he wiped water gently off my chin.

I smiled instinctively, then glared as I realized what I was doing.

Orion made a weird noise.

The temperature spiked hotter.

If I could see auras like a witch, I'd bet all the gold in the fae palace that all three of the kings' would be maroon. The color of spilled blood, aggression, lust, evil.

John brushed a curl behind my ear and asked softly, "How do you feel?"

I gave him a hesitant smile but stared at the cup because I couldn't look into his kind eyes. The throbbing ache between my legs reminded me of what we'd done.

What *I'd* done to him.

John stroked a curl off my forehead, and I struggled to swallow around the lump in my throat.

John was too good for me. His aura was probably gold. The color of friendship, compassion, generosity.

The kings stood beside the bed at my feet.

John stood beside my head.

I imagined my aura engulfed the space between them. Mine was black. Depression, bleakness, heaviness, and suffering.

After I'd finished drinking all the water in the cup, there was nothing left to distract me from my guilty conscience.

I cleared my throat a few times, then asked, "John, are you okay after the punishment?"

John made a pained sound in the back of his throat, then pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead.

He whispered, "I'm completely fine, Aran. It's you I'm worried about."

I sank lower into the covers.

I didn't deserve his forgiveness.

Gentle fingers tipped up my chin, and John asked, "Are you hurting?"

The same fingers had dug into my flesh while he was inside me. A tiny zip raced down my spine.

I breathed out shakily, then gave him a fake smile. "No, I'm good."

John narrowed his eyes like he wanted to argue.

I turned to the kings. "How about you guys? Did I hurt you?"

There was a long pause, then Scorpius sneered, "What are you talking about?"

I waved my hand at my hip, unable to make sense of their presence. "The slave brand. Did it hurt you or something? Is that why you're acting concerned?"

"No, it did not," Malum snarled. "We were worried about our teammate who was passed out in the shower, covered in bloody vomit."

I stared back at him with a dead expression.

A long second passed.

I raised my eyebrow. "Oh yes, I'm sure you were *really* worried about the hole in the room."

Malum swore viciously and said through gritted teeth, "You know I didn't mean that when I said it."

My jaw dropped.

I raised my eyebrows. Well, this was news to me.

"Women have"—Malum clenched his jaw—"other useful qualities."

I scoffed. "Please enlighten us."

There was a long pause during which I thought he wasn't going to say anything. "You can be brave. You saved my Protector, and you didn't have to. I'm grateful."

I gawked at Malum like he'd grown a second head.

Scorpius snarled. "We were worried about you." A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I told you to stand behind me, but you went ahead."

Scorpius's usual perfectly slicked-back hair was messy, and his pale skin had a greenish hue. He looked like shit.

"If I stood behind you, it wouldn't have mattered," I scoffed. "Why are you mad at me for helping you?"

"I'm mad because you hurt yourself and you didn't have to!" Scorpius yelled.

For the second time, my jaw dropped.

Usually, I ignored the kings. Their opinions were like male thongs.

Useless. Disturbing. And literally *no one* asked for them.

But now they were acting like they weren't the worst people who'd ever walked the realms.

They almost sounded like they had feelings, like they cared.

I might be depressed and possibly suffering from the most extreme case of scoliosis ever recorded, but I still had the energy to be stunned.

"You're our teammate," Malum said slowly. "We respect you as more than a hole."

"Obviously," Scorpius spat.

My eyes widened.

Nothing about anything they were saying was obvious to me.

Were they feeling well?

Had I woken up in a different dimension?

Holy sun god, was this what the afterlife was like? Disappointing—I'd been hoping for a fae beach and free drugs.

My thoughts must have been written on my face, because the kings didn't argue further.

Malum slung his flaming arm around both Scorpius's and Orion's shoulders, then he said to me, "You haven't eaten in too long. You need to go to dinner."

I sighed and began to crawl out of bed.

"Let me help you," Scorpius mumbled as he grabbed me underneath the arm and helped me out of bed.

"I'm gaping at you in shock," I said loudly because I didn't want Scorpius to miss out on my facial expressions.

He shook his head with exasperation, but a small smile curled the edge of his lips.

Like he thought I was funny.

I obviously was, but *he* did not think so.

I fell over from the surprise of it and nearly collapsed onto my knees.

"Careful, careful." Malum gripped me beneath my armpits and pulled me to my feet.

I yanked my arm away and pressed it to my chest like it burned. "I'm good. You don't need to help me."

Their niceness was too much for my feminine constitution. The sun god truly gave his hardest battles to his strongest soldiers.

I stared at my feet.

The kings stared at me.

“Aran,” John started to say, but I hobbled into the hall and called back, “Dinner.”

The devils were acting weird. There was an ache between my legs, a strange pressure on my spine, and a loud ringing in my ears. Yet the emotional distress was the worst part. Memories of what had gone down with John played in my head.

I’d never felt so confused.

Discombobulated.

Lost.

A weight crushed my chest, and it felt like my organs were shutting down from the force of my guilt. I moved quickly like if I walked fast enough, I could leave it behind me.

Lightning cracked.

I staggered down the empty halls, and I glanced back to find the rest of the legion following behind. My teammates all looked sleep-deprived, and each one wore a scowl.

When I walked into the hall, people turned.

Stared.

Dinner had already started. Chairs squeaked, forks clattered, and the sharp noises echoed like gunshots through my sensitive ears.

My eyes locked on Sadie.

I walked to the dais.

I kept my eyes on her.

Among a sea of judgmental gazes, she was a familiar lifeline.

When I walked to my usual seat, no matter how many times I told myself to just do it, I couldn’t force myself to pull it out and sit down.

I needed my best friend.

I must have stood at the table longer than I realized, because a deep voice said, “You can go sit with her.”

It took me a moment to register I hadn’t imagined it. Malum really had suffered a stroke. He was being nice.

I didn’t wait for him to recover.

As I hurried past the other legions toward Sadie, a wave of self-consciousness hit me. I moved slower. *Sadie’s mates don’t want you around her. Not after what you’ve done.*

When I got to the shifter table, I rubbed at the back of my neck. “Can I sit

with you?”

Everyone stood up.

I flinched.

Sadie threw herself against me and pulled me down into the newly vacant chair beside her. “I’ve been so worried about you,” she whispered against my chest as she hugged me.

I clung back.

Over her shoulder, Xerxes and Ascher both smiled and gave me little waves.

The friendly movement was comically out of place on the two men. Ascher’s tattoos and horns gave him an edge of violence that was matched by Xerxes’s fluid motions as he sharpened his daggers.

I breathed in the faint scent of sweet cranberries as I pressed my cheek against the top of Sadie’s head.

“Are you okay?” Jinx asked quietly from the end of the table as she stroked the ferret hanging around her neck like a scarf. Her dark eyes were too large for her pointy features and gave her a ghoulish appearance.

She looked worried.

Startled by the compassion on her face, I pulled away from Sadie and smoothed invisible wrinkles off my sweatshirt.

“Actually, it’s been pretty rough.” I gave an awkward laugh. “Are *you* okay?” I asked her pointedly.

Memories of her strapped to a chair sobbing overwhelmed me.

Her soft expression disappeared as she scowled.

“I’m fine.” Jinx’s tone was harsh. “What were you doing on that field? Lollygagging around while the time was counting down? I’ve never seen someone move slower in my life. Where was your sense of self-preservation?”

My jaw dropped. “Really? You want to do this now?”

I was clearly in a delicate state.

Did no one have any respect for the mentally ill anymore?

Jinx rolled her eyes as she cut a piece of steak into impossibly small pieces. “Well, when do you want to do it? Should I wait to criticize your performance when you’re *deceased* from indecision?”

Jax leaned over and cut Sadie’s steak for her. She tried to push him away, but he just glared at her missing finger and continued to cut until he was finished.

Sadie turned her attention to Jinx and said, “Don’t be mean to Aran. She’s clearly going through a lot right now.”

Jinx huffed and fed the ferret a piece of meat.

I could practically hear the insults she was calling me in her head.

I made a face at Jinx. “Aren’t you supposed to be simpering and apologizing for wiping our memories? Also, I just went through extreme trauma. Show a little respect for your elders.”

Jinx rolled her black eyes. “Nice. Deflect the conversation to cover up your own shortcomings. Very mature. Also, the John guy’s been making moon eyes at you since the competition started. Stop trying to milk it.”

“It was horrible and demeaning.” I gasped with outrage. “It was very upsetting for both of us.”

Jinx scoffed. “Sure, keep telling yourself that.”

“Don’t listen to her.” Sadie threaded her four fingers through mine and held my hand.

I squeezed Sadie’s hand. “Don’t worry, I’m not.”

Jinx fell silent, and I concentrated on trying to eat some vegetables, but everything tasted like ashes.

My stomach cramped.

The table fell into a comfortable silence.

The entire hall was more subdued than usual, and there was an awkward tension in the air. I could feel the weight of dozens of eyes staring at me.

I studied my plate.

Sadie held my hand under the table and squeezed three times in quick succession. I squeezed back four times.

We both knew what we meant.

I concentrated on the feel of her warm fingers against mine and her comforting presence beside me.

“I agree with Jinx about your performance during the competition,” Cobra said out of nowhere.

I choked.

The snake shifter leaned closer and glared at me. “I thought I was going to have to go back and rescue you because you were moving so slowly. You wasted a good minute just staring at your teammate.”

My jaw dropped. “Sorry that the lack of sound barrier made me slow,” I said sarcastically. “Not all of us are part snake.”

Cobra nodded. “Apology accepted.”

“I was being facetious.” I ground my teeth together.

He narrowed his eyes. “Well, you shouldn’t be. You should practice not wasting time in the middle of a life-or-death situation. It is—”

Sadie banged her utensils onto the tabletop and cut him off. “Everyone needs to start being nicer to Aran. It’s pissing me off!”

“I am being nice.” Cobra pointed his knife at me and scoffed. “I’m talking to her, aren’t I?”

The fact that he refused to talk to women because of what my mother did to him was a major character flaw.

Personally, it would be a deal breaker. But that was just me.

“Well, I wished you wouldn’t,” I snapped back at him.

Cobra bared his teeth, and his canines were elongated. “Oh, I won’t!”

Before I could say something else, a freakishly large hand smacked the back of Cobra’s head. A minor scuffle ensued as Jax overpowered Cobra and forcibly pulled him out of the seat next to me.

The much nicer bear shifter took his place.

He smelled like warm chestnuts and kindness.

Jax smiled down at me. “Sorry about Cobra. He was worried about you, and he doesn’t know how to express his emotions in a healthy way.”

“I do not care about her,” Cobra said as he leaned forward across the table so he could see past Jax’s large frame and glare at me.

Jax turned quickly, the chains in his braids tinkling as he put Cobra in a choke hold and whispered something in his ear.

When he pulled away, Cobra pouted in his seat and didn’t say anything else.

“Like I was saying.” Jax turned back to me. “Both he and Sadie didn’t sleep last night. He felt guilty for not going back to rescue you, so you didn’t finish last. He wasn’t sure if it would break the competition rules, but he’s mad at himself for not trying.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

Jax stared down at me with compassion and whispered, “He feels responsible for what happened to you.”

I pushed my pipe into my mouth with so much force that I accidentally stabbed my tongue. Shrugging with a casualness I didn’t feel, I said, “It’s not your fault, Cobra. It was all mine. Don’t worry.”

Cobra grunted.

“Everyone, stop talking about it,” Sadie ordered. She squeezed my hand

and changed the subject. "What was the last fiction book you read?"

I smiled at her gratefully. "I haven't read a fiction book in years."

Sadie flopped forward like she'd been shot. After dramatically convulsing a couple of times for the bit, she sat up straight and launched into an in-depth analysis of the erotic romance plot from the last book she'd read.

The meal progressed.

Sadie explained that the male character's crooked penis was symbolic of his imperfect love.

Straight women were so weird.

Yes, I was straight. I didn't want to talk about it.

Truthfully, I tried not to let a single thought cross my mind.

Everything was going great until a student with a mohawk sitting nearby said, "So how much does it cost to fuck you, Queen Arabella? I'll pay a small fortune for your services."

Male laughter echoed.

Ten thousand credits, I thought. I refrained from saying it aloud because I didn't have the energy to haggle for a good price.

Sadie stiffened beside me, and her mates sat up straighter.

I picked at the vegetables on my plate.

"Come on, babe, give me an offer," he whined.

I rolled my eyes.

"Psst, Queen Arabella," he said in a loud whisper, "I know you can hear me."

Why did the legion tables have to be so close to the dais?

"That's it." Sadie pressed her steak knife into her finger, and a ball of blood floated in the air from the cut.

Her ruby eyes glowed.

"Stop it," I swatted the blood down before she could do something stupid. "You don't want everyone to know about your powers."

The droplets I'd hit onto the table floated up into the air and recoagulated.

Sadie scowled. "He won't know anything once I've made him into a mindless zombie."

I turned to Jax and said tiredly, "Make her stop."

He nodded, then reached across the table and pinched Sadie's nose between two fingers.

Her eyes stopped glowing, and the blood dropped.

I shook my head. "I can't believe that worked."

Jax winked down at me. “You don’t want to know how we discovered it.”
“How about you just suck me off?” the douche at the other table said louder.

Excited to announce, I’m going to stop giving men the benefit of the doubt.

Sadie’s canines lengthen. Why was my friend so ridiculously overpowered yet unable to run for five minutes without asphyxiating? Truly a unique woman.

“He’s not worth it,” I hissed at her.

At the same time, the douche laughed and said, “Just one blow job, baby.”

I clenched my jaw so tightly it ached. If karma didn’t hit him, then I would.

Xerxes and Ascher pushed their chairs back and stood up, and Jax’s head snapped around. Sadie let out a low howl.

Jinx rolled her eyes and fed her ferret pieces of steak.

Before I could try to defuse the situation, the student let out a high-pitched scream.

Everyone in the hall turned to stare at the commotion.

I narrowed my eyes at Sadie, but she shrugged. “Wasn’t me.”

The jerk screamed louder.

It took everyone at the table a second to realize that the jewels embedded in Cobra’s skin were now slithering shadow snakes, and he had slit pupils.

“Oopssss,” he lisped and flashed two elongated front canines and a slightly forked tongue.

The tongue was new.

He smirked.

A single black shadow snake was latched onto the screaming student’s neck.

Cobra’s snakes emitted a painful poison. It was supposedly debilitating.

For a second, the air around the shrieking student also sparkled black, and his ruddy skin turned unnaturally pale.

The darkness disappeared when I blinked. I must have imagined it.

After a few moments, the other students became bored with watching the man scream. They turned back to their meals.

We did the same.

Sadie planned our next shopping trip in extreme detail, and even the men

joined in on the conversation.

Ascher wanted a new phone, Jax wanted a different nose ring, Cobra had his eye on a comic book (who knew he had hobbies?), and Xerxes wanted a new supercar.

Sadie said Xerxes was being ridiculous and that she just wanted a new book.

Yet again, her aversion to spending money was extremely creepy and not relatable.

I aspired to spend all the fae palace gold. Nothing would make me happier than bankrupting the realm.

When I told Sadie this, she said I was greedy.

I didn't see the problem.

Even as I argued with my friend about her acting like a peasant, the student's screams made me uncomfortable.

Someone else was in pain because of me.

It was stupid because realistically I didn't give a single shit about the man. Still, I couldn't help feeling like darkness clung to me.

I was corrupted.

Evil.

Soulless.

When the dinner finally ended, students grabbed the screaming man and dragged him across the floor out the door.

There was a black scorch mark across the crotch of his pants.

From the way Malum was smirking at the other table, Cobra wasn't the only one who'd intervened.

I inhaled enchanted smoke.

Exhaled with a long drag.

For a second, I'd forgotten I wasn't a member of the functional, loving shifter legion.

I was a part of the academy legion: psychotic devils, ornery demons, a depressed fae queen, and a happy-go-lucky human.

We were the definition of dysfunctional.

I gave Sadie and Jax a hug, bumped fists with Ascher and Xerxes, made a face at Cobra, and flipped off Jinx, who mouthed, "Do the right thing."

When I joined my teammates, I still couldn't look John in the eyes, and I pretended I didn't see the kings staring at me.

The demons raised their brows when I walked beside them in the halls.

“We’re not friends,” Zenith muttered angrily under his breath. “Stay away from us.”

I took a step closer.

He was such a funny guy.

I’d always loved his silent-but-deadly energy.

John gave me long looks over his shoulder, and the pressure on my chest intensified. The weight crushed me.

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to reverse the past.

When we entered the room, I bumped into Malum.

He stood in the doorway, blocking everyone.

Zenith bumped into me from behind and shoved me forward. I pushed him back, and he ran into Malum.

Malum bumped into Scorpius, who turned around and shoved Vegar.

John swore when Zenith pushed him over and launched himself at Scorpius to get retribution for hurting his boyfriend.

Everyone pushed at one another.

Heat prickled the side of my neck, and I looked over midscuffle to find Orion staring down at me with wide, unblinking eyes. The men bumped into him, and he didn’t react. He just kept staring at me.

I rolled my eyes back in my head and stuck my tongue out at him.

John tried to pull Scorpius and Zenith apart. Their hands were wrapped around each other’s necks, and they were strangling each other. Kinky.

Malum had a flaming fist pointed at Vegar.

In the middle of the scrum, Orion stepped close and invaded my personal space. He whispered so quietly I barely heard him say, “Do that again and I’ll take you up on your offer, sweetheart.”

Too-pretty features glinted maniacally.

It took me a second to realize what he was talking about.

I pulled my tongue back into my mouth as a blush burned my cheeks. “That wasn’t what I meant,” I hissed with outrage. “I was pretending to be dead.”

We both ignored the bulge that was growing in his pants.

“Enough,” Lothaire bellowed loudly, and everyone broke apart. The reason Malum had stopped in the doorway was clear.

“In formation, recruits. Did none of my training stick in your fucking brains? Are you five years old?”

We stood at attention.

Legs spread.
Arms behind our backs.
Heads lowered.
Soldiers.
Killers.

Lothaire stood in our room and stared at the hearth with a forlorn expression. He tapped his fingers on the mantel like he was impatient.

It wasn't a competition day, so I didn't understand why he was here.

Lothaire sighed heavily as he looked at us. His skin had a grayish tint, and his single eye was almost as bloodshot as mine.

He looked like shit.

I didn't care.

"You will be making a substitution," Lothaire said as he paced back and forth. "Your new teammate will arrive tomorrow."

Malum stood up straight. "What, that doesn't make any sense. We don't need a substitute. Who is it?"

Lothaire shook his head and walked toward where we stood.

All seven of us stilled, and the tension was palpable.

We held our breaths.

Waited for him to pull out his baton and beat the shit out of us. I fought the urge to flinch.

"You will learn soon enough," Lothaire said curtly as he walked out the door.

He passed by me in slow motion, features pinched with sadness. He glanced down at me with longing on his face.

I frowned back.

He was already dead to me.

Lothaire disappeared into the crowded hall.

A beat passed as everyone processed what he'd said.

"What the fuck?" Malum exploded with flames. "I'm the captain. I should know what's going on."

Scorpius and Orion immediately surrounded him. They caressed him and whispered into his ear as they tried to calm him.

The demons retreated into their bed together.

John stood still beside me, and his olive skin was pale like he was going to be sick.

"Do you know what's going on?" I asked him.

John just shook his head and climbed into bed without a backward glance.
He was uncharacteristically withdrawn.

It felt like a thousand-pound weight was crushing my sternum.

He's sad because of what you did to him.

After I brushed my teeth and tied back my hair, the room was dark, since the curtains had been drawn. Everyone had retreated into their beds for the night.

Picking at my lower lip, I reviewed my options.

I didn't have many.

Lying down on the carpet, I curled into myself. The floor was uncomfortable, but my mattress had been shredded to create a makeshift cot, and I wasn't going to force my presence on John.

I'd just gotten into a comfortable position when hands scooped me up.

Before I could blink, I was positioned under fluffy covers with John's arms wrapped around me.

I was cocooned in his warmth.

I started to pull away.

"Just go to sleep, Aran." John's voice cracked. "Please." He hugged me.

The desperation in his voice made me pause.

"Okay," I whispered and closed my eyes. The pressure on my chest lightened as John's heart beat steadily against my back.

As sleep pulled me under, John whispered, "Please forgive me."

I was too tired to ask what he meant.

In the future, I'd wish I had stayed awake to question him. I'd really wish I hadn't passed out.

But I did.

CHAPTER 27

ARAN

REVELATIONS

Metamorphosis—Day 36, hour 11

“**Y**ou’re in my bed,” John said.

I grunted and rubbed morning grit from my eyes, confused why he was pointing out the obvious.

Humans really weren’t the brightest.

My ears were still sensitive, but the ringing sensation was mostly gone.

I cracked my neck back and forth as I stretched and took stock of my injuries.

On a pain scale of one to ten, I was at a nine, which was an improvement because when my back was cracking, I’d been at a one thousand.

We loved personal growth.

It took my tired brain a second to process that John was looming over the bed like a dark, angry god. His dimples were gone, and a menacing energy surrounded him.

Long moments of silence stretched as he glared down at me.

It hit me.

Mr. Hyde is back.

I’d been wondering when John would make his personality switch, and it looked like it had finally happened.

“Aran?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

They were the same dark eyes that had stared down at me as I’d sat on his lap with him throbbing inside me.

I squeezed my legs together. I still ached from where he'd taken me.

A wave of self-consciousness, confusion, and regret hit me like a brick, and I pulled the pillow over my head. "Yes, John?"

Silence.

I peeked behind the pillow, and John's face was contorted into harsh angles by a deep scowl.

The air shimmered darkly around him.

"Are you okay?" I whispered, although I knew the answer.

He wasn't. The crushing weight on my chest quadrupled until it felt like a spear pinned me to the mattress.

What we'd done had triggered some type of psychological breakdown inside him.

John said nothing.

He stood unnaturally still and kept glaring.

I wanted to cry because I knew we were both thinking about it.

From his expression, he was having a lot of regrets.

Mr. Hyde was always quiet and brooding, I reminded myself. Maybe it just seemed worse because he hadn't switched personalities in a while? He'd seemed fine last night.

"Everyone, wake up. We leave for breakfast in thirty minutes," Malum barked out from across the room.

He hung shirtless from the bathroom doorframe by his fingertips. "We'll deal with Lothaire's announcement when the problem arises." Bronze arms glistened as he banged out pull-ups. "Everyone needs to focus on being strong."

Malum stared at me, and his harsh expression softened. "Are you feeling better?"

Great, he was having an episode.

I looked away, pulled the covers over my head, and pretended to sleep. I literally couldn't handle Malum acting like he was nice.

I also tried to ignore that John hadn't moved away from the bed and was looming over me.

Sure, Mr. Hyde was normally silent and brooding, but this was a lot.

Even for him.

I was surrounded by certifiable men.

When I gathered the courage to leave my blanket fort and go to the bathroom, John narrowed his eyes at me with distrust.

His energy was off as we walked to breakfast with a couple feet between us.

The space felt painfully awkward.

In the great hall, students fell silent as I passed.

When I got to the dais where the legions sat, feathers clattered together as all the angels turned to glare at me. The ice weapons strapped across their backs chilled the air.

Their captain turned to me and wrinkled his nose. “Sinful blood,” he spat as his mismatched eyes flashed.

I pretended he was also obsessed with me.

It was hard being popular.

A few tables down, Sadie gave me a friendly wave while Jax smiled, and their small acts of kindness meant everything.

I felt a little better.

Behind Sadie, Jinx mouthed, “Snap out of it,” and Cobra made a shockingly vulgar hand gesture. Jax slapped him.

Never mind.

I felt like shit.

As I sat down in my usual chair, I winced as my knees gave out.

Next to me John looked around the hall with wide eyes, and his gaze hovered on the bloody leviathan competitor crucified to the sacred tree.

Did he wish that was me?

I picked mindlessly at my lip.

The fae palace had felt like a prison, but I’d always known that one day I’d escape Mother.

Now I was trapped by so much more than one woman: the slave brand, queendom, enchanted wounds, the legion I’d been forced to join, and what I’d done to my friend.

Breathing shallowly through my nose, I tried to count but forgot how.

I broke out in a cold sweat.

Edges pressed in around me.

My vision blurred, and the world went quiet.

Someone pulled my fingers away from my lip and held my hands in a vise grip.

“Concentrate on me,” a man ordered from far away. “Feel my skin and focus on the pressure. Don’t think about your breath. Squeeze my hands as hard as you can.”

I obeyed.

“Just keep squeezing,” he commanded.

The touch was an anchor back to reality, and sounds slowly intensified.

I blinked, and my vision returned to normal.

Scorpius was leaning forward across the table with his hands holding mine.

His neck was flushed magenta like he was agitated.

Without a sneer contorting his face, he was extremely good-looking. His dark hair contrasted with his pale skin and the colorful eye tattoo on his neck. He wasn't pretty like Orion. He was dangerously handsome. A collection of harsh lines and shadows.

“Just keep focusing on my touch,” Scorpius said as he squeezed my fingers. “I've used this technique with Orion countless times.”

My lips parted in surprise.

I forced myself not to look over at the quiet king.

“Thanks,” I said awkwardly to Scorpius as I started to pull my hands away from his. I felt weak and clammy but marginally better.

I didn't need his help.

Scorpius's callused grip tightened.

He didn't let go.

I tugged against him. “I'm all good now. You can release me.”

Scorpius narrowed his eyes. “You're obviously not good, because you just had a panic attack over breakfast.” He didn't let go. “You need to take care of yourself.”

John looked back and forth between us with his eyebrows raised.

“Why do you care?” I struggled against his grip aimlessly. Why were his fingers so damn strong?

Scorpius's lips pursed into a thin line. He paused, then murmured, “Because I'm the reason you finished last. I'm the reason you and John were punished.”

I frowned.

“Yep.” I nodded as I thought about it. “It really was your fault.”

Silence.

Eye tattoo twitching, Scorpius snarled, “You're supposed to disagree. It was your own inability to move quickly that made you lose.” He yanked my hands across the table closer to him. “I can't believe you'd blame your *unconscious* teammate for your failures.”

I scoffed.

“Please,” I said. “You just admitted that you were the problem. Who takes a nap during a challenge that could cause death?”

I yanked back and knocked over a glass of ale.

Scorpius’s jaw dropped, but he didn’t release me. “Sorry that I’m blind and have extremely sensitive hearing.” He squeezed hard. “My ears still fucking hurt.”

“Does your face hurt?” I asked with concern.

He furrowed his brow. “No. Why?”

“Because it’s killing me,” I said snottily, grateful that Jinx used that comeback every time Sadie complained about something.

Silverware clattered.

Vegar sputtered water and choked while Zenith slapped his back.

Instead of defusing the tension like I’d planned, my joke had caused Scorpius to still like he was frozen.

Hurt flashed across his face.

Wait. Does he think he’s ugly?

He had to know he was disturbingly handsome. Right?

I slumped in my seat.

“I was joking,” I said with a sigh. It was hard work being such a good person. “I’m fully aware that it’s no one’s fault but my own. I took too long during the competition, and then I didn’t refuse the punishment like I should have.” My voice cracked. “I never should have...with John.”

I trailed off, unable to say it.

Any softness on Scorpius’s face melted away, and I was left with the cruel, blind king who bullied me.

His fingernails pressed harshly against my skin.

Malum burst into flames beside him.

Orion scowled.

John sat up straighter beside me.

Malum pointed over at the sacred tree. “You’re telling me you wish you were also strung up on the tree right now?”

I spoke without hesitation. “Absolutely. That would have been the right thing to do.”

Jinx’s statements about righteousness flashed through my mind.

She’d said I had to try to be a better person, then I’d gone and done the worst thing of my life.

Ever been the problem?

Same.

Malum growled like a feral animal, and Orion slammed his cup onto the table.

Scorpius squeezed my hands until my bones cracked. "You're an idiot," he sneered.

I couldn't believe I'd wasted a second of my life feeling bad for him.

Struggling against his painful grip, I shook my head and said, "You couldn't even pretend to be a decent person for five seconds without showing your true colors."

His eye tattoo blinked lazily like it was seeing through me.

The jerk still hadn't let me go.

"You think you're so high and mighty because you're a queen?" Scorpius tugged me forward across the table, and plates clattered. "You don't get to judge me. You're an indolent despot. A product of nepotism. Meanwhile I earned my title with nothing but pure power."

I scoffed.

"You forget that my title was also earned," I said haughtily. "I've suffered more to be queen than you can even imagine." I trembled with rage.

Scorpius narrowed his eyes.

Blood dripped across my hand and down my forearm from where he was stabbing me with his nails.

"If that were true, then you wouldn't act so fucking pathetic. Saying you'd rather be nailed to the tree and blaming me for your shortcomings. Weak. How can someone be so brave one moment and so uncaring about their own life the next?"

I saw red.

I was. Not. Weak.

A monster roared in my head and banged against its cage.

No. There was no monster.

It was just my anger.

Compartmentalizing and removing myself from my emotions was a crutch I'd promised myself I would stop using. It was a sign of insanity.

Was I perfect? No. Sometimes I dissociated for days and murdered people.

But did that make me a bad person? Yes. It definitely did.

But at least I wasn't insane. Not yet.

It was all I had left.

I squeezed my hands as hard as I could and curled my fingernails so I gouged Scorpius back. “You don’t get to speak to me like you know me.”

“We’ve trained and lived together for months,” he snarled back. “We do know each other.”

Zenith banged his fist on the table. “Stop making a scene. The other legions are staring at us.”

Malum’s flames shot higher into the air. “Since Arabella wishes she’d chosen to be tortured, I think a scene is necessary.”

“Oh, please,” I spat, vision getting darker every second Scorpius didn’t release me. “Don’t act like you care.”

Malum leaned forward.

Flames trailed up the side of his neck as he said, “You don’t get to tell me what I feel. I’ve decided that someone needs to care about you, because you clearly aren’t doing it. I agree the whole slave thing has been a little harsh. I’m sorry if I got carried away with it. Even if my anger gets the best of me, I don’t want to see you suffer.”

I gaped at him. Unable to form a single coherent word.

Did he just talk about his feelings? Did he just apologize?

I knew Malum was not lecturing me about emotional maturity, because that would be ridiculous.

There were rocks that were more emotionally aware than him.

“I’m your captain,” Malum finished awkwardly as scarlet stained the tops of his cheeks, like somehow that explained everything. The blush seemed out of place amongst the harsh angles of his face.

The other men shifted at the table and gave him strange looks.

“Slave,” John mouthed as his eyes clouded. He always bristled when the kings called me that.

“You’re not going to call me ‘slave’ anymore?” I asked slowly.

A muscle in Malum’s jaw jumped. “No.” He grunted, and his bronze cheeks flushed redder. “I never meant it like *that*.”

My jaw hit the floor.

How many connotations of “slave” were there? One.

Was this man for real right now?

I blinked slowly.

He was really trying to gaslight me into thinking he hadn’t treated me like scum since I’d met him. Good thing I’d never lacked confidence in myself.

I knew I was right.

Was I depressed? Yes. Was I never wrong? Also yes. The two were not mutually exclusive.

“That’s exactly how you meant it,” I snarled at Malum. Annoyed that we were even having this stupid conversation.

Flames jumped off Malum’s skull. “Well, I don’t mean it like that anymore.”

“Good for you.” I laughed sarcastically.

I shoved myself backward with so much force that Scorpius had no choice but to release my hands or break my wrists. Cups clattered, and food spilled.

Now that my hands were free, I used them to clap at Malum mockingly.

“We’re trying to help after...” Scorpius hissed and tilted his head in John’s direction.

His insinuation was clear.

It hit me like a physical blow.

I stopped clapping.

Fingers shook.

I pulled out my pipe and shoved it between my lips, and it clattered against my teeth.

“What’s wrong with you? Why would you bring that up?” Orion whispered as he shoved at Scorpius.

At least Orion cared.

Just not enough.

“I’m trying to help!” Scorpius threw his hands in the air.

Malum looked at me with pity and said something, but the whooshing sensation had returned to my ears, and everything became garbled.

I didn’t want his remorse.

I wanted his blood.

A crushing sensation expanded from my chest into my stomach. Digging my fingernails into my palm, I tried to stay present. Tried to fight off the fugue.

Oblivion swallowed me whole.

The haze returned.

I was barely aware of the meal ending, of moving down the hall and going outside to run.

A student jostled against me in the hall, and he said something. I stared

back blankly. He recoiled. Tripped in his haste to get away.

Could he see the darkness in my eyes?

I blinked.

I was twenty miles deep into a run, jogging beside John.

Sulfur stung my nose, and the bitter wind was a relief against clammy skin.

It felt like I was living in a dream within a dream.

A nightmare within a nightmare.

The tribulations continued.

Clashes echoed like thunder. High above the island, angels slammed their ice swords together. They thrust and parried, wings clattering as they flapped.

Wind howled, and tendrils of hair slapped my face as curls pulled out of my braids.

I was covered in a thick sheen of sweat. My bare feet were numb from pounding against rocks, lungs burning from exertion.

John loped silently beside me with a scowl on his face.

We ran at the back of our legion, with the other five men a few yards ahead of us.

“You back?” John asked in a clipped voice.

I nodded.

He turned forward.

We ran five more miles in comfortable silence. Mr. Hyde was never a big talker.

I cleared my throat.

John glanced down at me.

I gathered my courage and said, “Sorry about all that at breakfast. Do you need anything from me after...” I trailed off awkwardly. “Can I help make it better?”

I glanced up and wished I hadn’t.

John’s scowl deepened, and shadows hovered around him.

He opened and closed his mouth, then asked slowly, “What are you apologizing for doing to me?”

His phrasing was weird, and my stomach twisted in knots.

Did he want me to beg for forgiveness?

Mr. Hyde always had an intensity that put me on edge.

I took a deep breath. *Stop being a baby. You’ve wronged him. The kings are right, you’re making this all about yourself.*

“I’m-sorry-for-raping-you,” I said as fast as I could.

John’s eyes widened.

He stopped running, and the shadows around him expanded until the air shimmered with a black void.

“What are you doing?” Malum called as he looked back at John, who stood on the shore, getting left further and further behind.

I turned and ran back to where John was unmoving. “Hey, what are you —”

John lunged forward and picked me off the ground by my shoulders. He squeezed, and it felt like I was suffocating.

I stared into his dark eyes.

John barked with anger, “Did you say ‘rape’?”

I nodded and winced as he squeezed tighter.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

John screamed like a broken man.

Then I was airborne.

Slam.

I crashed against a wave.

It felt like I’d hit solid rock.

He threw me into the sea.

Water filled my lungs, and I choked as the rough surf pulled me under.

John wanted me dead.

Just like Sari.

To know me was to hate me. How was a person supposed to live with that?

Waves slammed my limp form against rocks, then sucked me out to sea.

Edges.

Everywhere.

I would have cried if I’d had anything left to feel.

Numbness swallowed me.

Maybe it was the haze. Maybe I passed out. Maybe I died but my heart wasn’t consumed so my queendom revived me. Or maybe my heart was eaten and the slave brand brought me back to life.

More tribulations.

Either way, the next thing I knew, I was lying on the shore while Orion slammed his hands against my chest in compressions.

His white-blond hair and clothes were soaking wet.

Stunning almond-shaped brown eyes were manic. Wide with terror. His pupils dilated.

Above him Scorpius loomed. He slapped my cheek and yelled, "Wake up!"

A few feet away, Malum was trying to slam his flaming fists into John.

The darkness around John shimmered like a tangible force, and he moved so quickly that Malum never landed a blow.

Salty water flooded my throat.

Orion pushed me onto my left side, and water gurgled out of my mouth.

Nose burning, eyes hurting from the pressure, I could do nothing but gag and choke.

"Sweetheart?" Orion whispered as his face hovered inches from mine. Wetness clung to his long lashes and dripped onto me.

I pushed away from him and got to my feet.

I stumbled across the rocks to where Malum was trying to hurt my friend.

When I saw an opening, I threw my aching body between them and blocked Malum.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Malum snarled, silver eyes hard as steel as flames danced off his shaved head in a creepy-looking crown.

"Do not hurt John." I coughed up salty water.

"Really?" Scorpius yelled as he and Orion stalked toward us. "You're going to side with the fucker who just *threw you into the sea to die?*"

The demons sat casually on a boulder and watched everything play out with bored expressions.

"Yes," I said forcefully. "I will always defend him from you three."

"*He tried to kill you!*" Malum bellowed to the sky.

Thankfully the angels were flying on the other side of the island and no one was around to see our legion falling to pieces.

"I deserved it," I said through gritted teeth. "We all process trauma differently. John is allowed to hate me."

John said something behind me, but I couldn't hear it over the howling wind.

"What did you say?" I asked as I turned to him.

His voice was menacing as he said, "I'm not John."

The ocean crashed across the rocks as if to punctuate his statement.

"What?" I said as I stared at my friend dumbly.

"I'm not John."

Everyone turned to him.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I'm Luka, his twin."

Time paused.

Jaws dropped.

Everything clicked into place with disturbing clarity.

John's two dramatically distinct personalities. How he'd switch from being talkative and friendly to silent and brooding. He'd spend days saying nothing. Lothaire had told us we already knew our substitute. Last night, John had whispered to me he was sorry after he'd heard there would be a substitution.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were two separate men.

Mr. Hyde is Luka.

John had an angry twin.

And he was standing in front of me, seething because I'd hurt his brother.

"What?" Vegar asked from the rocks. "There's been two of you for years and none of us noticed?"

John—no, *Luka*—gave a curt nod.

"Holy fuck," Zenith said.

If that didn't sum it all up.

I leaned forward and vomited water all over Luka's bare feet.

He glared down at me with disgust.

"Nice to meet you," I croaked.

Luka said nothing.

I remembered the hours I'd clung to Mr. Hyde in the black sea.

The hours he'd fought beside me in battles.

How he'd hauled my pathetic ass across these rocks.

He'd spent long days sitting next to me silently in class.

We'd shared a bed.

Trained until we couldn't stand without leaning against each other.

Held each other up as we bled.

Shared meals.

All that time together and I didn't even know who he really was.

Luka cleared his throat. "You're Aran. And you hurt John," he stated matter-of-factly.

Air whistled through my lips as I sighed heavily.

I nodded as I realized his voice was slightly deeper than John's. Was that why he never talked?

His eyebrows furrowed with confusion.

Oh, he meant I was *Aran*. I rubbed at my bruised face. “Yeah, I was disguised as a man.”

Luka turned around slowly.

Grabbed a boulder and chucked it as far as he could while he let out a war scream.

The hair on the backs of my arms stood up.

My knees gave out, and I sat back on the nearest rock, which put me right next to the demons.

“Well, I didn’t see this coming,” I said to Zenith.

He didn’t turn to look at me and said in a deadpan voice, “Don’t speak to me.”

I nodded in agreement and lay back. He liked to rib on me. That was how our friendship went.

I sucked on my pipe and blew out Horse.

Luka threw another boulder hundreds of feet across the shore.

Crash.

Rocks exploded on a gloomy beach.

Horse flapped his wings lazily as he flew higher into the sky, backlit by the eldritch eclipse. Celestial bodies consumed the sky.

I inhaled drugs, smoke pouring from my lips.

Malum ranted. He screamed something about being team captain and everyone keeping secrets from him. He said a lot of words.

I watched Horse longingly, wishing I could also fly away.

CHAPTER 28

ARAN

INTRODUCTIONS

Metamorphosis—Day 37, hour 11

“**A**nd then John carried me from the arena back to the room,” I finished telling Luka about the punishment.

John’s twin narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

Our bare feet slapped loudly against water and rocks. The surf slammed in with a roar, then retreated reluctantly back to sea.

Compared to his easygoing, talkative brother, Mr. Hyde was a quiet man. Intense.

Intimidating.

We were two hours into a long morning jog, and even though I was sore and tired, I was grateful Malum was making us train. The run gave me a distraction from *everything* that had gone down yesterday.

The revelations.

High above us in the sky, the angels once again fought with their ice swords. Far below them, hidden in the shadows behind the academy, the devil legion also trained with swords, but theirs were made of fire.

I shivered as I studied the two legions.

Fire and ice.

Angels and devils.

Sadie said they shared a realm, and I hadn’t understood until this moment what that meant.

Now I saw the similarities.

Strength and power radiated from both groups, and even their swords were mirror images of each other.

I squinted at the devil legion as we ran past. It wasn't hard to picture them with wings.

BANG. Ice swords slammed together, and blue flames exploded.

BANG. Fire swords bounced off each other loudly.

It was the alchemy law of extremes: At its hottest temperature, fire mimics the properties of ice. At its coldest temperature, ice mimics the properties of fire.

Goose bumps shivered down my spine.

A shadow flashed in my periphery, and I looked over my shoulder. I scanned the surf, but there was nothing, just rocks and the sea. I must have imagined it.

Movement. I whipped my head to the right.

There.

A pale body dashed swiftly across the rocks, angling itself in the shadows of boulders so that it was almost impossible to follow its progression.

It was a member of the assassin legion.

I'd assumed the other legions were all resting inside between competitions, but now I wasn't so sure. To the naked eyed, there was no one else outside training.

Has the assassin legion been training around us this entire time and I've never noticed?

Taking a deep breath of sulfur-stained air, I relaxed my arms and drove forward with my legs. I focused on each step.

I ignored the angels in the sky, devils on land, and assassins in the shadows.

Endorphins pumped through my blood.

They kept the haze at bay. Just barely.

I focused on my breathing and not the stranger who was matching pace beside me. Stride for stride, we ran together like we'd been doing so our entire lives.

Just like with John, Luka and I ran in perfect tandem. We'd done this same jog dozens of times.

But unlike with John, I didn't know this man.

Yet, he knew me.

From the shitshow that had been yesterday, Luka had no interest in

getting to know any of us further.

After Luka had revealed who he was, everyone in our legion had spiraled into a mini meltdown over the revelation.

For hours, we'd bombarded him with questions, which turned out to be a pointless and infuriating exercise because unlike his twin brother, Luka wasn't a big talker.

He was more of a glowerer.

Sun god, he was even quieter than Orion, who at least mouthed responses most of the time.

Luka didn't pretend to care that someone was talking to him. He was perfectly content ignoring everyone.

Even as he jogged beside me, his lips were pulled tight in a scowl, dark eyes stormy.

How had I ever thought he was John? They looked bizarrely identical, but their personalities were like night and day.

John shone with brightness.

Luka was shades of black.

A wave of melancholy hit me, and I staggered from the force of missing John. No wonder Mr. Hyde had always put me on edge.

He wasn't my friend.

I rubbed at the bruises under my eyes as my legs pumped faster.

My skin pinched as my stitches pulled.

I wished Luka would open up so I could at least figure out if John was okay. Where did he go? How did they travel? Why did they conceal their identities? Why all the secrecy?

So many questions.

No answers.

I stretched my head to the side as we rounded the bend and tried to ignore the tightness in my neck muscles.

I'd slept on the floor in an awkward ball.

At least it hadn't been cold.

I'd woken up with a pillow under my head and a cozy blanket tucked around me. I'd gone to bed with nothing but a sweatshirt under my head, so I assumed a servant had seen me on the floor and brought me stuff in the middle of the night.

I didn't know how much I depended on John until he was gone.

Everything that had happened between us still couldn't detract from what

he was to me.

My rock.

I spent my days sleeping beside John and sitting next to him at every meal. He was my running partner and confidant and the person I turned to for a laugh or a hug.

John was everything that made the academy bearable.

Now I was painfully alone.

I glanced up at Luka under my lashes, and it hurt how much he looked like John. He was a sad substitute.

Luka hadn't said a single word all run. Meanwhile I'd spent the first ten miles explaining in excruciating detail every second of the punishment. I'd told him everything that had gone down between John and me. I'd left nothing out.

I owed him that much.

I'd finished the story miles ago, and Luka *still* hadn't responded.

Was he waiting for an apology?

After another three miles, I broke the silence and said, "I'm sorry."

Luka furrowed his brows, and his dark eyes narrowed, but he didn't respond. He didn't care.

Whatever.

I turned my attention back to the shoreline.

Thirty-two miles later, we finished our run, and Luka walked beside me back to the academy.

I glanced over at him in confusion.

Yesterday, he'd made a point to avoid me and not stand anywhere near me. Now he was purposefully slowing his stride so we were side by side. Sweat covered both of us.

I opened my mouth to question him.

Luka glanced down at me, and his eyes crinkled as he frowned.

I closed my lips.

There was no point. He wouldn't respond anyway.

I tried to remember what my usual interactions with Mr. Hyde were like. I was pretty sure he'd always been quiet. I was the one who talked and teased him.

But I thought I'd been cheering up John.

Now that Luka was a different person, it felt pointless to speak. Sun god, he probably thought I was annoying as hell.

As I trudged up the steep walkway, I couldn't help but think about how John would have his arm thrown over my shoulder. He thought it was funny to touch me when we were both gross and sweaty, because I always freaked out.

No one touched me now.

My heart throbbed in my chest.

We entered the academy, and the hall buzzed with energy as students poured out of classrooms and headed to lunch. Malum sauntered forward, and people fell over themselves bowing and making a path for our legion.

Lightning streaked. The stench of ozone burned my nose. A gruesome battle raged in one of the stained-glass windows.

The black marble floors were polished like glass and chilled my aching feet.

As I walked down the hall with my legion, I pretended not to notice that most people were focused on me.

The energy in the academy had changed.

Men leered like pigs. Women made comments about my appearance as their high heels clacked against the marble.

If they'd always known I was a woman, I had a feeling they wouldn't be so focused on me, but since I'd deceived them, I'd become enemy number one.

The other.

Society either vilified women for their faults or worshipped them for being different. The decision was usually made based on how attractive the woman was.

Mother had been cruel and insane, but she'd also been flawlessly stunning and elegant. She'd had silky blue hair, she'd been lean with no muscle definition, and her pale skin had never been blemished. Her clothes were always extravagant.

They'd worshipped her for her perfection.

Where she'd been polished, I was jagged.

My skin was covered in bruises, dark circles surrounded my bloodshot eyes, and unruly blue curls hung in a tangled mess down to my butt. The gash under my left eye throbbed.

The girl who'd fucked her friend as punishment.

A woman's upper lip curled.

A man whispered something derogatory.

My worst sin of all—I'd lived and fought beside the men that every woman and man at the academy would kill to have associated with their name.

Everyone who attended the academy was powerful. Most had been sent with specific instructions to make allegiances that increased their families' standing. An assassin recruit was the ultimate prize.

The kings were the *crème de la crème* of the academy.

I hadn't realized how important they were until I'd started paying attention to the student gossip. How I'd managed to miss the millions of conversations about the "most powerful devils in all the realms" was a mystery to me.

It was probably the depression.

It always was.

I missed the days where I thought they were just fae men.

Ignorance was bliss; knowledge was suffering.

People sighed and fluttered their lashes at the kings, then turned to glare at me. Their stares had gotten noticeably colder after the punishment with John.

Just another slut.

Competition.

They didn't know about my plans to die alone.

Students stuck their noses up at my shitty appearance. In their business casual wardrobes, breasts were pushed high and shirts were worn a size too small so they stretched tightly across male chests.

The students oozed sexuality.

My teammates oozed strength and power.

I oozed blood because I accidentally ripped the scab off my lips again.

They wanted the power, and my roommates wanted to fuck; it was a perfect symbiotic relationship.

And I wanted inner peace, hard drugs, and a ten-day vacation on a fae beach.

Yet I was in the middle of it all.

The students thought I was interfering with their prizes.

A royal woman in a stunning wrap dress bumped into me and staggered back with disgust, brow arched and nose wrinkled.

I grinned at her and flashed all my teeth.

She recoiled with horror.

A lifetime ago, shopping and dressing up had filled me with joy, but now I could barely remember what it was like to feel polished and proud of how I looked.

I wiped sticky curls off my forehead and shivered in my sweat-soaked skin. My fingers were covered in dirt from where I'd collapsed onto all fours after the run.

My nails were black with grime.

They matched my soul.

Pushing my pipe between my lips, I kept my eyes downcast and inhaled with all my might.

Smoke filled my lungs.

The drugs took effect.

I stopped caring.

A man spoke loudly to my right. "Ms. Gola confirmed in class that a storm is coming. She said this one is going to be a bad one."

"Oh crap," someone responded. "That's not good."

"Weather is a pseudo-science," I mumbled under my breath.

The man glared at me.

I sighed.

Sure the air was chillier and the cloud cover darker, but there wasn't that much of a change. For some reason, the weather was all anyone ever wanted to talk about. The rumor mill was convinced that something big was coming.

I hoped it killed us all. Violently.

It would be sensational.

Thrilling.

Pulling my hoodie up over my head, I tied the knots around my chin so I looked like a gnome. I lowered my shoulders while I rubbed at my arms to get warm.

Lately it felt like I was constantly cold.

Nothing I did alleviated the chill that had settled into my bones. Maybe it was because I was an ice fae? I was probably haunted.

In the dining hall, Sadie frowned when she saw me.

I shrugged back at her.

Blood gurgled out of the mangled face of the man who was still crucified to the sacred tree. Sari sat at the royal table, glaring at me as she clutched a steak knife. Students openly gawked at me.

Ever have an impact on people around you? Same.

I collapsed tiredly into my seat.

Blinked.

A pig's head was the centerpiece of the table, and its body was spread out on various plates. The mouth was gaping and stuffed full of vegetables, and its dead eyes were wide open.

They looked directly at me.

I stared back.

Until it was my head on the plate and vegetables overflowed from my mouth. My limbs were scattered in pieces. Men leered at me and dug into my flesh, smacking their lips as they gnawed on my—

Fingers snapped in front of my face.

“Eat,” Luka ordered.

I slowly turned toward the man who had ignored my many attempts to converse for the last forty-eight hours.

He pointed at my empty plate.

Around me, the men dug into the pig, their jaws crunching through bone as they slurped on marrow.

A wave of nauseousness hit me.

I plugged my nose.

“Thank you! Finally, I’m not the only one saying it,” Scorpius said to Luka, eager to have someone else to talk shit about me with. “She needs to eat more and—” *Blah, blah, blah.*

Why did men talk so much?

I put my elbow on the table and leaned my cheek against my fist.

Scorpius’s upper lip was slightly crooked.

The black ink of the tattooed pupil on his neck dilated as it stared at me.

Was the tattoo sentient? Because its attention was fully on me while Scorpius was bitching to Luka.

I studied the art on Orion and Malum.

Was it all connected?

The sword on Malum wrapped around his neck like a choker, and the silver glinted like it was a sharpened edge. The pink flower petals on Orion’s neck shifted slightly as he moved his head.

I rubbed at the ink on my hip.

Surprisingly, being their slave wasn’t much of an imposition on my everyday life, since we were already forced to compete together as a legion.

I had nowhere to go and nothing to do.

No freedom.

I would laugh at the irony, but it wasn't funny. It was horrifying.

Malum's steel-colored eyes stared at me, and something close to pity flashed on his expression.

A servant appeared out of nowhere and bowed to Malum. "As requested, sir." He offered a platter overflowing with yogurts, nut butters, and ripe fruit.

My mouth watered.

The plate was full of my favorite foods that were usually only served at breakfast.

Malum nodded and took the plate.

He put it in front of me, then turned back to his meal and resumed eating like nothing had happened.

I gaped at the bronze king.

His cheeks flushed red, and he gave no explanation.

It felt like a peace offering.

Like something monumental had shifted between us after I'd rescued Scorpius in the last competition.

Whatever, I wasn't going to dwell on it.

Stomach growling, I hungrily dug into the feast. I piled on granola and drenched my creation in a mountain of nut butter.

Salty and sweet calories flooded my mouth.

My stomach cramped with relief.

I ate as fast as I could and replenished the energy I'd lost training. I was perpetually hungry after breakfast, since all the afternoon meals focused on serving meat.

"So good, thanks," I said to Malum between a mouthful of honeyed, sliced mangoes.

Malum's cheeks turned a brighter shade of crimson, and he grunted.

Good talk.

I turned back to inhaling my plate as quickly as I could.

Scorpius made a strangled noise, and Orion stared at me with a frown.

He didn't blink.

Scraping my spoon across my cleaned plate, I slumped back in my seat contentedly.

The kings were laser focused on me, and I squirmed under the weight of their undivided attention.

Looking for a distraction, I turned to Zenith, who sat on my right.

“So how are ya doing?” I asked him.

Inky lines expanded under the demon’s eyes. “I told you to never talk to me.”

I chuckled at his joke. “You’re so funny.”

The lines expanded down Zenith’s neck, and veins bulged obscenely from his forehead.

Vegar made a caution motion behind Zenith’s back.

What was he going to do? Kill me?

Get in line.

I just wanted someone to talk to me. I didn’t want to be alone with my thoughts. Was that too much to ask for?

There was a reason John and Sadie were my best friends.

The academy legion ate in silence.

I leaned my chair back on its legs and stared at the vaulted stained-glass ceiling. Rolling my pipe between my lips, I squinted until everything was unfocused and blurry.

“Don’t tip your chair back like that,” Malum said as he furrowed his brow. “You’ll break your neck.”

I tipped back further.

He said something else. I didn’t listen.

The meal lasted an hour, but it felt like seconds.

Colors faded to gray, sounds became muted, thoughts fragmented and shattered. Reality obfuscated.

The only constant was enchanted smoke, and I inhaled like it could save me.

It didn’t.

Nothing could.

CHAPTER 29

CORVUS MALUM

THE PARTY

Metamorphosis—Day 41, hour 23

“**N**o. We need this.” I glared down at the blue-haired woman who’d somehow become the bane of my existence.

Arabella huffed.

She paced back and forth in front of the hearth in our bedroom and whined, “Well, I need time alone in the library. So figure it out.” She squared her shoulders and tried to look intimidating.

I swallowed a laugh.

I had at least a hundred pounds of muscles on her.

It would be so easy to crush her.

“No.” I tried to sound casual, but my voice came out rough and gravelly.

She rubbed her fingers against her eyes with exasperation.

Somehow her eyes were *more* bloodshot than they’d been after the first competition. Black-and-green bruises stretched across her delicate cheekbones and the sides of her temples. A deep wound curled beneath her left eye. Her blue curls stuck out in every direction.

Shadows covered her pale skin.

She looked tired and young.

Laughter died on my tongue, and my face fell.

A foreign sensation crawled up my chest, and I rubbed at my sternum to dislodge it. I hated seeing her like this.

Lately all my hours had been consumed with worry over Arabella.

She wasn't taking care of herself. Her wounds weren't healing. There was a darkness in her eyes I didn't like.

Years ago, I'd seen the same dissociated look on both my mates' faces. It was the look of someone who was suffering. Someone who didn't have anyone.

Doe eyes widened at me. "Please, Malum?" Arabella stuck out her lower lip in a pout.

My name was Corvus, and Malum was the name of our Devil House, but for some reason, she only called me Malum.

It was infuriating.

"My name is Corvus," I spat out more aggressively than I wanted to. I was trying to be calmer around her, but it wasn't working.

I wanted to be gentler with her. She was still a woman and not just a fellow male soldier. But she was also a teammate.

It was confusing.

Each day that she persevered through these games, my respect for her grew.

Something had changed when she'd dragged my Protector across the field and risked her own life to save his.

How I'd thought of her as pathetic was beyond me. Her strength of will was impressive, and I was rarely impressed with people.

But for some reason, every time I spoke to her, my words came out rougher and harsher than I meant them to be.

"Okay, Malum." Sooty lashes fluttered as she made a face and said sarcastically, "Whatever you say."

I ignored the instincts telling me to wrap her up and protect her.

Heal her.

The thoughts were distracting and driving me near madness.

"No," I said roughly, then coughed as I tried to clear my throat. I tried to soften my posture. "Scorpius, Orion, and I need this party to let loose and recover from the competition. You don't get to take this away from us as well. Stop pouting. It disgusts me."

It didn't disgust me.

That was the problem.

Lately, everything about the blue-haired woman filled me with interest. Respect. It was becoming slightly obsessive.

Arabella's lips thinned into a snarl.

I inhaled deeply.

Her scent was icy and dangerous—like pure adrenaline.

She was intoxicating.

Dark-blue eyes flashed black, and she blew out a cloud of enchanted smoke as she scoffed, “It must be exhausting being so aggressive all the time.”

Her words echoed in the silence.

Wrapped around my neck like a rope.

Tightened.

Did she know how much I struggled to interact with her? I was trying to be softer. To be nicer.

But I wasn’t built that way.

She’d always been disturbingly good at analyzing a situation.

Sweat dripped down my nose as flames crawled along my arms. The achy, feverish feeling intensified.

Arabella tipped her head back and twirled her pipe with her tongue.

Her countenance was blasé, expression tired, face bored, like she hadn’t just eviscerated me with her words.

“Nice try. You’re still not going.” I took a step closer into her personal space as flames danced faster along my skin. “And if you try to leave without us, you’ll just be hurting yourself.”

She shrugged. “But it will hurt you too, and that makes it worth it for me.”

I grabbed her wrist before she could so much as flinch toward the door. I hated how cavalier she was about self-harm.

Her skin was freezing.

A harsh contrast to my overheated flesh.

The fire in my blood was roaring and begging to be released. The fever intensified.

I wanted to warm her. Chase the chill from her flesh. *Protect her.*

I shook my head and breathed in strength.

Exhaled control.

Instead of staying still and letting me do what I needed to do to not raze this academy to the ground, Arabella yanked and struggled against my hold.

She was the antithesis of obedience.

Chaos.

I tried to sound unaffected, but my voice came out as a throaty rasp. “I’ve

made the decision as captain. We're having a party in our room tonight because everyone needs to let loose. Please don't make this difficult."

I'm trying.

She bared her perfect white teeth like a wild animal.

I inhaled deeper.

No one should be allowed to smell so good. It was overpowering and heady, with an icy burn.

I coughed and turned to the side as I discreetly adjusted my pants.

The slave brand was clearly messing with my head.

Arabella sucked on her pipe.

Her pink tongue wiped across her cracked lips, and she whispered, "So I should choose a man to get with at the party?"

A sick sense of dread filled my stomach, like icy water was washing over me.

Her cheeks hollowed as she rolled her pipe in her mouth like it was candy.

"No." I tried to speak calmly, but my voice came out as a growl. "Touch anyone and I'll kill him."

Arabella tipped her head back like I'd made a joke. "Good one." She slapped me on the arm like I was her pathetic human pal, John.

I blinked down at her.

"I'm not joking," I said as flames rolled off my arms. "I have no limitations."

The thought of someone else fisting her blue curls and inhaling her intoxicating scent—it was wrong.

I did not like it.

"Why?" She raised her eyebrows. "Because I'm your slave?"

"No," I spat immediately. "It's not like that."

She narrowed her dark-blue eyes, and her face scrunched with confusion. "Then what is it like?"

I opened my lips, and no words came out.

I couldn't identify the emotions swirling in my gut. She was my teammate, and we were connected by the tattoo, but she was also *more*.

"I don't know," I whispered.

"You can get with women, but I can't get with men because of some weird, sexist double standard?" She scoffed at me like I was losing my mind.

I agreed with her.

I was.

“It’s not like that,” I repeated uselessly.

Crash. The bathroom door was thrown open with unnecessary force, and Luka sauntered out.

His eyes narrowed as he stared at me where I stood inches away from Arabella. My arms were on fire, and it looked like I was threatening her.

I made a point of taking a step back.

Arabella chuckled as she pushed past me like she thought I was pathetic.

Lately, I was.

The air around Luka shimmered black.

It was high time he explained himself. I turned to question Luka about what the hell kind of game he and John were playing, but a servant burst into the room.

Why would he keep his identity a secret for so many years but reveal it now?

“Here’s the enchanted speaker you requested.” The servant offered a glowing blue sphere to Zenith.

The demon stared down at it and furrowed his brow.

The servant explained, “Just tap it once while thinking of a song, genre of music, or general aesthetic.”

Zenith tapped.

A guitar tore through notes while a male singer screamed.

It was frenzied music.

Violent.

One corner of his mouth twitched up, and it was the happiest I’d ever seen him.

“Here we go.” Arabella climbed onto John’s bed and started playing the air guitar while shimmying her hips wantonly. She smiled and said, “Get up sluts it’s time to sin.”

My blood pressure skyrocketed.

Wasn’t she supposed to be depressed?

“What are you doing? You’re acting like a psychopath,” I growled at her over the unintelligible music blaring through the room.

So much for appearing less aggressive.

“At least I’m on a path,” Arabella said as she smirked and flipped the unruly mass of blue curls over her shoulder. “Also, I’m dancing like a whore.” She pretended to hump air.

She pointed both her middle fingers at me and scrunched them like she was waving.

“To everyone I’ve done wrong.” She gestured to the room like she was making an announcement. “I just want you to know.” She put a hand over her heart. “I’d do it again.”

I shook my head with disgust.

She laughed and tripped over a pillow.

I lunged forward, catching her before she hit the floor. My fingers tingled where they dug into the dip above her hips.

She scrambled out of my grip and climbed back onto the bed.

I took a step back and cleared my throat as I rubbed at my flushed face.

She resumed dancing provocatively.

The edge of my shirt sizzled as it caught on fire.

Lately, the servants were having to bring me new clothes every day because I was burning through them. I hadn’t been so out of control since puberty.

“Since you’re forcing me to be here,” Arabella said with a smirk, “I’m going to rage.”

She exhaled a cloud of smoke, and it formed into a guitar, then she pretended to slam the smoking mirage onto the comforters in a fit of rage.

I didn’t notice that she somehow looked both ferocious and cute pretending to be a rock star.

Nope.

I didn’t notice that at all.

Luka sauntered up to the bed and leaned against it so he stood beside her.

He didn’t smile or touch her like John, but he stood in her proximity with a scowl on his face as he studied her intensely. He was acting like he was her bodyguard or something.

I didn’t like it.

For some ridiculous reason, the twins were always hanging all over her. They were two grown men, but they were acting like clingy women.

It was embarrassing.

My Revered and Protector yawned as they crawled out of bed, where they’d been tangled together napping. Their hair was adorably messy, their eyes hooded. Sleep still clung to them.

I wrapped my arms around them and dragged them against my sides.

Their hard bodies felt so good pressed against mine.

Solid. Strong.

Orion's brown eyes sparkled, and his full upper lip begged to be kissed. Scorpius had red marks on his cheek from where he'd been pressed into the pillow.

I held them close to me.

"What's with all the noise?" Scorpius asked.

Orion whispered in his ear, "Arabella is pretending to smash a guitar. Now she's swiveling her hips. Luka's watching."

They both made a harsh noise in the backs of their throats.

I concurred.

Rubbing at my chest, I said, "We need to let loose tonight. The slave brand is making everything so much worse. We're having a party."

"Are you sure?" Scorpius said uneasily.

Orion didn't respond; he just stared at Arabella with his pupils blown wide.

A horrible pit expanded in my stomach as I agreed with my mates.

I didn't want a random woman on my cock. I wanted... *What was I doing?*

No. "We're all appeasing our fire tonight. That's an order." I clapped my hand against Orion's shoulder to divert his attention.

"Whatever you say, Captain," Scorpius drawled as he kneaded the back of my neck with his long fingers.

Somehow my Protector always knew when I was struggling with control.

"We raided Lothaire's secret stash," a female voice said from the doorway. The assassin legion walked into the room, holding up bottles of demon brew. The leviathan legion followed behind them and cheered.

Zenith tapped the enchanted speaker, and the volume increased.

Bottles were passed around.

Orion took a long drink, then handed it to me. The glass was still heated from his mouth, and I savored the remnants of him.

He tasted warm and expensive.

Someday we'd find our fourth and I'd always have the flavor of my Revered on my lips.

I couldn't wait to worship him. I'd consume him morning, day, and night.

He'd be mine.

Unequivocally.

For all of immortality.

I licked my lips and enjoyed the precious hint of what was to come. It tasted divine. Tonight was going to be a good night.

CHAPTER 30

ARAN

THE PARTY

Metamorphosis—Day 42, hour 1

I yelled over the loud music, “You know, sometimes I get this weird crick in my back, and it’s like ‘ow.’ Then, just when I finally relax and think it’s over, it goes crack, crack, crack.”

I held my hands wide to emphasize how large the cracks were and said, “I think it’s my sleeping position.”

Sadie’s mate Ascher tilted his head as he listened to my story.

Firelight danced across his horns.

I was pretty sure he shifted into some type of barnyard animal, but I couldn’t remember exactly. *Maybe a chicken? Or a sheep?*

I sidestepped a flailing arm.

Around us dozens of limbs waved in the darkness, and the floor vibrated to the pounding pulse of the loud bass.

Someone had closed all the curtains, so the room was mostly black except for firelight. It cast warm shadows on the packed bodies that danced and did unmentionable things to one another.

A few hours ago, the party had started as an intimate get-together among competitors.

It was now a full-blown rager.

There were at least seventy people crammed into the small room, and hundreds more were partying in the hallway outside. Word had leaked to the academy, and the entire student body was partying.

“What do you mean by a crack?” Ascher shouted back at me over the music with a concerned expression.

I held my hands up. “Imagine a crack on a sidewalk.”

Ascher nodded.

“Then imagine that crack on *your* back.” I pointed to myself for context.

Rose-and-flame tattoos flashed on his hand as Ascher gestured with the demon brew bottle and asked, “Is it like you’re cracking your back yourself or is it cracking on its own? Or did the crack just appear...in your skin?” He narrowed his eyes as he tried to make sense of what I was saying.

“Yes!” I took a swill from the demon brew bottle clenched between my fingers, then chased it with a long inhale of my pipe. “I’m so glad you get it.”

Ascher looked confused for a second but then shrugged like he’d given up trying to understand.

“To cracks!” He clanked his bottle against mine.

“Crackalack,” I responded smartly. “On my back.”

We drank to that.

I smoked some more.

We nodded at each other and looked around, pretending to take in the party’s ambiance. A man fell to his knees in front of us and started sucking another student’s cock.

We turned back to each other to give them some privacy.

“So,” I said conversationally, “how does it feel to be in love with and mated to the prettiest person in all the realms?”

Ascher beamed. “Aw, I’ll tell Cobra you said that.”

I choked, and demon brew poured out of my nose. “I can’t believe you’re mated to that psycho.”

“Imagine.” Ascher grinned. “I can literally *feel* his thoughts and emotions.”

My jaw dropped. “Does he really hate all women? Or is it just for show?”

“Oh, he hates them.” Ascher took a long swig from his bottle. “Way more than you think. But Sadie, you, Jinx, and the girls are the exceptions.”

I sidled closer to him. “Be honest, he definitely hates me way more than Sadie and the girls. Right? Like he secretly wants me dead.”

Ascher arched his brow and smiled. “Nope.”

“Come onnnnnnn,” I whined. “Give me the details. Gossiping about Cobra is all I have to live for these days.”

Ascher replied, “I think—”

“Who are you talking about?” Cobra appeared next to us, slit pupils glowing green in the dark.

“You.” I sucked in smoke. “Ascher says you’re pretending to hate women and secretly you love us all. So sweet of you.”

I tried to maneuver the bottle and my pipe so I could inhale smoke and demon brew at the same time.

Cobra glared at me. “You have a substance abuse problem.”

I sucked harder, and my esophagus burned delightfully as the two substances mixed.

I pointed out smartly, “Is it a problem or the solution?”

Ascher chuckled.

Cobra’s frown deepened.

I was feeling very philosophical today.

Maybe I was close to reaching an enlightened state? Or maybe the stress from discovering my happy-go-lucky best friend had a secret angry twin who I’d unknowingly spent hours beside was making my psyche crumble?

Who could tell these days?

It was probably a bit of both.

“You look like you robbed a jewelry store.” I pointed to the jewels in Cobra’s skin that refracted little pinpricks of light into the darkness. “It’s cool that you gave Sadie one of your snakes. Don’t tell her I said this, but never take the snake back. It would break her.”

Cobra’s slit pupils narrowed until they were single black lines.

He leaned close conspiratorially and asked, “Want to know a secret that the don shared?”

I nodded eagerly.

The don was Cobra’s estranged father and the leader of the Mafia in the beast realm. He seemed wise in an old man way.

Cobra smirked as he revealed, “In every species that has fated mates, the body knows before the mind does. I couldn’t take my snake back even if I wanted to. Our shadow snakes recognize our fated mate before we do. It left my flesh forever to live on hers so I’ll always know where she is and if she’s in danger. I’ll always be around to protect her.”

“Sun god.” I pressed the demon brew bottle against my chest and leaned back against the wall. “That’s so romantic.”

Ascher stared at Cobra with wide eyes, and he rubbed at his chest. “Fuck, man.”

“So beautiful.” I smiled. “Sadie deserves it.”

She had four men absolutely devoted to her, and I couldn’t imagine anything less for my best friend.

She deserved it. She was sunshine in darkness.

I guzzled more brew.

In contrast, I was the abyss within the darkness.

Cobra arched his brow at me. “A phenomenon you will probably never experience, because you look like you’ve been hit by a car. On a good day.”

“Burn,” I said as I nodded and took another drink.

He was right. I looked like shit and was completely unlovable.

Ascher frowned at Cobra and said, “I know you didn’t mean that. Why would you say that?”

Cobra made a petulant face.

My woozy brain changed the subject, and I asked both of them, “Have I told you about my back crack? Like a sidewalk crack but spinal.”

Cobra plucked the bottle out of my hands. “You’re cut off.”

I gasped.

Then I smiled and said, “I think it’s scoliosis.”

I turned to the overflowing bucket of demon brew bottles that was on the floor right next to me—that was why I’d chosen to stand in the corner in the first place—and grabbed two.

“Do you have tape or glue?” I asked Ascher. “I saw a bootleg human movie about a challenge and want to try it. I need you to stick these bottles to my hands.”

Cobra pinched his nose. “This is not my problem. Where’s Sadie?” he asked Ascher. “I thought you were with her.”

Ascher moved to avoid a dancer who careened out of control into the wall where he’d been standing.

He shook his head and said, “Aran and I were talking to her, but then she said she was going to quote ‘jump Jax and Xerxes in public because they’re too private and need a little public ravaging.’”

“What?” Cobra’s jaw dropped.

“Get it, girl!” I yelled into the crowd as I held both bottles up in a salute to Sadie, who was likely having sex with two of her mates in a corner somewhere.

She inspired me.

Cobra reached for my hand. “Give me one of those bottles.”

“No!” I snapped. “Get your own, snake boy. I bet Sadie chose Xerxes and Jax because she didn’t think you and Ascher were man enough to touch her in public.”

“Excuse me?” Cobra’s jaw clenched as Ascher pushed away from the wall.

I nodded. “Yep, she told me so.”

And just like that, I was standing alone in the corner. “You’re welcome, Sadie,” I said to no one. Best. Wingwoman. Ever.

I cackled at my intelligence.

Sadie had actually complained that Cobra and Ascher were *too* eager to touch her in public and that Jax and Xerxes were too respectful. Now, thanks to me, she was going to be having sexual relations with four aggressive shifter men in public while the guitar riffed and a male singer screamed.

Sun god, I was such a good friend.

Turning, laughing to myself like I was slightly (very) unstable, I was surprised to find Luka leaning against the wall a few feet away from me. He was actively ignoring a group of students that were all trying to touch and talk to him.

I waved and smiled.

He frowned.

I rolled my eyes and mimed shooting myself in the head to show how much I loved the party. For a split second, his eyes twinkled in the dark, and I swore he wanted to smile.

A man bumped into me.

Luka’s frown deepened into a harsh scowl.

“Sorry,” the random partier said as he spilled alcohol over me.

“No worries, sun god bless your family.” I gave the stranger a friendly salute. “May you all die young and never know the gods personally.”

He gave me a weird look and pushed through the crowd.

I scoffed; people just didn’t know how to take a blessing these days.

Tacky.

This generation had no class.

Leaning back against the wall, I tipped my head and opened my throat. The demon brew burned deliciously.

When I released the bottle with a burp, the sea of limbs and gyrating hips parted, and I glimpsed the kings.

Malum sat in the wingback chair with a girl’s head buried in his lap. His

sweatpants were around his ankles, and his shirt was pushed up to expose bronze abs.

I made a mental note to never sit in that chair again.

Scorpius and Orion stood on either side of the chair and flanked him. Multiple girls crawled all over them.

I inhaled smoke.

Malum's fingers were tangled in blonde hair, and he pushed a woman's head up and down on his lap. His expression was bored, and he looked like he was uncomfortable.

As his Adam's apple bobbed, pain streaked down my back.

A weird mix of emotions churned my gut, and suddenly it was hard to breathe.

Since I'd saved Scorpius, the kings had been acting different. They weren't nice, but they weren't as antagonistic.

I took a gulp of demon brew.

Breathed unevenly.

A dull ache pulsed between my legs. *John held me reverently and told me softly to lift my hips. He slowly entered me.*

There was a fluttering sensation in my lower stomach.

Pain streaked down my spine.

My sight line to the kings disappeared as the music changed and students pressed closer together. Hips and chests locked. Hands and lips exploring.

Everyone coupled up.

Suddenly, I was suffocating. The heat was intense because there were too many bodies in too small a space.

Sweat streaked over goose bumps.

Reaching down I tucked the front of my sweatshirt up into my sports bra, and I sighed with relief as coolness hit my abs.

I leaned back against the vibrating wall.

Sank into the shadows and concentrated on figuring it all out. "It" being getting drunk.

I was an overachiever.

A few seconds, maybe minutes, potentially four hours later, I squealed with delight as men joined me in the shadows.

"You have blue hair." I pointed to the three little fake fae men who stood in front of me. It was kind of weird that they pretended to be a different species. It was also adorable.

They were so cute when compared to my teammates.

Short and skinny.

Complete wimps.

We stood at eye level, so they were barely six feet tall, and I just wanted to pinch their cheeks.

I could easily take all of them in a fight, which made them great friend material.

“For our queen, we’d do anything,” fake fae man number one (he’d told me his name twice now, and I’d ignored him both times) fell to his knees and kissed my hand.

Aw.

I loved that devotion from him. Finally, someone recognized my importance. I just wanted to give him a little platonic head pat.

“Let us serve you sexually,” fake fae man number two said aggressively.

We were on two different pages.

I pressed both bottles to my lips and tipped my head back. The last drops of demon brew hit my tongue.

Fake fae man number three begged, “We’ll make it so good for you, our Queen. Let all three of us serve you. Please.” He fell to his knees beside the first man, who knelt on the ground in front of me.

“Um.” I gnawed on my lower lip.

My head spun, and I chuckled at the sensation.

Everything was floaty in the best possible way; my thoughts were effervescent bubbles that popped delightfully.

It was euphoric.

“Let us please you,” the man begged at my feet.

If only he had messy dark hair, dimples, olive skin, and hooded dark eyes that twinkled.

Then he would be perfect.

As I thought about John, the butterflies dancing in my stomach turned to lead. Guilt was acid in my stomach even as my heart beat harder at the thought of him.

I rolled my pipe between my lips and inhaled enchanted smoke.

Sun god, everything was so confusing.

My head spun.

A hand touched my leg. “You’re a perfect, flawless queen. There is not one thing wrong with you. You are the ideal female.”

Who was going to tell him?

He was spot on.

I half laughed, half giggled, and snorted at my joke.

Fingers trailed more aggressively up my calves and across my thighs.

I weighed the pros and cons of the situation.

Cons: Sexual relations hurt because of my enchanted scars. I still needed to talk to John and apologize. And now that I was looking at them, the three fake fae dudes were kind of ugly.

I exhaled a cloud of enchanted residue.

Pros: I was drunk.

“Please, mistress, let us serve you.” Man number one leaned forward and kissed the exposed skin of my stomach.

I jumped back with surprise and a jolt of pleasure mixed with a teensy, tiny jolt of pain.

My back barely hurt.

I’d found the answer to my problem.

I just needed to get drunk to the point of complete incapacitation to enjoy sexual relations.

Joy burst in my chest.

Finally, a realistic solution.

I smiled down at the three men literally kneeling before me. Sure, one of them was downright hideous, and they were all way too skinny for my liking. Yes, the man standing in front of me had an enormous nose and freakishly wide forehead.

I shrugged. “Sure.”

Who was I to judge? I had two black eyes, dozens of stitches littering my skin, and a rat’s nest of curls.

Also, apparently, I had no standards when it came to men. Some people fought their demons. I fucked mine. Or was I the demon?

It was confusing.

“What should we do?” My question turned into a gasp as the two men kneeling before me leaned forward and started kissing my abs.

I smiled. My pain neurons were muted enough that I found their kisses almost enjoyable.

Enjoyable was probably too strong of a word. It didn’t hurt.

A win.

The ugly dude standing in front of me shuffled to the side so he could

press his lips against mine.

I grinned under his lips.

Yep, I was kissing three men at the same time.

Iconic and inspiring.

A tongue pressed through my lips, and it was kind of slimy.

I wrinkled my nose.

Lips pressed harder against my impressive abs, and hands trailed up and down my sweatpants. Someone's fingers danced across my waist, then pushed under the fabric so two hands were gripping my ass.

Midkiss he groaned into my mouth. "You're not wearing underwear." His breath was kind of spicy, and I didn't like the taste.

I winced as he grabbed my butt like he was trying to bruise it.

Hands crept higher up my inner thighs.

A lot was happening.

Bodies danced inches away from us, but we were mostly hidden by the shadows of the wall.

I debated calling a stop to this little ménage à quatre, but the bubbles were still dancing in my head.

Everything spun.

Hazy. Delightful. Fun.

Nothing mattered anyway. Who cared if three random, ugly men touched all over my body?

Not me.

It was kind of pleasant.

Yes, my quality of life was so shitty that "pleasant" was an immense improvement.

If only Mother could see me now, she'd be furious.

I kissed back harder.

Just to spite her.

Hands dragged my ass forward so my front was pressed against a crotch. Six hands grabbed my butt. I shimmied my hips and smiled.

Whores be like.

Shadows danced, and my skin tingled like I was drifting through a dream.

The tongue in my mouth was starting to feel more skilled.

Fingers feathered across the juncture of my thighs, and I let out a little breathy moan. It felt nice.

I peeked open my eyes and stared at the person I truly wanted.

He scowled.

I jumped as I realized he wasn't a figment of my imagination.

In real life a man stood directly behind the commoner who was kissing me, glowering inches away from where our lips were locked.

"You do this with everyone?" Luka asked roughly.

I pulled my lips free from the kiss and beamed up at him. "Yep, I'm a huge slut."

It was called manifesting.

The commoner grabbed my face and dragged me back for more openmouthed kisses while the men at my feet became more aggressive with their touches.

The air around Luka shimmered black.

His dark eyes transformed into voids.

He reached a hand forward and ripped the man off my lips, then threw him away from me like he weighed nothing.

My jaw dropped.

A bubble popped in my head, and I laughed.

Then frowned.

"Who do you think you are?" I asked Luka incredulously. "You won't answer a single question, then you think you can just do that?" I waved my hand at the ugly man sprawled on the floor, struggling to stand up.

I grimaced and gestured at him. "Just pop your legs up." I tried to give him some help.

The man floundered.

Did he have no core strength?

It was hard to watch.

Luka made a noise of disbelief, and I whirled on him.

"You!" I poked my finger against his firm chest. "Why would you reveal your identity after years of silence? Explain yourself." I crossed my arms.

He arched a dark brow at my question.

A male singer screeched.

Luka said calmly, "John has informed me that the circumstances have changed. Our secrecy is no longer needed because we won't be keeping it."

I blinked.

"What?" I was too drunk for this conversation.

What were we talking about?

Oh, right. I stuck my finger in his face and said, "You aren't my friend,

father, or captain. Sun god, you're barely a member of this team. Yet you think you can interfere with my personal life?"

He took a step closer.

His breath smelled like spice and demon brew as he said, "I never said you couldn't call me Daddy."

My jaw dropped.

Something told me I wasn't the only drunk one.

Music pulsed. Bodies danced around us.

The two men kneeling at my feet kept trailing their hands across my butt, and Luka glanced down at them, then back at my face.

His expression hardened as he said, "Corvus, your captain's services are needed to handle Aran."

I scoffed.

He hadn't yelled, so there was no way Malum would hear him over the loud music.

Luka crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall with a smirk like he knew something I didn't. "You forget I've been training at this academy for years. I know how things work around here."

Long seconds stretched as the men kept kissing my stomach, and I tried to decipher his cryptic words.

I realized what he'd done.

My stomach sank.

"Why would you do that?" I smacked at him with my two empty bottles.

He ripped them out of my hands and narrowed his eyes as he looked into them and confirmed they were empty.

I scoffed. "Get your own." Poking him in the chest again, I went to do something, but my brain went fuzzy. "What were we talking about again?"

His lips formed a thin line.

"Are all humans way better looking than other species?" I asked him as I gestured to the facially challenged men at my feet. "Because you would win a beauty pageant hands down, and they would lose."

I mouthed, "Last place." So Luka knew what I was saying.

He rubbed at his forehead like he had a migraine.

"Pageants aren't for everyone," I said seriously as I narrowed my eyes at him. "It's a hard lifestyle."

His right eye twitched.

A cruel voice sneered, "You called for Corvus?"

The crowd of dancers parted, and three towering devil kings invaded the corner where I was trying to make destructive life decisions in peace.

“Who are you?” I asked as I pretended to not know Scorpius.

I chuckled at my joke.

Why was I actually hilarious?

Scorpius gnashed his teeth, and the muscle in his jaw jumped.

Annoying him was too easy.

Fingers gripped my ass, and I jolted at the contact. For a second, I’d forgotten about the two men kneeling and touching me intimately. Awkward.

Two kings glanced down.

One king cocked his head to the side in confusion.

Malum erupted in angry red flames, while Orion scowled as he whispered in Scorpius’s ear.

All three of them fisted their hands.

The temperature in the corner increased about a million degrees, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up at the danger in the air.

It was volatile.

Malum spoke, and his voice was the deepest I’d ever heard it. “Get your hands off our girl.”

I gaped. *Our girl*? He probably meant it in a slave sense.

Before anyone could move, Orion and Scorpius grabbed the men at my feet and threw them backward into the crowd.

Partygoers yelled as bodies smashed into them.

The kings didn’t bother to turn around to see the destruction they’d caused.

Luka smirked beside me.

Even drunk...

I knew I was doomed.

CHAPTER 31

SCORPIUS

THE PARTY

Metamorphosis—Day 42, hour 4

A few hours earlier

The party was boring.

I wanted to kill someone just to spice it up.

Females clung to my arms, and overly large breasts were squished against me. Lips trailed down my neck.

I felt nothing.

Next to me, gurgling noises let me know a woman was sucking on Corvus's cock. She choked.

I'm sure his eyes were closed and his head tipped back.

To other partygoers, I bet it looked like he was enjoying himself.

Every few seconds, Corvus's teeth clicked. He was grinding his jaw and breathing roughly through his nose.

He was trying not to lose control.

He was miserable.

Similarly, Orion was quiet on the other side of the chair. He didn't moan with pleasure or make any sounds of enjoyment while women were breathily calling his name and touching him.

All three of us were screwed.

The pleasure we got from the academy students wasn't a lot, but it had always been enough to take the edge off. It distracted us from the wanting we felt from one another.

Recently something had changed.

The willing students weren't a distraction anymore. Touching other people was a chore.

I trailed my hands over the bodies worshipping me.

My fingers tangled in short hair, then explored a jaw covered in stubble. I was startled because a man was on his knees before me, and I hadn't even noticed.

I should have been horrified.

A decade ago, when we'd realized we were missing our fourth, we'd made a pact to never touch another man. Only women. It had felt too much like I was cheating on my mates.

Now I felt nothing.

No guilt.

No disgust.

Just emptiness.

All three of us were bisexual, so we'd never found much of a difference between men and women. It was the fact that only devil males wielded flames that made us choose women over men.

Now I saw that our logic was flawed.

It didn't matter what they were.

The students were all just pathetic substitutes.

They weren't what I wanted.

I zipped up my pants and pushed the man off me roughly. His body slammed against the floor, and he moaned in pain.

I smiled.

A glimmer of enjoyment shuddered through me. It disappeared just as quickly as it arrived.

I dragged my nails against the back of my neck, and the pinpricks of pain helped me focus.

The floor shook beneath my feet, and vibrations pulsed all around. Students and competitors breathed heavily as they danced. Moaned as they fucked. Screamed along with the lyrics.

I missed the quiet.

Leaning against the chair, I put my hand on Corvus's warm shoulder and rested my head against the wall.

My mate sighed with relief at my touch.

We both knew my fingers kneading his muscles was the most pleasure

he'd feel tonight.

"I can't do this," Orion whispered, and there was a squelching noise as he pulled himself out of a woman and pushed her away.

She swore and yelped.

I smiled.

Orion walked over and leaned his broad back against my chest. I slung an arm over my Revered's strong shoulder and kept my other hand massaging Corvus.

My shoulders slumped with relief.

We were together.

I was supporting my Revered. I was touching my Ignis.

As a Protector, this was the closest I'd ever get to perfection.

An ache burned my chest, and an intense longing—to possess what I couldn't have—almost brought me to my knees.

Orion whimpered.

We rarely touched one another for this very reason. It was too perfect. It was nothing but a reminder of the ecstasy we couldn't have.

A cruel joke.

My cock swelled beneath Orion until it was harder than it had ever been. I swallowed thickly and couldn't stop myself from grinding against his perfect, firm ass.

We were tiptoeing across a line we swore we'd never cross.

Despair awaited us on the other side.

Orion moved his hips to the music, and I pressed my groin harder. We swayed together.

He was so warm.

So *right* against me.

From the fact that he didn't move away, we'd arrived at the same conclusion: we needed this.

I clutched the most precious man in all the realms. As I breathed in deeply, his rich, sweet scent filled my senses.

Fuck.

Orion was perfect.

No Revered had ever been so intoxicating: formidable, affectionate, tenacious.

Corvus's arms snaked between us, so he was wrapped around Orion with his head resting on his washboard abs.

The three of us clung to one another.

Hours passed.

The party raged.

It was the same as it had been when we were teens; all we had was one another. It was enough. It would always be enough.

Wrapped up in the pleasure of holding my mates, I almost didn't hear it.

It took my brain a second to put the sounds together.

"Corvus, your captain's services are needed to handle Aran," Luka said, and the hair on my arms prickled.

I pulled away, and both my mates groaned.

Straightening my sweatshirt, I explained, "Luka said Arabella needs us."

Before I'd finished speaking, Corvus was out of his chair, with flames trailing off his arms. Both my mates were shoving through the crowd, telling people to move.

I zeroed in on a familiar female voice in the room's corner. It must have been a consequence of the slave brand, because I could always locate Arabella's voice.

No matter how much outside noise distracted me.

I could always find her.

"You called for Corvus?" I asked as soon as I pushed through the crowd.

Her breath caught in the back of her throat, and men panted near her feet. I cocked my head to the side, unable to make sense of what I was hearing.

"Who are you?" Arabella asked, her words slurring together.

Rage broiled my blood as she made breathy chuckles. The little brat was insanely intoxicated.

Why could she never take care of herself? She needed keepers.

There was a whooshing noise as Corvus exploded into flames.

Intense heat poured off him.

The last time he'd burned so hot, we'd been battling in the wastelands before the sun god. He was seconds away from losing control, and I moved closer to try to calm him.

Arabella made a breathy sound of pleasure.

What the fuck?

I turned back to her slowly.

Orion's lips moved against the shell of my ear as he whispered, "The two pathetic blue-haired men are on their knees at Arabella's feet, groping her ass."

I thought I'd known rage.

I hadn't.

Not until this moment.

My hearing went silent as the sound of rushing blood filled my ears.

Then the other sounds came back with a roar.

This was ten times worse than the time we'd caught her with a nymph at the party. Now we knew that she'd just lost her virginity to John in the middle of the arena.

She was basically untouched.

She was innocent when it came to the ways of men.

Yet these fuckers thought they could touch her when she was intoxicated?

Any way you looked at it, it was clear they were taking advantage of her.

They'd waited until she was emotionally vulnerable.

Drunk.

They knew if they approached her in the daylight, she'd turn them down. They were fucking disgusting.

They would die.

"Get your hands off our girl," Corvus snarled. My mate had come to the same conclusion.

Lately he'd been acting weird around Arabella. He's stopped calling her slave and Orion said he'd started blushing when she spoke to him.

My Revered also said that he'd never seen our Ignis blush before.

I rubbed at my chest as a pang throbbed because I understood exactly where he was coming from.

Orion and I didn't have to speak. We were always on the same page.

We lunged forward at the same time.

I zeroed in on the breathing of one of the dead fuckers, grabbed his neck, and chucked him across the room as Orion threw the other man.

They both yelped in pain.

It wasn't enough.

Not even close.

It took me a second to realize that there was a fourth man breathing heavily beside my mates.

Luka was standing next to our slave.

No wonder he'd fooled everyone, even the inflection of his breaths was the same as his brother's.

The only difference was that the tenor of his voice was slightly deeper.

But he barely spoke, so I'd never noticed.

When I'd first discovered his deception, I'd been enraged like Corvus. However, unlike my hotheaded mate who needed to control every situation, I'd recognized that he must have his own reasons for secrecy.

He was a good soldier, and that was all that mattered.

I also liked him more than John because he wasn't hanging all over our slave and touching her constantly like she belonged to him.

I tipped my head in his direction.

Thank the sun god he'd alerted us.

Bile filled my throat at the thought of what would have happened if he'd never said anything.

Would Arabella have fucked them in the dark while we sat across the room, oblivious?

I would have heard her eventually, but it could have been too late. Would the men have been inside her?

Caressing her while she was mindless?

Grinding my teeth together, I clenched my hands into the tightest fists possible.

Arabella said something, but I couldn't hear her over the whooshing sensation intensifying in my ears.

"Keep her from debasing herself further," I ordered Luka.

He made a noise of agreement and said, "The third commoner, lying on the floor in the middle of the crowd, was kissing her lips and grinding against her. He was touching her ass."

Orion made a strangled sound in the back of his throat.

I nodded at him and turned.

Falling into step beside my mates, I cracked my neck back and forth. Years of training, living, and fighting together coalesced into this moment.

The three of us moved as a unit.

There was a fluttering sensation across my throat as my tattooed eye opened wide. I clenched my jaw, and it took every ounce of strength I possessed not to tip my head back and open all my eyes wide.

"They're dead," Orion said loudly.

Corvus burned hotter.

The music raged as bodies danced around us.

Three commoners moaned pitifully as they tried to stand up.

"Which one of you kissed her lips?" Corvus asked softly.

Listening to the man shift at my feet, I reached down and picked him up. I tightened my fingers until he choked and gurgled.

It wasn't enough.

The man Orion had picked up pleaded, "Please, we didn't mean to." He moaned in pain as Orion crushed his balls.

"Answer or all three of you die," Corvus ordered.

I loosened my choke hold.

"It wasn't me," the man in my hands said at the same time Orion's commoner denied kissing her.

I smiled.

Orion and I moved in tandem.

I slammed my knee into my man's crotch and let him collapse to his knees. He whimpered in pain. A whoosh blew against me harmlessly. "An air nymph, how pathetic," I taunted.

I grabbed the sides of his head with both hands.

Twisted.

Snapped his head 360 degrees.

Bone crunched as Orion did the same.

There was a thud as two bodies dropped to the floor.

The music switched to a fast-paced song, and the students jumped in tandem.

The floor shook.

The man in Corvus's hands whimpered, "If you let me go, I promise that when my friends heal, we won't tell Lothaire what you did."

The corner of my lips lifted.

Orion laughed loudly.

Students bumped into my back and sides as they jumped up and down and screamed lyrics.

Corvus snapped his fingers.

Heat exploded.

The commoner screamed as his two friends were incinerated into ashes in a matter of seconds.

Immortality.

Over.

"No, no, no," he repeated pathetically.

Orion laughed cruelly. "No, no, no," he mocked.

I bared my teeth.

Adrenaline and satisfaction coursed through me in an intoxicating rush. They'd touched what wasn't theirs to touch, and they'd died.

I didn't need to use my powers to know that justice had been served.

"You can't just do that," the man whimpered in Corvus's grip and kicked out desperately.

"Here's the thing," Corvus growled. "You messed with her when she was clearly drunk. You knew she'd experienced trauma and was in a delicate state." His voice got deeper as he shook with rage. "You don't get to take advantage of her. She's our teammate. She's ours."

He said "teammate" like it meant something else to him.

I understood exactly what he was saying, and I agreed.

Orion and I moved closer.

The three of us surrounded the remaining commoner so our much larger bodies blocked him from view of the rest of the party.

People danced against our backs.

The floor shook as students jumped to the pounding beat.

The man kicked out desperately and said, "Queen Aran wanted it."

Corvus laughed cruelly.

Orion and I smiled.

"No, she didn't," Corvus scoffed.

He sobbed brokenly, "This isn't fair." The air whirled as he kicked and punched aimlessly. He was also an air nymph. "She's our queen. We worship her. It's different."

Corvus's flames crackled louder in the wind.

"Wrong," I sneered as I reached out, wrapped my fingers around his throat, and squeezed.

"She's not yours," Orion said.

Corvus said darkly, "She's so much better than you that you're not fit to lick her boots."

The man went limp beneath my hands as he passed out from lack of oxygen.

Students yelled lyrics and laughed as bodies pressed together. If anyone noticed the kings were surrounding a student, they ignored it.

We ran this academy for a reason.

We were kings of the deadliest race in the realms.

A god had chosen us to be his killers.

We'd earned every title we had with blood and sheer power.

Muscles twitched beneath my fingers as the fae regained consciousness. He begged pitifully, "Please stop, I won't touch her again."

"You're right." Corvus slammed his fist into the commoner's stomach.

Organs exploded.

I tightened my grip on his neck so he couldn't move.

He gurgled in pain.

Orion punched him in his back, and bones cracked. My fingers squeezed so he couldn't scream. Corvus punched him in the nose, and blood sprayed against my face.

I smiled at the savagery.

It was ecstasy.

Finally, it felt like I was doing something right.

The constant need that plagued me, the itchiness that made my skin feel too tight, disappeared.

For the first time in years, I was at peace.

We didn't have any weapons to dole out our punishment, and we couldn't use our powers. All we had were our fists, and it made it so much sweeter.

Orion and Corvus didn't pull their punches like we had with Aran when we were playing with him.

No.

This wasn't about asserting dominance.

This was about punishing.

Sending a message.

Blood sprayed, bones cracked, and cartilage snapped as Orion and Corvus whaled on the man with everything they had.

I held him in place.

Choked him so he couldn't say a word.

"What are they doing?" Arabella's voice slurred somewhere in the crowd behind us.

Luka said something, but I didn't catch it.

Arabella made an annoyed noise. "No, I want to see." Her voice was closer.

"She's nearby," I warned my mates.

Corvus and Orion didn't stop punching, their fists slamming against flesh with a frenzied speed.

A lesser species of immortal would have been long dead.

Corvus said, "Don't let her see."

I stepped to the side and dropped the commoner so his abused body thudded down at our feet, but Arabella moved quicker.

The surrounding students stopped dancing and made noises of surprise.

“Look away,” Corvus ordered them.

Footsteps pounded as the students resumed dancing and singing like they hadn’t seen a thing.

Arabella made a harsh noise and said, “Let him go.” She’d pushed past me and from the sound of her ragged gasps, she was staring down at the man at our feet.

“No, sweetheart,” Orion whispered. Crunch. He slammed his foot into the bloody body to punctuate his point. “He touched you, and you’re drunk.” He stomped viciously.

Blood splattered.

Corvus swore and yanked Orion off the body. “Not with her watching.”

“But he didn’t do anything wrong?” Arabella asked, her intoxicated voice filled with confusion.

“He took advantage of you,” I said darkly.

Arabella whimpered, “It wasn’t like that.”

Corvus swore and tugged her away from us. “Don’t think about it,” he said as I heard him shuffle to shield her view with his body. “They deserved it.”

I nodded in agreement.

We didn’t like what had happened with John during the punishment, but we understood the circumstances had demanded it. Also, none of us would ever admit it, but we recognized that John helped her.

What he did for her.

It was different, and we all knew it.

Meanwhile the piece of shit at our feet was nothing. A random man who thought he could touch what wasn’t his because she was famous. He thought he could put his dick near a queen.

My hands shook with rage.

The fool thought he could go above his station and touch his betters. I stomped down on his crotch.

Arabella made a pained noise as she tried to tug away from Corvus.

“Go with Luka.” He gently transferred her into the other man’s arms.

Corvus walked back to us, and I asked, “We’re not going to kill him, right?”

“Fuck no,” Corvus said. “We’ll send a message to the rest of the school. He’ll live. But he’ll wish he hadn’t.”

Orion whispered, “They’ll know...”

“...what happens when you mess with Arabella,” I finished his sentence.

Everyone knew that death was justice. It was a blessing. We’d killed the two men because we were merciful and the punishment fit the crime.

The music switched to a slower song.

I walked over and pulled my mates against me.

And we danced.

A few feet away, a bloody carcass moaned in agony as feet jumped around him in rhythm with the song.

He would suffer.

He would wish he were dead.

But he would live.

That was his punishment, and it fit his crime. He’d learned just what it meant when people whispered that we weren’t normal men.

We were devils of the House of Malum.

We hoarded and protected what was ours.

Violently.

No exceptions.

CHAPTER 32

ARAN

POST PARTY

Metamorphosis—Day 42, hour 5

The music shut off.

I sat up in bed with a gasp as I looked around. From the swirly feeling in my head and the drunk laughter outside the door, the last partygoer had just left. Luka was sprawled out snoring beside me.

The room was pitch-black.

From the sounds of rustling bedding and heavy breathing, all my teammates were sleeping peacefully.

I had to pee.

Unfortunately, my bedding had other ideas. After ten minutes of wrestling with my comforter (and losing), my head was spinning and the world was topsy-turvy.

Finally, I collapsed onto the carpet on all fours.

I giggled to myself like a creature.

I was 100 percent still drunk.

Stealthy, like a ninja, I snuck across the room toward the bathroom.

Bam. I slammed my shin into a box of demon brew bottles, and I went down like a dead weight.

The glasses clinked loudly, and I moaned like a rabid squirrel.

Zenith muttered something derogatory in his sleep, then proceeded to let out the loudest fart I'd ever heard.

I snorted with laughter.

Stumbling as the room spun around me like a top, it took me three tries to open the door.

When I finally slipped inside, I gave the wall a high-five.

Pride filled me.

I'd done it. I'd done the impossible.

I opened the door.

Sun god, it was hard being such a strong, competent, accomplished young woman. I hated to say it, but I was starting to realize that people were intimidated by my prowess.

Some people just had that "it" factor.

I was some people.

I said all these realizations aggressively to the woman in the bathroom. She narrowed her eyes at me. *Rude.*

It took me a second to realize I'd been talking to my reflection.

Awkward.

"We will never speak of this," I whispered at her furiously, and we both nodded in agreement.

Good. Good. All my plans were working out.

The only problem was—I forgot.

Why am I standing in the bathroom? Why did I come in here?

Must have needed a shower.

I stumbled down the long row of marble showers until I got to the one at the end. It had a floor-to-ceiling door that shut and was the best stall for privacy.

It took me a few seconds to open the latch, because the bathroom was also cast in darkness.

Finally, I sighed with relief and pushed my way inside.

Running water, marble, and skin swirled in a circle as the shower stall spun.

"Cool, is this the party within the party? Invite only?" I asked with a slight slur (My words were indecipherable, and even I didn't know what I'd said).

Three large, naked men turned slowly and stared down at me.

One of them caught on fire.

Since water was still sloshing over him, I gaped as he casually defied the laws of physics.

"Sweet flames." I raised my fist for him to bump.

Unfortunately, gravity was stronger than I remembered, and I tipped forward.

Golden hands lunged forward and caught me. “What are you doing, sweetheart? Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

I laughed and pushed the hands so I could pull off my clothes and join the party. I went to pull off my T-shirt and remembered there was a reason I couldn’t remove it.

“Cease stripping immediately,” Malum growled.

Scorpius swore.

In nothing but a T-shirt, I pushed into the shower stall. There were grunts and a small skirmish as I positioned myself to get under the water.

“Wow, the water’s warmer than usual.” I closed my eyes and tipped my head back in bliss. The flames leaping off Malum added a nice, warm ambiance to the cold marble.

“She’s partially naked,” Orion whispered aggressively.

Scorpius snarled, “I fucking got that from the sounds of clothes being thrown off.”

Orion’s voice was strained as he said quietly, “Sweetheart, you really shouldn’t be in here with us.”

I pumped the soap from the dispenser but winced as I tried to bring my arms up to wash my hair. Stitches pulled, and my aching shoulders rebelled.

I gasped with pain as I tried to get the shampoo onto my scalp.

“Stop hurting yourself,” Malum snarled, and strong, callused fingers were massaging the product against my scalp.

My eyes rolled back in my head from the amazing sensation.

“So good,” I mumbled as I leaned back against the towering wall of naked flesh. My bare butt rested against something hard, and the ridges of a cut stomach rippled as I moaned with pleasure.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Malum said harshly. “What if it were the demons or a random partygoer in this shower? What would you have done?”

I smiled contently as he worked his fingers into the base of my skull. “Joined them if it felt this good,” I mumbled.

Scorpius let out a string of expletives.

I tried to follow, but my drunk brain got confused.

Malum’s fingers stilled against my scalp, and I slapped at his hand and ordered, “Don’t stop.”

“Don’t boss me around,” he countered. “I’m in charge.”

I huffed, “Wrong. Don’t tell me what to do.”

The wall of wet muscles leaned closer so every inch of my back was pressed flush against him.

Malum whispered in my ear, “I’ve decided that you need someone to take care of you, because you clearly can’t do it yourself.” His fingers pushed harder against my scalp. “Even if you are infuriating to be around.”

My toes curled.

I shivered from the deliciousness.

Little pinpricks of pain danced down my spine.

Then I laughed as I realized what he’d said. Well, I got every third word, and I could tell the vibe.

“You’re the last person I’d want taking care of me,” I mumbled sleepily. His magic fingers were really confusing my brain.

I was a puddle in his arms.

His soapy fingers tangled in my curls, and he tipped my head back at a harsh angle. He ran his mouth across my jawline slowly. “Is that so?” He nipped at my sensitive skin, and I saw stars.

The pain streaking down my back was distant.

Far away.

Like a memory.

Malum’s hands were still tangled in my hair, but someone else’s soapy fingers pinched my nipples.

Multiple bodies were pressed together in the small space.

It took me a minute to orient myself to what was happening.

“I don’t know, she seems to like it,” Scorpius sneered. “Her nipples are rock-hard. I can feel them through her shirt.”

“Let me check,” Orion whispered.

We all shuffled to the side.

Malum pulled me back harder against him, Scorpius leaned against the wall to my right, and my side was pressed against him. Orion pushed past us so he stood in front of me underneath the nozzle on the wall.

There was the sound of knees hitting tile.

Warm breath tickled my crotch.

Long fingers slowly parted my folds and swiped through them. My knees gave out, and Malum held me up.

Orion whispered, “Baby, you’re fucking soaking for us.”

The warm spray rinsed over the four of us.

His breath fanned against my sensitive flesh, and I saw stars. I'd never experienced so much pleasure in my life, and it was overwhelming.

"But you're drunk, and we can't," he whispered and sighed heavily. The air against my clit made me whimper.

Scorpius made a rough noise of agreement in his throat as he tweaked my nipples through my T-shirt, then dropped his hands.

Malum pulled away from my neck with a low growl.

They both reached for the conditioner, and the two of them coated my curls in the product. My body vibrated with a strange mix of tension and relaxation as they took care of me.

Orion didn't move.

The entire time his mates worked, he kept his fingers pulling my lips apart. His breath fanning the sensitive flesh.

I wiggled my hips to try to get him to do something, and he whispered, "Stop it." He kept me parted wide with his face below me but didn't move. "Let me just look at this pretty pussy while they take care of you."

Time became a blur of hazy pleasure as two kings washed my hair with painstaking care while the other king knelt before me and stared at my most private region.

It should have been weird.

It was the most erotic moment of my life.

Or maybe I was just drunk?

Either way, when Orion wrapped my T-shirt-clad body in a fluffy towel and Malum dried off my hair, I didn't fight them.

It felt nice to be doted on.

Strange. Different. But nice.

I giggled as Scorpius pulled his sweatshirt over my wet shirt and his sweatpants up my hips. Since he had about a foot on me, his clothes hung off and looked ridiculous.

"You're built like a mountain troll," I pointed out.

Malum chuckled, and I was jostled as someone was slapped. I'd never heard him laugh before.

"Thanks," I slurred when Orion rubbed enchanted moisturizer gently on my face.

I didn't have any products of my own.

Malum tipped a glass of cold water to my lips. "Drink, or you're going to

be hungover.”

I gulped greedily.

When the three of them pulled me into their bed, I chuckled because I ended up lying on top of Orion with Malum and Scorpius half-piled on top of me. There was no room for me in the bed.

I tried to crawl away.

Arms tightened around me so I couldn't move.

“For once in your life, just listen to instructions. Go to sleep,” Malum ordered gruffly.

And that was all it took.

I passed out.

CHAPTER 33

ARAN

THE THIRD CHALLENGE

Metamorphosis—Day 45, hour 10.

I touched my toes.

Palming the grass of the arena, I stretched and focused on releasing the tightness in my calves and thighs as I prepared for the third competition.

It had all started when I was born.

After that, everything had gone to absolute shit.

It had also started this morning at 5:00 a.m., when the bedroom door had slammed open.

Startled out of a pleasant dream where I was eating my mother's heart, I'd sat up from the floor, disoriented in a cocoon of blankets.

Blinking bleary eyes, I'd barely been able to make out the vampyre's figure in the darkness.

Lothaire had pointed his finger at me and barked, "Arabella, why have you been chosen to compete again? Vegar, Zenith, and Luka, you've also been selected."

His single eye had glared at me accusingly like it was my fault the gods hated me.

I'd pulled the blankets back over my head and gone to sleep.

At some point, you stopped caring and accepted that life was not worth living.

I'd reached that point fifteen years ago.

Now, as I stretched on the field of the arena and waited for the

competition to begin, there was a sharp pounding in the front of my skull.

I pressed delicately at the bruises on my face and winced.

Shockingly, pushing on the contusions while I prayed for death didn't help with pain management.

I tilted my face up to the wind.

The party had been three days ago, and I still had a headache.

The fact that my drunk self had had the audacity to climb into a shower with the kings and then sleep in their bed was beyond my understanding.

My memories were foggy.

The only good thing was the kings hadn't mentioned it, and the three of us just went on pretending I hadn't gotten naked in front of them.

The hangover kept me distracted.

Turned out drinking three full bottles of demon brew in a few hours resulted in a feeling similar to an elephant stomping on your skull.

In the future, I'd stop at two bottles.

People always said that moderation was the key to a happy life. Although, who were these supposed happy people?

They sounded fake.

I stretched my legs as far as they could go without pulling open my stitches.

Good news was that the dozens of cuts covering my body were now healing over. Bad news was that I was now covered in inflamed, crusty scabs.

Physically, I was hideous.

Mentally, I was worse.

Spiritually, I was a slut.

So basically everything evened itself out and I was thriving.

I made a point not to look across the field at the spectators because sun god forbid I make eye contact with one of the kings. Every time I saw them, images of soapy skin, naked muscles, and gore flashed through my mind.

My memories from the party before the shower were like a twisted nightmare.

Bodies jumped in a big crush to the rhythm of the pounding music, and three devil kings stood still in the middle of it all.

They were covered in blood.

Tendrils of smoke rose off Malum.

Violence incarnate.

A broken man moaned pitifully on the ground.

Scorpius smiled, and his white teeth glowed in the darkness.

He lifted his powerful thigh and stomped on the carcass at his feet. Bones snapped. Corvus and Orion joined him.

And then I'd let them condition my hair and crawled into bed with them like it was fine?

Who did that?

As I thought about it, bile filled my throat.

They were soulless monsters that lacked empathy. I knew this. But every time they proved it, something inside me died a little more.

At the party, I'd watched in horror as my drunk mind could not comprehend the level of depravity that was unfolding before me. Luka had pulled me away until the devils were lost in the crowd.

Malum had acted like he didn't want me to see what was happening, like he cared. But then he'd gone back to join his mates *torturing* a person.

I wasn't a good person.

But there were lines that had to be drawn.

Things that shouldn't be done.

The devils crossed all of them.

Right?

A part of me was sick to my stomach because I *wasn't* sick to my stomach over what they'd done.

That was what was really making me feel nauseous.

It was a horrible cycle.

I needed to be terrified of them. Yet I cuddled them like they were warm little teddy bears?

The worst part was I'd slept like a babe. Hands down best sleep of my life.

I felt like I'd been taken care of. Pampered. Cared for.

Which made no sense.

Because I wasn't.

Now, as the harsh scarlet light of the eclipse washed over me, dark memories prodded and poked at my psyche.

The haze was getting less linear and more circular.

Everything was jumbled.

The marble floor of the fae palace was icy beneath my sprawled limbs, and everything hurt.

Flames pulled me apart.

Mother launched into one of her mad rambles. “They thought they could force me out, but look what I became. Me, powerless? Unworthy?” She cackled. “Can you even imagine?”

“Mercy,” I begged her.

Blue flames covered every inch of my skin. They never burned.

Mother spoke like she hadn’t heard me. “It’s so sad how weak you are. So much weaker than I was at your age. Twelve years old and all you do is whine and complain. You’ll never even get the chance to fail like I did.”

The memory was so vibrant and crystal clear that it felt more like reality than the grass beneath my bare feet.

I aggressively grabbed my calves and pressed my forehead to my shins as I stretched.

A stitch popped.

You’re in the arena. It’s the day of the third competition. Stay present.

It didn’t work.

The day after the party, Malum had watched me climb out of his bed with a worried expression.

Like he *cared*. Men were so audacious.

For the next three days, we’d trained like our lives depended on it. We’d run until our feet cramped and lifted boulders until our hands were blistered.

Malum had kept asking me if I wanted to rest. He’d even offered to let me sit out of the runs so I could heal. Orion kept holding doors open for me, and Scorpius had stopped sneering at me and started sneering at people who bumped into me in the halls.

So. Bizarre.

In response to Malum’s inane question about needing rest, I’d sprinted the fastest and set the pace. The kings had run beside me in companionable silence.

So strange.

Everything was getting all jumbled.

Each night since, I’d fallen asleep on the floor by the hearth as flames screamed expletives at me.

No one talked about the three men who were brutalized because I’d consented to their touch.

Yesterday, I’d seen one of the blue-haired men walking alone in the hallway. The other men were probably recovering somewhere.

His face was so swollen that I wouldn’t have been able to recognize him

if not for his blue hair. He'd whimpered when he'd seen me and quickly limped away.

I'd tried to go after him and apologize.

Luka had blocked my path and said, "He got what was coming to him." At his words, my limbs had gone numb.

Orion had nodded and whispered, "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

Before I could say no, Scorpius had sneered, "Those men were scum. Do not let it get to you."

"Don't waste your energy on them," Malum had said gruffly.

I'd turned to him with surprise. Arched my brow at him.

Had he really been trying to console me?

The tops of his sculpted bronze cheekbones had flushed maroon. He'd pulled at the neck of his shirt, and he'd looked away.

I'd been so surprised by how the kings were treating me I'd forgotten all about the blue-haired men.

I hadn't known what to say, so I'd put my head down and smoked my pipe.

Now, as air slapped against my cheeks, I noted dispassionately that it was windier than usual.

The ocean crashed against the shore and sprayed salty water. Droplets peppered my clammy flesh.

I inhaled enchanted smoke.

All the competitors stretched on the field and waited for Lyla.

Vegar said something to Zenith, and Luka nodded in agreement. The three of them stretched on the grass beside me.

Loud music played, and bones crunched. A femur snapped beneath Scorpius's feet.

I blinked.

Rubbed at my eyes.

Wind whipped my unbraided curls into a frenzy.

Mother lit me on fire.

I lay back on the grass and stared up at the sky. Dark clouds drifted in front of the eclipse and cast the realm into darkness.

I closed my eyes and rolled them back in my head until my brain went fuzzy and it felt like I was spinning.

The planet rotated beneath me.

"Are you ready, Aran?"

I opened my eyes.

My three teammates stared above me and waited for a response. I wasn't sure who had spoken.

"Yeah." My voice cracked, dry and rough because I hadn't spoken a word in three days.

I stood in the middle of a party.

Blue flames swallowed me.

John gripped my tattooed hip.

My back cracked and burned.

"Sinful blood," an angel spat.

I shivered on the floor of the fae palace.

Malum, Scorpius, and Orion kissed one another.

Red flames burned my skin off.

I held a strangely shaped ice dagger.

A villager sobbed. I stabbed them.

I screamed as I tried to leave the kings.

Jinx's eyes went black.

"WHORE" was written across my back.

Malum conditioned my hair.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Vegar asked as he stared down at me with a frown.

It felt like I lifted a million pounds as I forced my lips up into a smile. The wind whipped around us.

"Of course." I forced out a chuckle and asked, "Why wouldn't I be?"

Three sets of eyes narrowed.

I laughed louder. "Seriously, I'm good."

The demons shrugged and walked away, but Luka kept staring at me.

My smile dropped.

I contorted my body forward, grabbed both my feet, and pressed my nose against my knees as I stretched my hamstrings.

A manic chuckle escaped my lips, and I pressed them into my knees to silence the noise.

Is this how my mother went mad?

Had the haze warped her time and cut her reality into pieces?

Had chunks of her life passed without her noticing, while the worst moments stretched painfully long?

When she was fourteen years old, had she also woken up one day to find

that the world was a colder place?

Had everyone watched her with nervous expressions as she'd lied to their faces?

I would ask her, but alas, I'd ripped out her heart and eaten it. So that wasn't an option.

"Stay focused." Luka squatted and clapped his hand across my back encouragingly.

I swallowed a scream.

Pain lanced my spine like I'd been stabbed with a hot poker.

Lothaire's enchanted voice boomed around the stadium, "This challenge is very specific. Daggers, swords, and talons are the only weapons that competitors can use. These weapons must also be manifestations of a competitor's power. No outside weapons are allowed. You *cannot* share your weapons with a teammate. Everyone must use their own."

The student section murmured with excitement.

Lothaire continued, "The goal is to draw a competitor's blood. When blood is drawn, an enchanted black X will hover in the air above the injured person's head. The first team whose members are all injured will be the losers. They will be punished."

I stood up.

His words washed over me, and reality clicked into harsh focus.

Everything was crisp.

The individual strands of vibrant green grass swayed in the wind.

I pulled the fractured pieces of my psyche together. Pushed my shoulders back and flexed my butt for stability.

Adrenaline pounded through my veins, and my heart pumped frantically in my chest.

I looked around the arena and studied who we'd be competing against.

The angels and leviathans also had four competitors each. The assassins, shifters, and devils had two competitors each.

More competitors means we have more chances to draw blood but also means it will be harder to protect one another from attacks. It will be easy to separate us. We'll have to stick together in a formation and focus on offense. Attacking first will be our best strategy.

"Present your weapons now," Lothaire ordered. "Daggers, swords, and talons only. If you do not present it for inspection, you cannot use it."

I tucked my pipe away in my pocket and concentrated on the well of rage

inside me.

It was disturbingly easy.

There was a twinge across my back, and two familiar ice daggers shimmered into existence in my hands.

I flipped the irregularly shaped weapons into the air. They were light and sharp. I felt safer and more competent holding them.

Beside me, Vegar made a grunting noise as inky black lines expanded down his face and the side of his neck. Ink poured off his black fingertips and defied gravity.

The tendrils swarmed together and formed into an impressive broadsword.

Zenith smirked as he brandished the same black weapon.

The lower halves of both their faces were covered in ink like they were wearing creepy masks.

Note to self: don't piss off the demons.

Across the field, angels smirked as they brandished ice swords, while devils bared their teeth and brandished swords of fire.

Meter-long talons erupted from the hands of the leviathans.

Beside them the assassins punched at their forearms with blank expressions. My jaw dropped as they gouged their skin, then pulled out pieces of cracked bone. The bone shards expanded and shaped into daggers.

They tossed bone weapons back and forth in their hands like their forearms weren't gaping open, pouring blood.

Did they not feel pain?

Highly unsettling.

On the other side of the field, Jax let out a low growl as he partially shifted and flashed bear claws. Sadie furrowed her brow and hovered a sphere of blood before her eyes. She smiled as the plasma took the shape of a dagger.

Wow.

That was new.

Vegar and Zenith swore violently. I turned back to my teammates to see what the commotion was.

Both demons stared at Luka with frowns.

It took me a second to realize the problem.

Fuck.

The air around Luka glimmered black, but he didn't have a weapon.

His cheeks tinged pink as the darkness disappeared. He looked down at his hands with defeat, unable to make eye contact with any of us.

My heart pounded harder in my chest.

New plan.

We had three competitors and one liability, so we needed to focus on protecting Luka. Instead of offense, we needed to prioritize defense.

Luka rubbed at the back of his neck.

“It’s fine,” I said and pulled my teammates into a huddle. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

I explained my plan, and the demons nodded in agreement.

Luka frowned. “No,” he spat.

“It’s the only realistic thing we can do to ensure we don’t lose,” I explained slowly.

Luka rubbed at his face. “I don’t—”

He was cut off by a loud horn and Lothaire shouting, “The brandished weapons are accepted. Begin.”

The arena erupted in violence.

Competitors threw themselves at one another.

A few Xs popped up above the heads of people who weren’t quick enough to avoid the attacks.

The demons and I fell back into a protective circle around Luka. He hunched low and made himself small behind us like we’d planned, swearing loudly to make it clear he disagreed.

We shuffled backward as a group.

I held my dagger out in front of me, and the demons pointed their swords forward. We moved swiftly across the field until Luka’s back was pressed against a pillar.

The three of us formed a wall in front of our weaponless teammate.

Salty air stung my wide eyes.

We waited.

It didn’t take long for the conflict to find us.

Across the field, two angels pointed their mammoth ice swords at us. I was grateful the demons also had oversized weapons or we’d be fucked.

Seconds later there was a crash as flaming ice slammed against ink.

Blue locked against black.

With their swords intertwined, I darted forward and slashed my daggers across the angels’ exposed biceps. Unlike when I’d stabbed the shifters in the

beast realm, they didn't disintegrate into dust. *Sad.*

Blood welled and dripped from the normal-looking wounds, but two black Xs appeared over their heads.

I grinned and darted back in front of Luka protectively.

The angels snarled with frustration, and their eyes darkened. They both disengaged their swords and locked onto a new target. Me.

They had nothing left to lose.

It was pure retribution.

Everything played out in slow motion—I couldn't move because I had to protect the human behind me.

I stayed in place.

Zenith and Vegar lunged on either side of me and tried to parry the attack, but the angle was awkward. Their swords slowed the descent but didn't stop it completely.

One ice sword slammed into my stomach, and the other stabbed my thigh.

I bit down on my tongue, and copper flooded my mouth.

A black X appeared over my head.

They shoved forward with all their might to try to get past me.

I didn't move.

Dug my toes into the dirt and widened my stance.

Luka grabbed my shoulder and started to try to pull me behind him.

I shoved forward out of his grip.

"No!" I shouted. "Stick to the plan. This is the plan."

Luka released me but let out a trail of creative expletives that would make the most hardened soldiers blush, something about Zeus, a firebolt, and a man's ass.

Vegar and Zenith slammed their swords at the angels and took a step forward out of position.

I shook my head and yelled, "The plan!"

The demons fell back.

For what felt like forever, the angels tried and failed to draw blood from Vegar and Zenith. Sweat poured off the angels' faces as they growled with frustration.

The demons grinned through their black ink masks.

They were completely unfazed and fought like their swords were extensions of themselves. It was wicked.

Finally, the angels realized they were wasting their time fighting against

men they wouldn't beat. They swore and ran off.

"The plan is working," I croaked as I pressed my palm against the wound on my thigh.

My fingers were drenched in blood.

"The plan is idiotic," Luka growled.

Something rustled behind me. Then he was gripping my thigh with both his hands and wrapping his sock around my wound. I grunted as he tied it tightly and created a tourniquet.

It felt like the air had dropped ten degrees, and I shivered. "Th-Th-Thanks."

"Shut up," Luka snarled.

How had I ever thought he was John?

Across the field, a lone leviathan was jogging while scanning competitors, looking for people without Xs.

He locked eyes with Luka and the demons.

He sprinted forward with his wicked talons, which looked more like knives, pointed at us.

The demons and I widened our stances and palmed our weapons.

Sweat dripped into my eye.

I didn't blink.

A few moments later, Vegar, Zenith, and the leviathan had Xs floating above their heads. The demons and I were bleeding from a dozen scratches.

My cheek stung from where the side of a claw had clipped my face.

When the leviathan's talons had raked over the sword wound on my thigh, I'd had enough. He'd skirted too far backward for me to hit him with my dagger and protect Luka. I'd snapped my arm in his direction and flung the ice dagger like a throwing star.

The leviathan had staggered backward with an *O* of surprise on his lips and a crystal dagger in his gut. His tan skin had paled, and his lips had faded to a ghastly shade of blue.

He'd scampered away across the field like a wounded animal and taken my dagger with him.

Vegar high-fived me.

All three of us slumped forward with relief.

"What the fuck!" Luka bellowed in my ear, and he gnashed his teeth. "You. Needed. That. Dagger."

I shrugged. "He was pissing me off. I still have one."

As I held my remaining dagger up to the light, my sleeve fell off. Gashes covered every inch of my right arm.

Damn.

I'd been hit a lot.

"Fucking Hades," Luka growled.

I missed when he'd refused to speak.

"Swearing is the sign of a weak mind," I repeated Jinx's statement. In my defense, she was the scariest person I knew and had good sayings.

Luka snarled, "Fuck yourself."

Someone was clearly not open to self-improvement.

Sad.

In a move no one was expecting, Luka reached down and pulled off his shirt.

I opened my mouth to tell him that now was not the time to act like a pervert, but he pressed the fabric down on my arm to stanch the bleeding.

A lot of smooth olive skin was on display.

Luka no longer looked identical to John.

I stared at the silver chain of skulls dangling between his pierced nipples. It attached to another skull chain that hung low and wrapped around his lean, tattooed abs.

I gawked.

Black wings spread across his chest, and a serpent trailed down his abs. A key, a skull, a pomegranate, a chariot, a mint plant, the moon, and a three-headed dog were scattered across his torso.

Oh.

Familiar pain streaked down my spine.

I'd seen John shirtless, and he definitely didn't have tattoos or piercings. Now that I thought about it, when I'd thought John was Mr. Hyde, he'd always gone into the bathroom to change.

I'd assumed it was because he was in a bad mood and needed space. It was really because his body would have given him away.

Objectively, it was a nice body.

Subjectively, immediate smash.

"*Concentrate, you dumbass. Pay attention to the other competitors,*" Jinx's voice sounded in my head and startled me out of my trance.

Great, I'd accidentally summoned the demon child.

"Are you even listening to me?" Luka snarled as he wiped my arm.

I grimaced as he pressed against a particularly deep lesion. “Not really.”
He made a rough sound that was somewhere between an animal snarl and a human growl.

“Nice piercings, bruh.” I slapped him on the shoulder with my limp arm.
The demons glanced over at me like I’d lost my mind.

Luka pressed harder on my wound and leaned forward. Where John’s natural scent was smooth and rich, his was dark and spicy. I shivered.

His stubble grazed my jaw as he whispered, “Keep staring at me like that and I’ll let you feel the rest of my piercings.”

It took a second, then his meaning sank in.

I cleared my throat.

My cheeks burned, but I didn’t look down at his boxers to see if he meant what I thought he did.

I kept my eyes forward.

Ever since I’d revealed I was a woman, I’d been getting a *lot* of disturbing comments thrown my way. I was 99 percent sure that my teammates were sexually harassing me.

There was only one thing left to do.

I cleared my throat. “Keep talking like that and you’ll get fucked.”
Sexually harass them back.

I studied my cuticles like I was picking out a polish. Since I was missing three fingernails and my pinky was jutting out at a disturbing angle, it was going to take a lot more than a clear coat.

Luka choked.

I turned my back to him and surveyed the field. Most competitors were locked in combat with Xs floating above their heads.

Bodies moved quickly across the arena, and it was hard to tell who was left.

Luka wrapped his arms around his shirt and knotted it quickly to my arm like he was afraid to touch me too long.

I whipped my head to the side as something flashed in my periphery.

Either I was hallucinating or an assassin without an X over her head was headed toward us. “Straight ahead,” I warned the demons.

We backed up until we were pressed against Luka.

Since all three of us had marks, if someone drew his blood, we’d lose.

I crouched so I was protecting his legs. The demons shuffled close to protect his front and sides.

We formed a shield.

The assassin was disappearing into the wide shadows cast by the poles that surrounded the field.

She approached as a blur.

Closer.

I raised my arm back, but I only had one dagger, and she was zigzagging so fast that it would be almost impossible to get a good hit.

The demons pointed their ink swords forward, but their arms trembled slightly from fatigue and blood loss.

In her hand, a sharp bone sword gleamed white.

I prepared for a world of hurt.

Out of nowhere, an object slammed against the bony assassin, and she fell to her knees with an object protruding from her chest.

Sadie marched across the field with a blank expression. She'd flicked on the numb, the homicidal voice in her head that made her into a killing machine. My best friend was completely uninjured and didn't have an X above her head.

"Stand up," Sadie ordered in a monotone voice.

The assassin complied like a zombie, a blood dagger sticking out of her sternum and infecting her.

Sadie's ruby eyes glowed against her golden skin. She looked like she was born from the eclipse.

Since they'd approved her blood dagger, she technically wasn't breaking any rules. I think.

It seemed like it was kind of a gray area.

Sadie's raspy voice cracked like a whip. "Hunt down your fellow teammates and stab them. Now."

The assassin turned and sprinted across the arena with impressive speed.

Sadie watched dispassionately.

Behind her a devil sprinted across the field with his flame sword raised above his head.

"Behind you!" I shouted and pulled back my throwing arm.

Before I could act, Jax slammed into the devil like a truck. Braids flew around his head and impressive muscles rippled as in midair he hammered his fist into the devil's face.

He tackled him to the ground and flung the flame sword to the side, then Jax tore at the man with his claws.

A menacing roar erupted from his chest.

Jax shredded his skin with a vengeance.

“Kill him!” Cobra screamed from the spectator section, and Ascher and Xerxes whistled and yelled in agreement.

“*Pay attention!*” Luka shouted in my ear, and I jumped with surprise.

Rolling my eyes, I crouched lower to protect his feet.

“The game is over,” Lothaire’s voice boomed. “The assassin legion lost.”

I made a sign of worship and thanked the sun god that my best friend had the power to turn people into mindless zombies.

A true blessing to us all.

I tried to stand up, but my knees gave out. Luka grabbed me as I stumbled, and my finger brushed against his nipple piercing.

Pain streaked across my back.

I pulled away roughly and turned my attention to the demons.

“Nice work,” Vegar grinned as he gave me a high-five.

“We make a good team.” I smiled back.

Zenith frowned, and the black lines retreated off his weapons and crawled back under his eyes. “I told you not to talk to me.” He looked angry, but the corner of his mouth twitched like he wanted to smile.

Vegar winked behind his back and gave me a thumbs-up.

“Whatever you say, buddy.” I tipped my imaginary hat at him.

It was obvious that he was suffering from low testosterone and didn’t know how to express his emotions properly.

He just needed to be handled with care.

“What the hell were you three doing out there?” Malum’s angry voice interrupted my musings. He looked furious.

Bronze muscles rippled, and his shaved head was on fire as he stalked across the grass toward us with Scorpius and Orion following behind.

“We were executing a winning plan,” I said with a grin, and Vegar gave me another high-five.

Luka mumbled under his breath, “The dumbest plan in history.”

Malum grabbed the demons by the shirt fronts and started yelling in their faces. Scorpius looked pissed beside him, and Orion stared at me with wide eyes.

I rolled my eyes and limped away from my teammates to where four powerful men were embracing Sadie.

She pushed out of their arms and grabbed me just as I collapsed.

“You’re the prettiest, most impressive woman in all the realms,” I whispered as I lost consciousness from blood loss.

Sadie held me tightly and said, “I know.”

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER 34

ARAN

SOFT KISSES

Metamorphosis—Day 46, hour 1

“**A** HHHHHH!” I screamed as I arched my back off the makeshift cot.

I was lying in a sticky puddle of blood. Everything itched. My clothes were crusted to sweat-soaked skin.

Zenith and Vegar lay on the floor beside me.

Each of us was on one of the makeshift bloody mattress pads from the first competition. They were marginally better than the floor.

Our room reeked of copper and desperation.

The demons panted loudly and swore through gritted teeth.

I moaned brokenly.

Malum snapped, “*Help her, Luka!*” His head was bent low, face scrunched with concentration, as he knelt and stitched up Vegar’s wounds.

“*I’m trying!*” Luka yelled back frantically.

Everyone was panicking.

Orion was on his knees, stitching up Zenith.

Scorpius sat between his mates with his jaw clenched as he struggled to hold the demons still. Every few seconds, he released them, reached over, and grabbed my arm like he wanted to make sure I was still there.

I didn’t have time to dwell on the bizarre gesture.

I whimpered as the pain intensified.

Orion made a pained noise and looked over at me with wide, concerned eyes.

“One breath at a time. Breathe slowly,” Luka said gruffly as he concentrated on stitching up the gash on my thigh. His movements were smooth and precise.

I made a point of inhaling as fast as I could. Just to spite him.

I didn’t like when men told me what to do, it was a trigger.

Luka crinkled his eyes and looked down at me like I was an idiot.

A scream bubbled up my throat.

I bit down on my lower lip until my teeth poked through and stabbed my chin.

The stabbing, pulling sensation of the needle was pleasurable compared to the absolute agony raking down my back.

It was the shower all over again.

Absolute.

Torture.

And I had no clue why my spinal cord was fracturing inside me.

Luka finished closing the gaping wound on my leg. “I need to do your chest,” he said gruffly as he pointed at the gash that traveled across my collarbone.

I couldn’t remember if it was from a sword or a talon.

Swallowing another scream, I gave him a shaky nod.

Sweat poured down my forehead, and I wanted to yell at him to fix my back. But unless he had a doctorate in dark enchantment, he couldn’t do anything to help me.

Some burdens weren’t meant to be shared.

I said nothing.

And suffered.

Luka pointed at my collarbone again like he was waiting for permission.

Zenith groaned loudly beside me and slammed his feet against the floor as Orion stitched his arm. Scorpius reached over and touched my shoulder.

Vegar whimpered.

Malum glanced at me, silver eyes wide with worry.

Crack. My spine snapped.

Everything went dark.

Cold water splashed across my face, and I sputtered with outrage as it filled my nose. It was frigid compared to my clammy skin.

“Stay conscious,” Luka ordered.

I blinked through watery lashes.

Instead of leaning across me to get to my neck, Luka threw his powerful leg over my hips.

I froze.

He straddled me and leaned forward.

I choked with surprise.

The apex of his thighs was nestled against mine, and he'd put on a new sweatshirt, but it was soaked with sweat and blood. It clung to his muscled upper body like a second skin.

I held my breath.

His fingers danced gently across my collarbone.

There was a loud ripping noise as Luka tore apart the top of my sweatshirt so it was hanging open to expose my collarbone. He leaned closer and flexed his thighs for stability as he stitched up the gash.

He had nimble fingers for a large man.

Crack. Things *shifted* in my back, and I swallowed vomit as my limbs shook.

Involuntarily I flung my hips forward and curled my shoulders back to alleviate the pain. My core rubbed against Luka.

"Sorry," I choked out. "Can't help it."

The tops of Luka's cheekbones turned a faint pink, but he didn't look up from his work. He silently fixed my broken pieces.

I grunted.

Squeezed my eyes shut.

Whimpered.

Luka made a sound of concern.

Again the pain exploded. Again I slammed my hips forward and arched my back as I squeezed my eyes shut. This time, I rubbed against a solid object.

Half-delirious, I mumbled, "Why. Do you have a weapon?"

Luka choked, and I peeled open my eyes.

I looked further down, and my eyes widened.

"That's not a weapon," I whispered like an idiot.

Luka didn't take his eyes off my neck where he was working. "No, Your Highness, it's not."

It was my turn to blush.

I was an idiot. Calling a man's dick a weapon was the type of stupid shit Sadie babbled about happening in her romance books.

I would never recover from this.

“Why are you suddenly calling me Highness?” I gasped between whimpers of pain because I was desperate to change the topic and move on from being an embarrassment to all of womankind.

Scorpius’s grip on my shoulder tightened.

Things were *moving* inside my skeleton. The sensation was tortuous and wrong.

I prayed for death.

Luka didn’t answer. He climbed off my hips and started working on my arm.

I didn’t ask again.

Hours later my back *finally* stopped trying to send me into cardiac arrest, and Luka finished up stitching what felt like my millionth wound. He rummaged around, putting the supplies away.

He’d rolled up his sleeves, and his forearms were coated like he’d dipped his arms into red paint.

I couldn’t move.

My body weighed three hundred thousand tons.

A dull throbbing sensation echoed through my limbs.

I was liquid. The excruciating sensations had fried my neurons, and I’d melted. There was nothing left of me.

I moved a little and froze. Dozens of stitches pulled.

A horrible sensation washed over me; when I moved, it felt like my organs were going to spill out from my skin.

Or maybe it was all in my head?

Vegar thumped his fist against the carpet and moaned loudly.

“Stay still,” Scorpius snapped as he held him down with one hand, his other still holding onto me.

The two demons were littered with even more cuts than I was.

“‘Your Highness’ is fitting because you’re bossy and stubborn. You refused to listen to reason, and your plan was the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Luka whispered as he cleaned up his supplies.

I shivered.

Goose bumps erupted on my neck.

What? I made a sound of confusion.

Luka’s voice darkened. “You sacrificed yourself to protect me.” He paused, “Never do that again.”

With my eyes closed, body a limp amalgamation of soup, I scoffed under my throat.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I whispered.

Luka chuckled, and the sound was rich and deep.

He was laughing at me.

Before I could say anything else, I was jostled and lifted off the floor. Luka easily maneuvered my dead weight.

“What are you doing with her?” Malum snapped, and his gravelly voice echoed like a shot.

We stopped with me hanging in his arms midair.

A long moment passed, and it seemed like Luka wasn’t going to answer.

Scorpius muttered something derogatory under his breath.

When Luka spoke, his words held no room for argument. “She’s going to bed,” he said like he was declaring war.

Malum’s voice was filled with fury. “Put her in our bed.”

If I had any energy left, I would have launched out of Luka’s arms in feminine outrage and kicked Malum’s ass.

“No,” I mumbled weakly.

My lips were chapped from panting, and the words didn’t come out as harshly as I would have wanted.

Sad.

Luka’s fingers tightened.

“If she needs to lie in a bed,” Malum said roughly, “She can lie in ours, not yours. She’s slept with us before.”

I muttered, “There’s no space.”

Scorpius snarled, “We’ll make space for you.”

Orion whispered something quietly that I couldn’t hear.

“She’s coming to my bed. I have the space,” Luka growled as he gently laid me down onto a warm mattress. He pulled the covers up under my chin, then slowly tucked the bedding under my legs.

There was a low hiss and a sizzling sound. I didn’t have to open my eyes to know with 100 percent certainty that Malum was on fire.

We all needed help, but he *really* needed help. The type only a fae fire department could give.

A moment later, Luka was pulling fuzzy socks over my feet. “These are my favorite pair,” he whispered softly.

Déjà vu hit me like a punch to the face.

When I was destroyed after the first challenge, John had taken care of me.
The twins are the only men who've ever consistently shown me kindness and support.

They knew me. Saw me at my worst. And unlike every other male I'd ever known, they stayed by my side.

They cared.

Even Sadie's men were only friendly with me out of an obligation to their mate. I knew that.

The twins had no obligation to be kind. Yet that was all they'd ever been.

Luka tucked the comforter under my feet and said, "I better not see you take these socks off. You've been shivering a lot lately."

Pressure welled.

Tears spilled down my cheeks, and my lips parted on a silent sob.

"What?" Luka's hand stroked my forehead. "Please don't cry."

He was being so nice to me.

His words had the opposite effect of what he was going for.

I sobbed harder. Curling onto my side, I buried my head in a pillow and shook from the force of the emotions burning through my chest.

I was on fire, but the flames came from within.

I missed when I'd felt nothing.

The haze was nice.

This was hell.

"Aran, please." Luka gingerly crawled into the bed and scooped me into his arms so his front was to my back. I was pressed against him and the wall.

His muscled frame blocked me from the rest of the room.

He enveloped me.

Completely.

Protectively.

I turned and cried into his chest, careful to make no noise so I didn't alert the rest of the room that I was being pathetic.

On the floor, the demons thrashed and moaned in pain. The kings panted with exhaustion as they pulled needles and threads through skin with expert precision.

I cried because for the first time in my life, I knew two men I really liked.
Sun god help me.

By some small miracle, no one but Luka noticed I was breaking down. His arms surrounded me, but they rested against me lightly like he was afraid

I'd break if he touched me too hard.

"Sorry," I whispered into his chest as I soaked his bloody shirt with pathetic tears.

Luka leaned forward and pressed his lips against my ears so only I could hear him. "Don't you dare apologize for crying."

Of course I cried harder.

Luka groaned like I was hurting him and whispered, "You know, I thought Aran was the coolest guy I'd ever met."

I hiccuped and bit down on my fist to quiet myself. Warm, callused fingers tangled in my curls, and Luka palmed the back of my head. He pulled me closer and said, "And now I think Arabella is the coolest woman."

I blinked up at him.

The corners of his mouth pulled up into a small smile, and he transformed from an unapproachable grouch into a breathtakingly handsome man.

Another sob welled inside me.

I reached my fingers forward and trailed them across his face.

He was missing dimples.

My voice was raspy from sobbing as I replied, "You're pretty cool yourself. Even if you're not John's alter ego."

"Trust me, sweetheart." Luka pressed his hips forward until he was flush against me. "I'm my own man."

A zing of pain shot down my spine.

Before I could do something disturbing, Luka closed his eyes. "Go to sleep, my little dictator."

My heart beat a thousand miles per second at his casual use of *my*.

I scoffed, "Why does everyone keep calling me little? I'm six four in heels."

He chuckled, and the sound vibrated through his chest. "Sure you are."

I felt safer than I had in my life as I drifted off against him. "I literally am."

A bicep flexed against my side like Luka was trying to show off his muscles. "Whatever you want to believe, Your Highness."

Sleepily I argued, "I can't tell if you're being ironically disrespectful or sweet."

There was a long pause. "If I were disrespecting you, you'd know it."

I stilled.

Convinced I'd heard him wrong.

I opened my eyes. “What?”

Luka pressed his hand over my face like he was mock suffocating me and ordered, “Shut the fuck up and go to sleep.”

The grouch was back.

I debated causing a scene, but exhaustion had me closing my eyes and whispering, “Maybe you do have a personality disorder.”

Luka pressed his lips to my forehead. “Whatever you need to believe to sleep at night, dictator.”

It was the softest kiss in the history of kisses.

Like a butterfly’s wing.

It felt like someone had stabbed my spine. Pure. White hot. Agony.

I curled my toes in my fuzzy socks and smiled, and for the first time in a long time, it wasn’t fake.

In my imagination, Scorpius asked, “Is she all right? I heard her crying.”

Orion made a sound of distress.

“She was crying?” Malum asked brokenly like the thought of me in tears did something to him.

Clearly, I was creating false scenarios because I knew the kings didn’t actually care about me.

They couldn’t.

Not after everything they’d done.

CHAPTER 35

ARAN

JOHN'S RETURN

Metamorphosis—Day 47, hour 14

I rubbed the crust from my eyes as consciousness returned.

Everything ached.

I moaned and turned my face into the soft pillow. The worst part of life was the moment when you were ripped from sleep and remembered that you hadn't gone on a shopping trip in years.

My eyes shot open.

I jolted upward and immediately regretted it as the stitches littering my body pulled and pinched.

The room was a quiet dark-red haze, and it took my eyes a moment to adjust.

I was alone in bed.

My teammates were asleep.

Malum and Scorpius were wrapped around Orion, snoring softly. Vegar and Zenith were lying on the bloody mattress pads on the floor, and their hands were outstretched toward each other. The tips of their fingers were interlaced.

They were so romantic.

It made me sick.

The clock on the wall read two in the afternoon, but the curtains were closed like it was night.

I gagged and covered my nose.

The room reeked of sweaty male and gore.

It definitely hadn't been five days since the competition, because the servants hadn't cleaned anything.

Arcs of blood had been splattered across the floor, wall, and even the hearth like in a crime scene.

I went to lie back down but tensed my abdominal muscles and froze because there was a loud squeak in the bathroom.

Luka's muffled voice said, "I told everyone. So the plan better have worked. They know there are two of us."

There was a pause.

"It's done. It all worked out." The voice that replied was virtually identical, but it was a little less gruff. It was also extremely familiar. *Holy sun god*, John was speaking.

The twins were in the bathroom.

Together.

My eyes widened, and I froze.

Luka gasped.

"I've told him I've chosen my gynaíka." John's voice was full of emotion. "He's freed me from my obligation."

It was a term I'd never heard before.

There was a shuffling noise.

"Holy fuck," Luka said. "That's the..."

"Don't say it aloud," John cut him off with a hiss. "Just speaking its name can alert poachers."

"And you think it will work for me?" Luka asked softly.

I leaned forward on my bed.

John's response was so quiet that I couldn't hear it through the bathroom door.

I picked at my lower lip. I had no idea what the twins were discussing, but from the awe in Luka's voice, it was a big deal.

My stomach pulled into knots as I thought about the tender moment I'd shared with Luka after he'd stitched me up.

It didn't seem as sweet when I remembered all his secrets.

The twins were purposefully keeping me in the dark.

Were they toying with me?

Was it all some sick prank, pretend to befriend the loser fae girl?

I made a face at my stupid thoughts. Did I think I was in some coming-of-

age teen romance? I wasn't a helpless, naïve girl getting pranked by stupid boys. I was a depressed twenty-four-year-old fae queen who'd killed a lot of people.

"Stay safe, brother," John said.

"You too." Luka's slightly deeper voice trailed off like he disappeared.

The door squeaked.

I flung myself back into the bed and pulled the covers over my head, heart racing. I feigned sleep.

Footsteps padded softly across the rug.

Then the bed moved.

A large body squeezed into the gap between me and the wall. Arms reached out and wrapped around me. They pulled me against a hard chest. The rich scent of sandalwood, not spice, filled my nose.

I was lying in John's arms.

I didn't know if I wanted to laugh or cry.

John sighed contentedly, and his breath steadied as he drifted off to sleep.

Hours passed.

I lay wide awake.

I was afraid to move and have the mirage of my friend disappear. I'd wanted him to come back so badly, and now here he was. A part of me mourned the loss of Luka.

It was all so confusing.

So I waited.

Hours later Malum yelled, "Everyone, up. Time for dinner. We need the fuel."

John jolted awake; his warm muscles tensed as he pulled himself away from me. I pretended to keep sleeping.

Instead of getting off the bed, John climbed over me. The covers were pulled off my head, and cool air hit my face.

I went impossibly still.

Callused fingers touched the back of my neck, and something cold and heavy settled around my throat. John's breath was faint against my cheeks.

"Stop wasting time and move, Luka," Malum snapped, and John climbed off the bed.

"That's not Luka," Scorpius said slowly. "I listened closely this week and noted the slight difference in how they breathe."

Malum's voice deepened. "What?"

The demons groaned from the mattress pads on the floor as they woke up.

“He’s right. I RJE’d back a few hours ago, and I was going to let everyone know,” John said casually like he was talking about the weather.

“Bullshit, you weren’t going to say anything,” Malum snapped. “But you *will* explain just what in the sun god’s realms is going on right now.”

“You have five seconds to explain,” Scorpius sneered. “Or we’ll hurt you.”

“All I can tell you is that there are two of us. Until everything else is sorted out, I’m still sworn to secrecy.” John chuckled. “Seriously. You can even ask Lothaire.”

Malum growled like a wild animal. “*Unacceptable!* I am the captain of this team, and you will explain.”

John sighed loudly. “I can tell you that on my end, I’ve completed my... other obligations...and I will not have to RJE away again. Since Luka is still otherwise engaged, the secrecy stands. If anything changes, you’ll be the first to know.”

Malum made a noise of disbelief.

“Trust me,” John said in a serious tone. “It has killed me to deceive everyone, and I wish things were different.”

“I’m sure you fucking do,” Scorpius snarled.

John’s voice was hard. “We all know how the realms work. We’ve all made sacrifices to be here. So don’t try me. A secrecy enchantment prevents me from speaking on the issue, and all you’ll do is piss me off. Now, can we go to dinner?”

Malum scoffed. “Screw you.”

“Very mature,” I said as I gave up playing dead, because let’s be real, I couldn’t pass up an opportunity to needle Malum.

I rubbed at my eyes and yawned dramatically like I was coming out of a deep sleep. My neck cramped, and I rubbed at a knot on the base of my skull.

I winced at the state of my arms.

Blue-and-green bruises wrapped around my pale flesh and contrasted nicely with black stitches that held together about a dozen new, weeping wounds. They crossed over the scabbing, old wounds. The skin under my left eye throbbed.

I looked exactly how I felt.

“*What the actual fuck!*” Malum bellowed.

He moved with impossible speed, a blur of bronze and flames, as he flew

across the room in my direction.

John moved into his path and blocked him from getting to me.

The air shimmered black.

Manic silver eyes locked on mine as Malum's upper lip curled back with disgust, and he radiated distress.

I patted my hair and tried to smooth down the wild curls.

My bedhead was bad, but it seemed slightly excessive to scream and charge across the room because of a bad hair day.

Malum breathed raggedly like a maniac.

This was *exactly* why all fae men would be jailed at birth and not released until they proved themselves peaceful. Thank the sun god I was queen and not some male whack job.

"*Why are you wearing that! Take it off now!*" Malum shouted, and I stared back at him blankly.

Was he having a breakdown? I hated to say it, but that would be the most relatable thing he'd done to date.

"Maybe try lying on the floor to ground yourself. It can help panic attacks," I pointed out helpfully and crossed my arms over my chest to demonstrate. "Deep breaths."

Malum snarled and gnashed his teeth like a rabid animal.

I spoke slowly. "No, you have to suck in through your nose." I pointed to my nostril and sucked in. "Then try to release it through your mouth." I nodded at him as I blew out.

There was a sizzling sound as his shirt caught on fire.

I narrowed my eyes. "I feel like you're not trying."

Malum trembled with rage. Poor guy was giving it his best shot, but he just couldn't get the hang of it.

Orion whispered in Scorpius's ear, then moved across the room and laid one hand on his flaming mate's shoulder while he pointed his other hand at me. "Your neck."

I looked down.

Gasped.

A black teardrop jewel about the size of my palm hung from a glittering diamond chain around my neck. The jewels were ice-cold and ridiculously heavy.

My eyes snapped to John, the man who'd knelt atop me seconds before.

He stared back.

Then arched a dark brow and smirked like he was offering a challenge.

I arched my brow back at him and asked in a snooty tone, “You couldn’t have gotten anything bigger?”

Malum choked.

Orion’s jaw dropped.

John’s dark eyes twinkled as he matched my energy and asked, “Have you earned a bigger diamond?”

I gracefully crawled out of bed, shoulders back, neck straight, and stopped in front of him. My aching knees begged to give out, but I locked them tight and flexed my thighs.

Like a queen I arched my brow at him. “Please, we both know what I deserve. Now, care to explain the rock hanging from my neck?”

John shrugged casually. “It’s nothing serious. I’ve always owned it, but I never had a woman to give it to. Figured I might as well give it to my bestie.”

I narrowed my eyes and stared up at him as I searched for the lie.

“You just happened to have this hanging around?” I asked skeptically as I fingered the cold weight.

It was *heavy*.

I’d grown up with coffers of expensive jewels, and I’d never seen a single stone so large. Especially not one that was such a unique shade of black.

“Yep.” John flashed his dimples. “It’s really not a big deal.” The smile slipped from his face, and his eyes looked sad. “Think of it as an apology for deceiving you.”

John glanced around the room uncomfortably as the devils and demons stared at him with distrust.

He put his hands into his sweatpants’ pockets and rocked back on his heels, shrugging. With his messy hair and dimples, he looked young. Vulnerable.

My heart hurt.

From his expression, it was clear he’d been afraid I wouldn’t want to be his friend after I found out about Luka.

Playing with the necklace, I grinned at him. “Apology accepted.”

John smiled so brightly that it hurt to look at him.

He draped his arm across my shoulders and leaned against me. “Thank the sun god, I could *not* have handled having to befriend the kings.” He shuddered dramatically. “That would have been horrible.”

I let him drag me out of the room and lead the way to dinner.

As we walked down the hall, lightning struck, and John's smile slipped from his face as he stared down at me.

His expression tightened as he glared at my arms and face.

I stumbled.

Horror slowly unfurled in my gut.

Somewhere among the competitions, Luka, the gruesome wounds, and the haze, I'd stopped worrying about what had happened between the two of us.

From the darkness in John's eyes, he'd just remembered.

Did he regret giving me the necklace? Was he disgusted to be touching me? Was he repulsed by my cowardice?

I was done being pathetic. "About the punishment," I blurted out and faced the elephant between us head-on.

It was John's turn to stumble.

Students and competitors pressed together in the crowded halls as the entire academy went to dinner, but the two of us might as well have been alone.

The world faded into background noise.

It felt like we were alone.

John took a deep, shuddering breath, and he glanced quickly at my necklace. "Let's not talk about that right now. We have bigger issues."

I bit down hard on my lower lip to steady myself and rasped, "Okay, later."

My heart beat like it was trying to jump out of my chest. Why wouldn't we talk about it now? Was it too terrifying for him to discuss? Did it trigger him?

Possibilities unfolded before my eyes, each worse than the last.

By the time we made it to the dining hall entrance, I was convinced that John was waiting until the competition was over to petition the High Council to have me arrested for assault and emotional battery.

Sure, I was probably catastrophizing.

But what if I wasn't?

John pulled away as we passed the sacred tree. "I need to talk to Lothaire. Save me my usual seat." He walked away.

The bloodied man crucified to the tree gurgled as my heart fell to my toes. What if he was going to tell Lothaire that he wanted to press charges?

I slapped the heel of my palm against the side of my head. Hard.

The pain didn't help.

Distracted by my racing thoughts, I didn't see the shoulder until it slammed into my side.

A woman invaded my personal space.

Sari scowled.

I hadn't been this close to her since I'd carried her limp body down the hall.

She had dark circles around her eyes, and her blouse was askew. "You don't deserve to wear that." She pointed at my neck.

I grabbed the jewel protectively. "What?"

"Actually." She smiled, and it wasn't a pleasant expression. "You probably do, it's very fitting."

"What is?" I asked dumbly as I stared down at the necklace.

"They call it death." Sari wrinkled her nose patronizingly. "You'd know all about that, wouldn't you? Since death is your thing."

She smirked.

I fondled the heavy black stone with curiosity. I'd heard of black jewels called jade but never *death*. Seemed a little dramatic.

I shrugged.

I'd known it wasn't jade because the jewel refracted light and sparkled brighter. Who cared about a jewel's name anyway?

Sari waited, probably for me to spiral.

I could see what she was getting at. I was the fae queen, and my rightful throne was called the seat of death. I'd killed too many people to count, and now I wore a type of jewel called death.

I couldn't find the energy to do anything but stare back at her blankly.

She waited for me to freak out.

My lips curled downward in a frown as I took in her battered appearance.

Jinx's advice about doing the right thing pounded against my skull.

I rubbed at my chilled arms, and my fingers snagged on stitches. I hadn't even realized I was still wearing my tattered sweatshirt.

"I'm sorry about Tara." I pushed my pipe between my lips but kept my eyes locked on hers.

I let her see my regret.

Sari's pretty face contorted into something hideous. "How dare you say her name," she spat. "You didn't save her."

I nodded and refused to look away like a coward. "I know. And every

day, I regret that I didn't get there sooner."

Sari's eyes widened. "Please," she wheezed harshly. "You were there in time. You just froze. If you'd acted sooner, she'd still be alive."

I rubbed my eyes.

Thought back to the night.

Everything was a twisted blur of drugs and intoxication.

Loud music. Dancing. Running through the hall frantically. Horace leaning over Sari, killing her. Tara dead on the floor. Stabbing Horace as I straddled him.

"She was already dead." My voice cracked. "On the floor."

Sari leaned closer. "She was still breathing, and you paused and wasted time. Time that could have been used to save her."

She spat onto the floor in front of me.

I rubbed at my face with both my hands, my harsh movements opening the stitches on my face.

Blood dripped.

The man on the sacred tree gurgled louder, and it sounded like he was crying for help.

"I know. I should have done more," I said defeatedly. "You're right."

Sari's voice was filled with abject loathing. "You're a disgusting, worthless person."

I could feel how much she hated me; it was a tangible energy between us.

My shoulders slumped, and I nodded at her. "I know."

"Go back to your royal table, you useless whore," Malum snapped, and his voice was harsher than I'd heard it in a long time. I'd forgotten how cruel he could be.

The students who were taking their seats around us froze.

Sari gave me one last glare before she stomped back across the room to her seat.

Like a zombie I turned around and walked toward the dais.

An arm settled around my shoulders, and I relaxed against it, then instantly stiffened when I realized it didn't smell of sandalwood and the body was taller.

Bergamot and musk filled my senses.

"What are you doing?" I asked Scorpius as I tried to disentangle myself from him.

His arm tightened painfully so I couldn't move.

“She’s wrong,” he said viciously.

I rolled my eyes. “Let me guess, because she’s a worthless woman.” I sucked in enchanted smoke. “No. She’s right.”

Scorpius laughed cruelly. “No.” His fingernails gouged the back of my neck. “She’s wrong because she’s a naïve, sheltered fool just like the rest of them.” He gestured his head toward where the students sat.

“Whatever.” I blew out a cloud of smoke, not caring what one of the academy’s biggest bullies had to say.

“He’s right,” Malum dipped his head to whisper in my ear as he walked past.

I blinked at his retreating form.

He glanced back over his shoulder, and at my inquisitive look, a blush stained the tops of his cheeks.

A queasy sensation filled my gut.

For a second, Malum looked young.

I always thought of him as someone who was over one hundred years old like Jax, but it struck me for the first time that he was young. Someone had said he was turning thirty.

When it came to immortality, that was nothing.

Yet he already seemed to have the weight of the world on his shoulders. Was that why he was so harsh all the time?

Sun god, ever since the second competition, he’d been confusing.

I felt like I didn’t know who he was anymore.

When we got to our table, Scorpius let me go so I could sit down, but he didn’t walk around the table to his seat.

He grabbed my shoulders with both his hands and stood behind me.

He squeezed.

“Ow, can you stop hurting me?” I snapped at him.

He loomed above me.

“The students at this academy think they’re powerful leaders.” He bared his teeth. “They’re nothing but political sheep who rely on *us* to keep the realms safe for them. That pathetic girl who spoke to you has never had to wield a blade. She’s never taken a life. And yet she judges you for the speed at which you killed your own friend to save *her* worthless existence.”

His nails dug deeper into my skin as he leaned closer.

He whispered into my ear, “The ones who never sully their souls will only ever cast judgment on those drenched in shadows, because darkness is

power. The weak fear what they are not.”

I puffed out smoke and tried to shove him off me.

It was like trying to push an immovable force.

After a couple awkward seconds of shoving with no results, Scorpius released me and walked away slowly. The bastard was definitely emphasizing that he was leaving by choice and not because I’d made him.

“That doesn’t even make any sense,” I said with annoyance as he took his seat.

Arms crossed in front of his chest, Scorpius sat back in his chair and smirked. “It’s not my problem if you’re not smart enough to get it.”

Please. We both knew I was intelligent.

I sucked in enchanted smoke and tossed back at him, “They muddy the waters to make them seem deep.”

It was Jinx’s favorite quote from Nietzsche.

Scorpius speared a piece of steak with his knife and brought it to his lips. “Sounds like something someone would say if they didn’t understand.”

He chewed aggressively.

I opened my mouth to reply but stopped as John huffed and took his seat next to me. “What did I miss? What don’t we understand?”

“Our souls are corrupted, and we’re awful people,” I said at the same time that Scorpius replied, “Arabella let a pathetic sheep tell her she was a bad person.”

Malum made a weird growling noise, and Orion raised his eyebrows at me.

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously, we’re not the good guys,” I said sarcastically.

John scooted his chair closer to me. “We kill because someone has to do it. That doesn’t make us evil.”

I choked on the piece of broccoli I’d shoved into my mouth. Swallowing thickly, I said, “Uh, we’re definitely evil.”

As if I’d entered an alternate universe, everyone at the table burst into laughter. Loud, boisterous chuckles.

The demons slapped the table.

The kings clutched their stomachs.

John clapped me on my back and grinned. “Good one, bestie. That’s like saying that fire in the hearth doesn’t scream.”

“Could you imagine *not* hearing the screams of the dying?” Scorpius

sneered between laughter.

The men shook their heads and chuckled harder.

He confirmed what I'd already deduced: we all heard the screams of the dying in fire because we were killers.

We'd all done horrible things.

The men laughed harder and clapped one another on the back. Everyone in my legion was completely delusional.

They wiped tears of mirth out of their eyes like the idea of them being evil was funny.

I stared down at the table with horror.

Holy sun god, they didn't know they were villains?

I was the sanest person at the table.

A twisted, oily sensation expanded in my gut as my teammates kept laughing.

I pressed my pipe between my lips, tipped my head back, and whispered the inscription that was carved in small lettering on the floor of the fae palace.

The one I'd stared at for hours as my teeth chattered and my muscles cramped in the aftermath of torture.

May the sun god save us from ourselves.

CHAPTER 36

ARAN

SADIE FINDS OUT

Metamorphosis—Day 50, hour 14

“**Y**eah, and then John came back two days ago,” I said to Sadie as I jogged beside her.

Well, Sadie jogged.

I walked.

It wasn't even a brisk walk. I was moving at a slow stroll.

Sadie pumped her arms aggressively like that was going to give her momentum. Poor girl could enslave a man with her blood and shift into a monster cat but couldn't move faster than a granny shuffle.

At this point, I was 80 percent convinced she was faking it.

It was physically impossible for someone to move as slowly as she was. It had to be a ruse.

Sadie gasped for air and said, “No way, so they really are twins.” She stopped running and keeled over with her hands on her legs.

So far, we'd run back and forth along the shore twice. Half a mile at the most.

Sweat poured off Sadie's face like we'd run fifty miles. *How is that even possible?*

She needed medical help.

I kicked a pebble into the roaring surf and pointed out, “I don't think leaning over will help you move faster.”

Sadie glared at me as she spat out a thick glob of mucus.

I stretched my arm above my head, needing to release some restless energy because watching my friend struggle with basic fitness was surprisingly boring.

“You’re such a drama queen,” I said.

“Sorry not all of us—” Sadie coughed and choked. “—have the body of a horse.”

I stared at her. “Did you just compare me to a horse?”

“Your—” She choked on a juicy cough. “—legs come up to my armpits.”

I put my hands on my hips and stared down at my vertically challenged best friend. “That doesn’t mean you get to call me a horse. That’s just rude.”

She made a stupid face and asked, “Isn’t that why you named your crow Horse?”

I gaped at the woman I called a friend. “I didn’t name my crow Horse because I thought I was a horse. How does that make sense?” I kicked another rock into the sea. “Super rude.”

“Grow up.” Sadie leaned forward and puked.

I rolled my eyes and moved aside. “You have an actual issue. This is literally disgusting.”

“That’s what—” Sadie vomited aggressively. “—a horse would say.”

I shook my head and turned my back to her as I said, “You know, a few weeks ago, we had to run fifty miles, *then* do more training afterward. And no one got sick like this. You didn’t even do one full lap.”

Sadie moaned, “No one cares.”

Dragging my fingers through wild curls, I surveyed the island and imagined what it would be like if I didn’t have friends.

Life would be peaceful.

The only blessing was at least I wasn’t having to train with the rest of my team.

A few yards away, they hoisted boulders alongside Sadie’s mates. Apparently, all the men had woken up today and thought, *I want to lift something and put it down for literally no reason.*

I’d said it before, and I’d say it again: men were deranged, and they should all be shot. On sight. No questions asked.

Once Malum had announced we were lifting, I’d spent the morning mentally preparing to impersonate a pack mule.

However, the sun god had intervened on my behalf.

Bless up.

I lifted one boulder, and all the stitches on my arm had pulled open. Blood had gushed down my arms, and I'd fallen to my knees, gasping.

Everyone had freaked out.

Malum had burst into flames, Scorpius had yelled obscenities, Orion had taken the boulder from my hands and tossed it away, and John had wiped at my arms frantically.

Zenith's and Vegar's wounds had also pulled open, but they'd smiled like they enjoyed the pain and hoisted boulders faster.

Malum had forbidden me from lifting and gone on a five-minute rant about how I needed to take care of myself, and blah, blah, blah.

Truthfully, I'd stopped listening as soon as I'd realized he was the one speaking.

When he'd concluded having his mental breakdown, I'd saluted him with my middle finger and walked away.

That was how I now found myself dealing with my best friend's antics.

Since I was too injured to lift, and Sadie liked to pretend to be a weak woman to get out of any manual labor, the two of us were jogging back and forth across the rocks near where the men trained.

At least, that was the plan.

I'd forgotten that my friend had the endurance of an asthmatic suffering from tuberculosis.

Vomit splashed across the rocks, and I plugged my nose. This could *not* be good for her health. I joked about it, but I was concerned for her.

Sadie groaned miserably. I sighed and did what any good friend would do.

I walked fifteen feet away down the shore, lay down on some rocks, and pretended I didn't know her.

Spreading my arms and legs wide, I inhaled deeply.

Salty sulfur burned my nose.

The howling winds pushed against the black cloud cover, and the dark sky rolled tumultuously.

The clouds seemed angry.

Black contrasted with red and made everything glow.

The supposed incoming storm was all that anyone seemed to want to talk about inside the academy. Students whispered about it like it was the coming of the sun god himself.

This morning, I'd watched incredulously as servants boarded up the

windows with enchanted pieces of wood. There was literal lightning in the halls; I was pretty sure the academy could withstand a little thunder and rain.

My guess was that everyone was freaking out because there were never any weather changes in this realm.

Now, with the windows boarded, the black marble halls of the academy had a cave-like feel.

It was dark and peaceful.

I repositioned my neck to get more comfortable on the rocks. Closing my eyes, I sighed contentedly as the sea sprayed against my clammy, abused skin. Waves roared and hammered the shore.

Thunder boomed high above.

I opened my eyes, but it wasn't the fabled storm.

It was the angels.

They were little specks amid the clouds that resembled the wind fae action figures other kids had played with. The crown princess hadn't played with toys. Obviously.

Ice swords clashed, and a CRACK echoed loudly through the sky.

Crystal wings flapped, and feathers clattered.

I unfocused my eyes until the entire group of angels was a pretty blur of light blue.

The angel with the feline features and mismatched eyes folded his wings and plummeted downward toward the raging sea.

I refocused my eyes.

Inches from the waves, his wings shot out, and he hovered above the sea, glaring directly at me.

I scowled back.

He streaked upward like a missile, and his movement defied gravity.

I shivered at his little display of insane power.

From what I'd seen of the angels in the Legionnaire Games, there was nothing like them in all the realms. Wind fae could sustain flight but only for minutes at a time before it depleted them.

Other species had wings, but no other sentient creature could fly. Not like they could.

The angels were unique.

They were built to rule the skies.

Lying spread-eagle on the rocky shore while my best friend gagged a few feet away, I was hyperaware of how different I was from the angels.

What would it feel like to be so powerful that you could defy the laws of physics?

You could see it in the way the angel legion walked, with their chins pointed up and noses in the air, they knew they were better than everyone else. Leagues ahead. They were a species that was more myth than reality.

In every realm angels were synonymous with the gods.

The rocks beneath me dug into my enchanted wounds as blood continued to seep from the multitude of stitches I'd pulled.

I was a lowly ice fae.

I'd known the truth from the first second my back had cracked beneath Mother's wounds—I wasn't all-powerful like Sadie.

Was the feeling of strength euphoric? Maybe that was why I was depressed?

I was weak.

Above, an angel swooped downward with their wings expanded wide as they thrust their seven-foot sword straight in the air. Flames jumped off the blue ice.

I wished I had a paintbrush and artistic talent, to capture the moment of ice against clouds.

It was glorious.

How could they not be the chosen generals for the war? They were the perfect awe-inspiring symbol for the masses. A physical representation of hope and beauty.

The angels were proof that there was a greater civilization to be had. A more majestic one.

I'd follow the angels into battle.

Goose bumps erupted across my skin because I had a feeling I'd live to experience it.

"Okay, I'm good," Sadie panted unconvincingly as she ambled over to leer down at me. "Let's walk around the perimeter of the island. I need a cooldown."

I shook my head and closed my eyes. "We can't. I have to stay in proximity to the kings."

Silence.

My eyes shot open as I realized what I'd inadvertently revealed.

Sadie's catlike features seemed sharper as she asked softly, "Why can't you leave their proximity, Aran?"

I sighed.

Pulled my pipe from my pocket and pressed it between my lips.

I held both hands up in the air in the universal “calm down” gesture. “No need to freak out.”

Sadie smiled. “Oh, I’m calm.”

Horse cawed and shot up. He streaked away toward where the angels sparred, like he was afraid of Sadie.

I sighed and tried to give off calm energy.

“Remember that life takes different paths for different people.” I chose my words carefully. “And some paths may seem more oppressive or unfair from a certain perspective. But it all works out in the end.” I pursed my lips as I thought about it. “Maybe. Probably not. But let’s just say for argument’s sake that it does.”

Sadie’s white hair whipped back and forth in the wind. Her ruby eyes glowed, and the outline of a saber-toothed tiger shimmered around her as she asked, “And has it all worked out for you?”

She smiled, and it wasn’t a friendly expression.

This was exactly why I could never find the right moment to tell her.

I blew out a smoking gun. Pop. The smoke bullet poofed harmlessly off my forehead.

“No, Sadie, it obviously hasn’t,” I said sarcastically.

“You have five seconds to explain, or I’m going to leap to”—a low rumbling roar rattled her chest—“some terrible conclusions.”

I studied my cuticles.

Clucked my tongue.

Pursed my lips and blew out a raspberry.

Sighed.

“ARAN, EXPLAIN!” Sadie alpha-barked.

I scoffed and watched an angel spread her wings and spiral on a column of air. “I’m not a shifter. That doesn’t work on me.”

Horse mimicked the angel’s movement on the breeze. He spun out of control, and I gave him a thumbs-up.

I inhaled smoke.

Sadie snatched the pipe from my lips and held it in the air. “Explain or I’ll snap it.”

I stilled. “You wouldn’t.”

The outline of foot-long teeth flickered on her face. “Don’t test me.” I’m

pretty sure that was a new thing for her.

I hit my head backward so my skull knocked satisfyingly against the rocks. “You’re such a cunt.”

“Aran,” Sadie warned and grabbed the pipe with both hands.

“Aren’t you supposed to be all tired and exhausted after”—I held up two fingers and made air quotes—“running?”

The rumbling noise in her chest intensified.

“Fine, I’ll tell you.” I caved. “Give me the pipe first.”

“No.” Sadie bared her teeth. “Tell me and I’ll give you the pipe.”

I hit my head harder as I tried to stall. “Sun god, you don’t have to be such a bitch about it.”

Sadie bent my pipe between her hands.

“Simmer down.” I winced as I ambled to my feet and sighed heavily. “You want to know the truth?”

Sadie bent my pipe until it was in a *U* shape.

I closed my eyes and got it all over with.

“My-father-is-Lothaire-and-he-made-me-get-a-tattoo-on-my-hip-that-enslaves-me-to-the-kings-so-I-can’t-leave-their-presence-without-pain.”

Sadie blinked, and her shoulders lowered. “Was that so hard?”

I narrowed my eyes.

Her posture was relaxed.

She seemed calm.

I snatched the pipe from her hands and inhaled greedily. “I’m surprised you’re taking it so well. I was afraid to tell you because, you know, sometimes you can be a little...” I spun my finger in the air around my ear.

“I don’t know what you mean?” Sadie smiled.

I rubbed at the back of my neck with chagrin. “You’re right. I forgot that between the two of us, you’re the pleasant one.”

She chuckled.

“Sorry for projecting,” I said as I felt like a fool for waiting so long to tell her.

Sadie smiled bigger. “Yep, I’m the happy friend, and you’re the grumpy friend. That’s why we work.”

I nodded and twirled my pipe between my lips and tried to change the topic. “So what do you want to do now?”

Sadie turned slowly and faced where both our teams were lifting boulders. “I want to return the favor.”

I paused, my pipe dangling from my lips.

Sadie rolled up her sleeve and dug her fingernails into her forearm. The blood coagulated into a ball and hovered in the air, and her ruby eyes glowed so brightly it was hard to look at her.

Her spine straightened.

Her posture wasn't natural, and I knew without a doubt what she'd done.

The bitch had flipped the switch in her brain that she called the numb. The one that made her an emotionless killing machine.

"Come on," I whined and stomped my foot. "Don't do this. This is why I didn't want to tell you things!"

Sadie snarled and sprinted toward the men.

Fast.

"Now you can run?" I shouted as I sprinted after her. "Don't you dare do this."

"You!" Sadie ignored me and pointed at Malum.

He looked behind him and pointed at his chest with confusion.

"What are you doing, Princess?" Ascher asked as he stepped in front of Sadie.

Sadie hooked her leg around his and used her momentum and the element of surprise to send his tattooed body flying through the air. It was comical with their size difference, and I would have been proud if she weren't having a full-scale meltdown.

That was the thing about my best friend.

She was my opposite—sunshine and happiness, full of jokes and laughter. Until she wasn't.

Then she was death incarnate.

When she snapped, it was like looking in a mirror. I recognized myself in her. She was unfeeling. Cold.

"Can we talk about this?" I yelled over the wind.

Sadie raised her arms forward and flung her blood at the kings.

Bone slammed against rock.

Malum, Scorpius, and Orion fell to their knees.

"Sadie, let them go." Jax rubbed his hands over his face with exasperation. "We've talked about this."

John and the demons backed away from Sadie slowly.

Cobra arched his brow and sauntered over to her. "What did they do?"

Sadie spoke slowly, and her scratchy voice was raspier than usual.

“They’ve enslaved Aran.”

Cobra stopped walking. Like a snake, he went perfectly still, and his round pupils flickered to slits.

Before I could blink, Ascher and Xerxes stood on either side of me.

“Is that true?” Ascher asked me, and his horns expanded.

Shhhhhhhhk. Xerxes sharpened his daggers.

I rubbed at my temples. “It’s not like that. Lately, they’ve been better about it. I mean technically, yes, but—”

“*Kneel. Kiss the ground. Beg for forgiveness,*” Sadie’s booming voice echoed across the island.

Scorpius and Orion kissed the rocks.

Malum started to lean forward, but he stopped midbend. Flames exploded across his body. With veins popping out of his neck as he strained, he slowly climbed to his feet. Steel-grey eyes flashed.

“Release my mates,” he growled.

My eyes widened.

No one had broken Sadie’s weird blood mind control before. I was slightly worried that she was all-powerful. I mean, she was forged by the moon goddess herself for war.

Yet Malum was snarling before her.

Enraged.

The knife tattooed on his neck glimmered like it was real metal.

It took a second for all of us to process what was happening, then I moved in tandem with Sadie’s mates.

All five of us flung ourselves in front of her protectively.

“I’m sorry,” Scorpius said mindlessly as he kissed the ground. Orion whispered the same words and also kissed the rocks.

Malum’s flames shot higher into the air until he was an inferno.

Sweat dripped down my forehead.

The heat increased.

“Let them go,” I ordered my friend as Jax reached for her face. She blocked his arm and glared at the bowing kings.

“If he wants to fight—” Sadie laughed hoarsely. “—I’ll fight.”

I gritted my teeth.

Malum took a step closer, embers flew through the air, and the black rocks around him caught fire.

He was a storm.

Of fire.

Red flames expanded until he was an inferno.

There was only one thing left to do.

I swore.

And stepped forward into his path.

CHAPTER 37

CORVUS MALUM

INFERNO

Metamorphosis—Day 50, hour 14

I was going to kill the bitch Sadie.

She had my mates under her control. They were helpless. Defenseless.

My Revered and Protector were kneeling on the ground in an incoherent state.

Sadie dared to mess with an Ignis.

The bitch dared to attack what was mine.

She would learn.

I'd graciously let her live after she'd fucked Arabella, and now she did this? She was dead.

I also didn't like that Arabella was standing so close to her. She reached out and put a hand on Sadie's arm.

They were touching.

It was the final straw. There was no reasoning left.

Just retribution.

An inferno swallowed me whole, and the pressure under my skin mounted.

Sweat poured off my skin as I burned with a fever.

I couldn't see, couldn't think, couldn't feel. If I didn't release my flames, I was going to explode.

Control fell through my fingers like sand.

Disappeared.

There was no mind to calm down, because my mates were in danger.
DANGER.

I would not fail them. I would not fail my Revered again. The bond sickness would not return, because he would *not* suffer. I wouldn't allow it.

She would never touch Arabella. Never again.

I was flame incarnate.

Where the fire began, I ended.

There was no controlling the burn, because it was me.

Sadie would learn what happened when you pissed off an Ignis who didn't have a completed mate bond to help control his flames.

I was chaos.

I was a king.

"Malum, calm down, please." A garbled feminine voice filtered through the crackle of flames.

I opened my mouth to reply.

But there were no words.

Only fire.

It streamed from my mouth like a flamethrower.

Faraway voices swore.

My mates were under attack, and at the end of the day, I was nothing but a vessel to serve them. I was an Ignis. *The* Ignis of the House of Malum. My life's purpose was to defend my mates, but I'd let them fall into harm's way.

The pressure increased.

Red poured off me like every cell in my body was shedding fire.

Scarlet flickered to a dark purple.

I'd never burned so hot.

The pressure climbed, and there was nothing left to do but incinerate the world. I tipped my head back and opened my mouth.

Without the mate bond, there was nothing but a forest of quiet surrounding us.

Now it was the perfect kindling.

Peaceful.

Still.

It was the ideal landscape to release the pressure that tortured me.

Relief was in my grasp.

Arabella's voice flickered through the inferno. "Malum, get control of yourself. Orion and Scorpius are fine. She let them go." She sounded nearby.

That didn't change the fact that she was close to Arabella. That they'd touched. Nothing solved that.

Muscle aches made me tremble, and a horrible sense of weakness made my head spin. I blinked, but sweat and flames clouded my vision.

"Focus on me." Arabella's voice was mere feet away.

I shook from the fever and wept.

It was so painful.

Disorienting.

I tipped my head back and screamed.

All my life, I'd lived with the burden of aching bones and delirium. For twenty-nine years, I'd suffered from fevers.

My life was characterized by blistering pain.

I was supposed to be the strong one.

That was my job.

The leader.

But I was so tired of hurting twenty-four seven. I was exhausted from the countless sleepless nights, the endless quest to push my body to an extreme where the dark thoughts couldn't find me.

I ran to get away from the intrusive voice that constantly told me I'd never find my missing mate, I'd never have control, the fevers would never stop. Life would always be torment.

A part of me feared that my missing mate knew who I was.

Had I unknowingly met them in the past and they'd chosen to walk away? Run. Hide.

Maybe they'd seen how destructive my flames were and how harsh my personality was and they'd been disgusted.

Ignises were special because they wielded the flames of the soul. They were great healers, artists, Renaissance men who pushed culture forward. Sure, they were also elite soldiers because devil culture was brutal and emphasized male discipline and endurance.

Ignises were usually *more*. They had something to offer the world.

Yet I had nothing.

I wasn't more.

I was fire. Incarnate.

How was I supposed to live with that?

Maybe our missing Protector would rather spend an eternity suffering than an eternity in my presence.

Maybe he'd heard the stories about the dark history that tainted the House of Malum.

I was the dark history.

It was disturbingly simple: I'd cried as a baby and engulfed my fathers in flames.

Did my missing mate know that I'd killed my biological father and all his mates? Did he know that the famous Ignis who'd led the House of Malum for centuries had been murdered by his infant son?

Did my mate think I was an unworthy Ignis?

After all, someone like me could never defend my Protectors and Revered. I was destructive.

My father was the proof.

Death by fire.

A dishonorable way to die.

What I'd done was unheard of.

My father had been an extremely powerful Ignis who'd wielded healing fire expertly with his mates by his side for centuries. Yet he'd been burned to death by a mere babe.

A horrible irony.

The worst part of it all—I'd burned my mother after I was born. Scorched the skin off her arms and breasts when I was settled on her chest.

But she'd lived.

And she hadn't told my father or his mates.

Purposefully.

She'd performed her function. Her duty was to birth an heir for the illustrious House of Malum, and she had. Then she'd taken the money and left without a word of warning.

And I'd killed them all.

The sins of my past coalesced with the failures of my present.

The inferno ravaged me as my fever spiked.

It demanded release into the silence.

My fire wanted a freedom that my soul could never have without a soul bond.

I fell to my knees.

Sobbed out flames and begged the fire to take me.

"Breathe. Focus on my voice." Arabella was inches away.

Scorpius's voice was beside hers. "You are in control. You control the

flames. They are you. They don't rule you, you rule them. Concentrate, my Ignis."

"Concentrate on me." Orion's lyrical voice was so sweet it hurt.

If I could let the flames consume me, I would. I'd have done so years ago. The problem was the fire didn't want to hurt me; it wanted to hurt everyone else around me.

It always left me unscathed.

If it weren't for my mates and their powers, my fire would murder indiscriminately.

I was a killing machine. An abomination.

With Scorpius and Orion, I was justice.

Now I was detonating.

I opened my mouth to tell my mates to step back, but purple flames shot higher into the air.

Someone swore.

This was the end.

I closed my eyes, tears of fire streaking faster down my face. Ashes and smoke surrounded me.

There was no returning from this.

I'd lost all pretenses of control.

Even if my mates tried to activate their powers, it was too late. There was an order to things. Orion had to activate his powers first for all of us to be in tandem.

It was hopeless.

Icy pain streaked across my arm, and I looked down in slow motion. A blue crystal dagger was sticking out of my bicep.

Time stood still.

Silence wrapped around me like an icy blanket.

My aching arm cramped as it froze.

Iced over.

Cold streaked through my boiling veins like an electrocution of frost. I convulsed and tipped face forward.

My head slammed into hard rock, and blood splattered across my face as my nose shattered on impact.

I breathed roughly.

Mouth half-open and plastered against the rocks, I inhaled pebbles and grime. I didn't care.

I no longer shook with a fever. My flames were extinguished.

Breathing greedily, I replaced the taste of ashes with fresh oxygen. The raw sensation of breathing fire still burned my lungs.

The flames that were pouring from my eyes turned to water. Tears felt cool against my fevered skin.

Hands grabbed my shoulders and hoisted me up.

The world tipped and spun.

Embers fell to the ground around me.

I coughed, and smoke exploded from my lips. I'd never felt so much like the dragon crest that represented the House of Malum.

The pads of my feet were raw.

My thighs cramped as I tried to support my weight, and I tipped forward.

This time, arms wrapped under my shoulders and caught me.

The silence was loud.

My skin crawled with the wrongness of the moment.

I'd lost control.

Everyone had seen me fail. I'd embarrassed my mates.

I hadn't protected anybody.

Something jostled in my bicep, and I got a better look at the stalk of the crystal hilt that protruded from my skin. It was irregularly shaped.

A thin hilt stuck out, and a thick, flat blade was stuck inside me. It was almost paper-thin.

Arabella's dagger was in my arm.

"You're okay, I've got you, Corvus," Scorpius whispered as he dipped his dark head low and kept his strong arms wrapped around me protectively.

I was a dead weight, but he supported me like I wasn't seven feet of muscles.

His pale skin contrasted with my darker bronze, and the heady scent of bergamot calmed me.

Scorpius trailed his fingers across my forehead and wiped the sweat off my brow.

I relaxed against him.

There was something intoxicating about Scorpius because he was a Protector through and through. He'd been by my side since puberty, and he always picked me up. No matter how ugly things got, Scorpius was there.

"Relax against me, don't worry," he said as he carried me.

I leaned harder against him as I gasped with shaky lungs.

To the rest of the world, Scorpius was cruel. He liked pain and wasn't afraid to tear a person to shreds. He was made of sharp edges, like the blade tattooed across my throat.

Weaker men were afraid of his energy because he was strength incarnate.

I turned my head. Rested my lips against the side of his neck and whispered, "Thank you," so quietly that only he could hear.

His fingernails dug into my side and created little pinpricks of pain.

It had always been how he showed that he cared.

Digging his nails into skin was his way of saying *I love you*.

I moved my head infinitesimally so he could feel me nuzzle his neck, but nobody else would be able to tell what I'd done.

That was how Scorpius and I operated.

Over the years, we'd perfected the act of creating a show of strength at all times, while leaning on each other for support in a myriad of small ways. Little stolen touches. Just enough to calm our fire but not too much to drive us mad.

Since puberty we'd walked a tightrope.

But we walked it together.

"That was wild." A raspy female voice brought me back to the present, and I realized I had an audience.

The shifter legion gaped at me.

Arabella stood beside Scorpius and stared at me with worry.

"Here," Orion whispered, then pulled his hoodie over his shoulders so his golden abs were on display. He knelt at my feet and wrapped it gently around my waist.

Even in this state, mentally and physically destroyed, I swallowed thickly and had to look away from the sight of him offering himself before me.

A Revered was supposed to be taken care of.

But he took care of me. All the time.

Orion gently knotted the fabric around my waist and adjusted it so I was fully protected.

It was so wrong, but a part of me liked when Orion took care of me.

I liked that all three of us had one another's backs.

I was a shitty Ignis.

"Really, are we sure we want to cover..." The future dead cunt named Sadie gestured with her hands toward my crotch. "All that?"

Had she not disrespected me enough? Had she no mercy?

Scorpius and Orion turned to her with a snarl.

Arabella dragged her hands over her face, then smacked Sadie on the shoulder. “Really?” she asked her with exasperation.

I didn’t like that she touched her.

I liked that she glared at her.

Good.

Hopefully Arabella would realize how much of a bitch she was. The memory of them fucking in the shower made my hands fist, and I focused on my breathing.

Before one of my mates could lose their cool and attack the woman for ogling me in my weakened state, Sadie’s mates pulled her behind them and blocked her view.

The shifter legion launched into a furtive, whispered argument that I was too drained to care about. One of them hissed, and knives were drawn.

Let them kill one another.

“Are you okay, big guy?” Orion mouthed as he touched my cheek gently. “That was terrifying.”

I nodded and tried to stand up straight so I would appear strong for him.

I doubled over and coughed out clouds of ashy smoke.

“We need to get him back to the room so we can take out the dagger safely,” Scorpius snarled and walked faster as he supported me.

A mess of curly blue hair came into my field of vision. “Uh, sorry about that.” Arabella rubbed her arms. “I panicked and knew that my daggers were made of ice and just thought, what the heck, might as well, and then before I knew it, I was—”

“Stop apologizing,” Scorpius snarled at her.

Arabella’s jaw clicked as it slammed together, and her shoulders slumped.

She nodded and turned away to go back to the shifters as we limped toward the academy.

A loud whimper echoed.

Must protect. Must keep her safe. She is mine.

We jostled to a stop, and I swallowed a moan of pain as my muscles cramped from the sudden movement. Orion lunged forward and grabbed me to keep me upright as my mate turned.

Scorpius’s voice was laced with venom. “Come with us. Now. Stop walking away.”

Arabella jogged and stumbled toward us. "Sorry," she gasped. "I forgot."
She stared up at me with wide dark-blue eyes.

She looked heinous, like a war prisoner who'd spent months being tortured for information.

The Legionnaire Games were tearing her to shreds.

An unfamiliar emotion made my throat close and my breath shake.

It hurt to look at her.

Protect her. Do better.

She studied me like she was looking into my soul, and I felt my face heat.
Lately my blasted cheeks were constantly on fire.

I closed my eyes from embarrassment.

I tried to help support myself as Scorpius and Orion resumed dragging me toward the academy.

I reached my hand out to the side pathetically.

For long moments, I thought she wouldn't take it, but icy fingers wrapped around my much larger hand.

Arabella's skin was a sharp contrast to my clammy skin.

I wrapped my fingers tightly around hers.

She didn't let go.

Memories of her resting against me in the shower flashed through my mind. Her lean, powerful body had completely relaxed as she closed her eyes and smiled while I soaped her hair.

Such a small interaction.

Fuck, the most I'd done was kiss along her jawline.

Yet it had felt more intense and potent than any fuck I'd had since I'd gotten to the academy.

By the time we finally made it back to the room, I was shaking. My skin was ice cold, but I convulsed with hot flashes.

It was too much.

When Arabella released my hand, I made a pathetic sound of distress.

Orion pulled out one of the bloody mattress pads from the competitions, and Scorpius laid me down gently onto the makeshift cot.

Orion, Scorpius, and Arabella paused above me. They looked at one another with wide eyes.

"Do it. Pull it out now," I ordered.

Arabella nodded and looked down at me with determination as she leaned forward.

I swore. “Not you.” I gritted my teeth. “Scorpius.”

Her bruised eyes filled with hurt.

Scorpius nodded as he understood what I was saying and forcibly pulled her back. “Turn around,” he ordered her. “Don’t watch.”

Orion shoved a strip of leather between my teeth. It was indented from where Zenith had bitten down as we stitched him three days earlier.

I nodded up at Orion, who used his body to shield Arabella’s view.

Grateful that he also didn’t want Arabella to have to see this.

My mates and I had talked about it at night. None of us liked how she was being targeted in these games.

There was purposeful hazing and power dynamics—sometimes you had to use force to make your point—but what was happening to Arabella was cruel. Pointless.

For some reason, the gods had singled her out.

They were targeting her.

She was falling apart before our eyes, and we could do nothing to help.

It was infuriating.

And I wasn’t so conceited that I couldn’t see that Arabella had saved me by using her ice fae powers to stab me. That was why I didn’t want her removing the dagger. She didn’t need more guilt and pain heaped onto her already fragile state.

Not today. Not because of my weakness.

Scorpius nodded down at me. “Breathe in through your nose.”

I sucked in air.

My chest expanded.

He gripped the hilt of the dagger. “Now bite down.” In one smooth motion, he ripped the blade from my skin. Metal razed flesh.

My teeth cracked.

I bellowed into the leather strip, and my back arched off the ground as I planted my heels and screamed.

Scorpius pressed cloth over the wound to stop the bleeding, and the sensation was worse than getting stabbed in the first place.

I writhed in agony.

What type of power was in her dagger? It was not normal ice.

Arabella tried to turn around, but Orion stood strong with his thighs parted, and he blocked her view with his golden body.

Scorpius’s face contorted with concentration as he used his full strength

to stem the bleeding. “I got you,” he promised.

I tried to nod.

Ice sizzled as it mixed with fire in my veins. I boiled alive.

Tears streamed down my face.

If it weren’t for my mates surrounding me, I wouldn’t have found the will to fight through the pain.

But they were there, so I bowed my back, planted my feet, and gritted through it.

I left broken pieces of my teeth on a leather strap.

But I kept fighting.

For them—my Protector and Revered.

I was an Ignis.

Even if my destiny was that of pain.

I would wield my power, and I would not fail my mates.

Not while I lived.

CHAPTER 38

ARAN

THE CHOICES WE MAKE

Metamorphosis—Day 55, hour 5

I woke up to a body choking beneath me.

My bruised forearm was digging deep into John's windpipe and crushing off his flow of air. He was pressed into the bed with a crimson face.

As I stared down, a horrible sense of foreboding washed over me.

What a way to start the day.

John opened his bulging eyes and flashed brilliant white teeth. He grinned at me like he wasn't asphyxiating by my hand, and his dimples stood out in stark relief.

Had his eyelashes always been so long and full?

John's grin turned cocky, and he winked at me like he was the one on top.

I exerted more pressure and asked, "Why am I in your bed?" My morning voice was rough and scratchy.

Last night, I'd fallen asleep on the floor with a comforter wrapped around me. John had tried to pull me into the bed, but I'd snarled and fought until he'd climbed in alone. I'd fallen asleep with his face hanging over the side of the bed, glaring down at me.

I knew I'd done the right thing.

Sure, things seemed good between us, but we still hadn't talked through everything that had gone down. I didn't feel comfortable with the situation even if he said it was fine.

There was a constant pit in my stomach.

I was waiting for John to dwell on what had happened and hate me.

Sleeping separately was the least I could do to protect myself.

At least, that had been the plan.

For some reason, I'd just woken up on top of him.

John smirked casually beneath me, like we were just two friends hanging out and his face wasn't still turning three shades of purple.

I loosened the pressure a little. "Explain, John."

He arched an eyebrow tauntingly. "My bestie doesn't sleep on the floor." Something intense flickered in his eyes. "You sleep in my arms."

I forgot how to breathe.

Every day, the sheer gall of men astounded me.

"Don't say things like that." I tensed my thighs and leaned forward. "I have half a mind to finish you off right now." I increased the pressure so my full body weight was flush against him.

John tipped his head back, and his Adam's apple pressed into my palm. He chuckled, and his warm skin vibrated.

My toes curled.

Zips of concentrated pain streaked down my spine.

I froze.

John took advantage of my momentary pause, and with disturbing strength, he broke my choke hold and flipped us over.

I was at his mercy.

Pinned beneath his warm body, I drowned in sandalwood and musk.

"Next time," John drawled lazily as his hooded eyes twinkled, "try to put up a fight, Aran. That was embarrassing."

I bared my teeth and jackknifed my legs at his shins.

"Tsk, tsks." He pressed his hips forward so I couldn't move.

A hardness dug into my lower stomach.

The zips of pain became shooting streaks.

My vision blurred, and I struggled against his hold with all my strength.

John didn't move an inch.

He leaned closer and wrapped his arm around my head. A network of veins trailed across his hands and stuck out in stark relief against his forearms.

I forgot how to breathe.

Somewhere along the way, I'd stopped viewing him as just a friend. He was an extremely handsome man that I spent every waking moment of my

life beside.

Agony.

John rubbed his fist against the top of my head and ruffled my curls. “Where I’m from, we call this a noogie.”

I tried to speak, but he adjusted his arms so his veiny forearm was pressed against my mouth, gagging me. “Fshivjnavuq.” My voice was garbled.

“What was that, bestie? I can’t hear you.” John taunted.

I opened my jaw wider.

Then bit down hard until copper flooded my mouth.

John let out a low, rough noise.

I pulled my head back. Blood dripped down my chin, and I spat it out.

The muscles pinning me to the bed tensed, and John whispered, “Did I say you could spit?”

It took my brain a second to process what he’d said.

When I did, the pain exploded like grenades down my spine.

I made a mental note to add it to my list of times I’d been sexually harassed by my teammates.

I didn’t know who I was filing a complaint with, but someone in the High Court would be hearing from me.

“You’re such a pervert,” I said with a nonchalance I didn’t feel as I punched him in the kidneys and strained to push him off me.

Sometimes I forgot that John was a feared assassin with whipcord, steel muscles.

Now I remembered.

The thighs pinning me to the bed could run for miles, and the arms wrapped around my face had snapped the necks of ungodly.

John’s fingers caught on my curls, and he started rubbing my scalp. “Please, you know you love me.”

My sleepy brain ignored his erratic behavior and purred with delight.

I closed my eyes. “Ugh, that’s good.”

John’s fingers were magic.

The streaking agony down my spine was expected.

The duality of man—pain and pleasure.

After a few minutes of absolute bliss, John said something I missed under his breath, and he pulled away.

“No.” I opened my eyes. “I didn’t say you could stop.”

John licked his full bottom lip and grinned. “What do I get in return?”

“We’ll strike a deal.” I slapped at his limp fingers to try to get him to start massaging again. “You give me a head massage every day, and I’ll laugh at all your bad jokes.”

John slapped me back. “But you already do that?” He whined. “I need a better reward. How about you massage me back?”

I shook my head. “We both know you stink half the time and are too tired to shower. No way am I touching your nasty, sweaty ass. At least I’m always clean.”

John trembled dramatically. He threw his shoulders back like he was taking multiple bullets to the chest, then he flopped backward onto the bed. “How you wound me.”

I rolled out of the way and narrowly avoided being crushed.

What I didn’t say was that I low-key loved the scent of John’s natural musk.

After a long day of training, with adorably, messy hair, he always collapsed into bed with a grin while reeking of sandalwood and salt.

John chilled and went with the flow, and sometimes that meant falling asleep without showering.

Not relatable.

My smile faltered, and I picked at my lip.

I didn’t shower to be clean. I showered because I was covered in a grime that no amount of scrubbing could get rid of.

Also, I enjoyed singing moodily under the spray.

The demons had once walked in on me making up a song and we’d mutually agreed to never speak of it again. Since I’d gone off on a lyrical tangent and had rhymed “dying alone” with “traffic cone” it was probably for the best.

Some things were better not discussed.

Now John popped up above me and pulled my fingers gently away from my lip. He nudged my shoulder and asked, “What does the Greek symbol ligma stand for?”

I raked through my knowledge of the Greek alphabet. I couldn’t recall anything. “I don’t know. What?”

John’s smile was blinding. “Ligma balls.”

My eye twitched.

This was why everyone hated humans.

“That’s the stupidest”—I punched him in the gut—“joke I’ve heard in my

life.”

He chortled. “I’m not the *idiot* who fell for it.”

He punched me back lazily like a cat playing with its favorite mouse.

With renewed vigor, I tried to get him in a chokehold, but he laughed and easily evaded my grasp.

We rolled around on the bed.

“*Knock it off!*” Malum ordered.

John and I stilled.

The raspy command was disturbingly loud in the quiet bedroom.

“Everyone, up.” Malum stalked half-naked across the room—layers upon layers of back muscle rippled—he flung the bathroom door shut.

It banged against the wall, cracked, and a hinge broke.

The fuzzy memory of him holding me in the shower and telling me that he was going to take care of me played like a bad trip.

In his bed, Scorpius yawned loudly and cuddled Orion against his chest. I tried to ignore the irrational part of me that wondered if they’d ever considered modeling. It was hard to look away from them.

Forcibly shaking the irrational thoughts from my head, I climbed off John’s bed.

Climbed being a generous term for falling over.

“Calf cramp,” I yelped as gravity slammed me to the floor. Sprawled on the rug I massaged my sore leg.

John leaned over the edge of his bed cocooned in blankets and peered down at me. “Eat a banana,” he said unhelpfully.

My eye twitched.

“Great advice,” I said sarcastically as I shivered from a phantom chill and hobbled to my feet.

It was the morning of the fourth competition.

I’d barely survived the last three.

Darkness swallowed me. Colors muted, and I struggled to take a deep breath.

The haze returned with a vengeance.

When Malum left the bathroom, I went to get ready for the awful day. Nerves ate at my stomach, and my hands shook as I dug through my clothes.

The new underwear I’d gotten from a servant last week was already missing.

I was too nervous to care.

Brushing my teeth like a zombie, I grimaced at my reflection in the mirror.

Whatever they were putting in our food to slow our healing rate was highly effective.

They'd said the Legionnaire Games were a psychological competition.

They lied.

I'd never known that bruises could turn a putrid shade of green and purple or that healing wounds got messier as they were reopened.

Now I did.

I didn't bother to run water over my hair to try to define my curls. The turquoise mass was a frizzy nightmare beyond help. The deep cut under my left eye was becoming a permanent fixture on my face.

Fae prided themselves on their beauty and class.

A small smile curled my lips.

In the history of the realms, no fae had ever looked as horrible as I did now. I could guarantee it.

A spark of pride flared.

I pointed my toothbrush at the mirror like a gun and bared my teeth. *Take that, Mother.*

The door opened as Zenith entered, and I whirled around and tried to give off "she's not having a mental breakdown in the mirror" energy.

Zenith scoffed and made a point of choosing the sink furthest from me.

I bowed my head in deference as I passed him.

He narrowed his eyes.

I winked, and he wrinkled his nose like he'd smelled something bad.

He was secretly obsessed with me. I could tell.

Unfortunately, my momentary god complex didn't last long.

It never did.

Ten minutes later I sat at the breakfast table, debating whether I should try to kill the kings and eat my heart before the slave brand saved our lives.

I didn't want to participate in another competition.

I picked at my lip, made a small ball out of the pile of dried skin, and put it in my pocket. You never know when you might need to make some money.

John made bad jokes while I came up with a business plan. It didn't matter that I was technically rich, it was about having an entrepreneurial spirit.

I picked harder.

John smacked my hand away from my lip.

He was probably poor. He didn't understand the hustler lifestyle.

My knee shook under the table.

All the windows in the hall were boarded up, so everything was cast in darkness.

It didn't help.

Across the table, shadows caressed the kings. High cheekbones, sharp jawlines, and sunken cheeks stood out in stark relief.

They looked like the devils they were.

CREAK. WHISTLE.

I dug my nails into flesh and made a concerted effort to not look up at the arched ceiling.

Students tipped their heads back and gawked.

No one spoke.

Even the mutilated man on the tree didn't gurgle like usual.

CREEEEEEAAAAAAK.

I jolted in my seat.

The rafters moaned as winds battered against them, and plates and glasses clattered.

Looked like all the rumors had finally come to fruition.

The storm had started.

I finally understood what all the gossip was about. The noises outside the academy were furious. Punishing. Terrifying.

This was no normal storm.

BOOM.

Thunder cracked, and the academy swayed back and forth from the force of the collision.

The cosmos themselves were falling.

The realm imploding.

Was the moon colliding with the planet?

Food fell off plates and ale splashed all over tables as the room shook.

A branch cracked and fell from the sacred tree. It slammed down atop an unsuspecting royal student, who crashed to the floor, unconscious.

Everyone stared at the limp student. No one helped.

When breakfast finally concluded, a stampede of competitors and students rushed from the hall.

Sadie slammed into me in the crush and asked, "Do you want me to braid

your hair?” She grimaced as she took in my wild curls.

I couldn’t find my voice, so I shook my head to tell her no.

I was too nervous to sit still.

Sadie nodded in understanding and wrapped her arms around me. She squeezed.

Bodies crushed around us, and I inhaled her cranberry scent, grateful for the moment of peace with her.

A gust of wind battered the boards, and a glass pitcher on the table next to us shattered. Pieces splintered around us.

Students shrieked in surprise.

Sadie gripped me harder.

“How dare you touch her?” Malum forcibly ripped me out of her grasp.

I stumbled back, and Orion caught me. He saved my fall, but he didn’t release me. His hands splayed across my shoulders, and he leaned his head into my hair.

Orion inhaled with his eyes closed. “Relax, sweetheart,” he whispered.

I relaxed back into his embrace.

He pressed his soft lips against my temple, and I closed my eyes. His fingers massaged my shoulders.

I relaxed into his touch.

“Did she hurt you?” Scorpius sneered cruelly, and I blinked with confusion. Was he really asking me if Sadie had hurt me? My best friend.

Malum said gruffly, “I don’t want her near you.”

I jolted back to reality.

I didn’t need men to comfort me.

Clearing my throat, I awkwardly stepped away from Orion, who was reaching for me like he didn’t want to let me go.

Sadie made a heart with her hands and blew me a kiss as she disappeared back into the crowd of students. I watched her go for a long moment.

Fear made my heart thump painfully in my chest.

Steel eyes widened at the expression on my face. Malum made a strangled noise as he looked down at me. “I know I overreacted, but I don’t like how she—”

I cut him off and said roughly, “My loyalties will always be to her.” I turned away from the kings and threw myself into the crowd.

Sadie accepted me for who I was, and I accepted her. We always stood up for each other. That was how true loyalty worked.

Bodies pushed and shoved as everyone moved in a frenzy.
Where we were running to, I didn't know.
I bumped against the wall.
Orion yanked me roughly to the side, and I tasted ozone on my tongue.
Lightning struck inches from my skin.
A missed opportunity.
To feel something.
"Be careful," Malum snapped as he manhandled both Orion and me into our room.
Inside the bedroom, seconds crawled by like eons.
I paced back and forth. Stared at the door.
Waited.
When Lothaire finally entered, I stopped breathing. Immediate lung collapse.
Clammy sweat poured from my pits.
I bounced on my feet.
Lothaire's lips moved, and it took my brain a second to pick up the noise.
"The gods have changed the rules for the final competition." His posture gave nothing away.
Different is good.
Lothaire inhaled and breathed out heavily. "Each team captain will choose who competes for their legion."
I rocked back on my heels with relief. Most of my teammates were healthy, and even the demons had mostly recovered. I was clearly the worst choice.
Thank the sun god.
My head spun with lightness.
"However, there's a catch," Lothaire said quietly.
Time froze.
My stomach plummeted, and foreboding slammed into me.
Nothing else had to be said.
I *knew*.
I was doomed.
The haze crept over me, and all the colors dimmed.
Lothaire stared at the wall as he spoke. "The gods have given two teammates for each captain to choose between." He turned to Malum. "You must select one of them."

My hands trembled as I shoved my pipe between my lips.

John shuffled closer.

I took a step away from him.

Lothaire said quietly, "You must choose between Arabella and Orion."

His words echoed like a gunshot.

Seven words. Seven bullets. I took each one to the chest.

No time to dodge.

The trembling in my hands became a full shake, and I pushed my fingers against my bruised eyes.

Everything went white.

Lothaire said something else, but I'd stopped listening. There was a commotion around me, and I barely registered it.

Nothing mattered anymore.

If it were anyone else, I might have had a chance.

Orion was Malum's world.

A few days ago, Malum had lost control and nearly killed us all because he thought his mates were in danger.

This wasn't a choice for our captain.

I'd never had a chance.

Someone jostled against me and knocked my fingers from my eyes.

The room was in shambles.

Lothaire was gone.

The wingback chair was tipped over and lying on the other side of the room. Scorpius restrained Orion, who was bucking and punching, trying to break his hold.

Malum was covered in flames, and his expression was devastated. Like someone had died. John and Vegar gestured wildly at him as they yelled.

He didn't argue back.

Amid the chaos, Zenith stood still and stared at me.

I stared back.

The demon's lips curled down in the smallest frown.

I scoffed and inhaled smoke. I didn't need his pity.

Bang. Crash. Scorpius flung Orion against the wall, then slapped a hand over his mouth.

A muffled, high-pitched sound burned my ears.

Scorpius pressed both his hands against Orion's mouth. Then the blind devil reared his fist back and knocked out his mate with a well-placed blow

to the temple.

Orion slumped forward, and Scorpius caught him.

Shit. I'd never thought I'd see the day they hurt each other.

Across the room, darkness expanded in the air around John as he took a step forward and jammed his pointer finger against Malum's chest.

Flames sizzled as the edge of Malum's sleeve caught fire.

"Let's go," I said through chapped lips.

No one listened.

I fisted my hands. "*Everyone, stop!*"

The men stilled and turned to me.

"I know I'm fighting." My voice cracked. "We need to go before I'm late."

I stalked toward the door.

"Aran," John said at the same time Malum said, "Arabella," and they moved in front of me to block my path.

"Don't," I whispered.

I pulled my shoulders back. Face blank. Eyes dead.

Malum opened his mouth.

I held my hand up to his face and looked away because I didn't need him to give me some weak excuse.

I knew the score.

Malum's jaw closed with a click, and he looked away from me. Pink stained the tops of his cheekbones, and he fisted his hands. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Pain scoured my chest like I'd been stabbed.

I expected it, but still. Wow. Disappointment washed over me because he was so predictable.

So much for him saying he was sorry. So much for him washing my hair in the shower. So much for holding my hand as I lay limp in pain. So much for pretending he was different.

So much for taking care of me.

Men were all the same.

Empty. Promises.

I slammed my shoulder into his as I walked past.

In the hall lightning streaked down in quick succession like it was punctuating the uselessness of the situation.

There was a smacking sound and swearing as John punched Malum.

I ignored my teammates.

With a long puff, I blew out Horse, and he settled onto my shoulder in a cloud of smoke and wings.

He cawed violently. I nodded in agreement.

There was a reason I'd never liked Sadie's romance books.

A man was no woman's savior.

Never had been.

Never would be.

I stepped out into the storm with my head high, and I walked straight into fate's cruel arms.

For the fourth time in a row.

CHAPTER 39

ARAN

A STORM OF HORRORS

Metamorphosis—Day 55, hour 10

“Welcome, competitors, to the fourth competition.” Lothaire’s loud, enchanted voice warped and crackled as it filled the arena.

My eyes watered from the punishing winds.

I leaned forward, thigh muscles straining as I fought to stand upright. Hair whipped my face, and I wished I’d taken Sadie up on the hair braiding.

Across the field, a new one-story concrete structure sat ominously.

It was comically small compared to the towering posts it was positioned between. The new building shimmered with the telltale blue of enchantment, and it had floor-to-ceiling black glass facing the field.

It was a one-way mirror.

At least it wasn’t a window. The gods had spared us the humiliation of having to see everyone gawking at us from safety.

The students, judges, and the rest of the competitors were inside the compact structure.

Six of us stood on the outside.

Unprotected.

Discarded by our captains and thrown into the storm to suffer.

Lothaire spoke from somewhere inside the building, and his enchanted voice echoed across the field. “All competitors must stay within the arena bounds until five a.m. tomorrow. There are no other rules for this challenge. You can use any powers you might need. The competition begins now.”

Doesn't sound too bad. Although, that is a lot of hours.

Thunder boomed.

The grass shook, and I pressed my hand to my chest as my fingers trembled from the rumble vibrating through me.

Black clouds rolled angrily above me.

For the first time since I'd been at the academy, the realm wasn't scarlet. It was black like night had fallen.

Visibility was shit.

I couldn't see the ocean at all, even though I knew it was only a hundred feet away. But I could hear it. Waves bellowed as they slammed against the rocky shore.

Sometimes darkness was peaceful.

This wasn't.

Malevolent noises seemed to multiply in the shadows, and they screamed at me from all directions.

I was hyperaware of how out in the open the arena was. We were sitting ducks with no protection.

Five a.m. tomorrow was hours away.

One, three, five. I counted upward in odd numbers and tried desperately to clear my mind.

The panic remained.

A frigid gust of wind pushed my feet backward, and I dug my heels in as I slid across the grass. Falling to my knees, I scraped my fingernails against the soil to keep myself from being blown away.

I shivered.

Breathed out a puff of frost.

When I'd first stepped outside ten minutes ago, my breath hadn't condensed.

The temperature of the realm was plummeting.

Rapidly.

"We just have to survive a few hours out here. It shouldn't be too bad!" someone bellowed to my right, and their voice was swallowed by the wind.

I pushed my whipping hair out of my face and squinted.

Long blond hair billowed around a muscled figure. The man looked up. Glowing purple eyes met mine.

Sadie's mate Xerxes was hunched over on all fours a few feet away.

I shuffled toward him.

Tensed my abs and dug my numb toes deeper into the soil for purchase. It was excruciating.

By the time I was by his side, my leg muscles were cramping with exhaustion like I'd run thirty miles.

Xerxes's eyes flickered over my abused skin with pity.

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I didn't know what to say. Out of all four of Sadie's mates, Xerxes was the one I was the least comfortable with.

He'd been my mother's assassin.

He'd been the one who'd betrayed us and brought us to the fae realm.

He was the reason "WHORE" was carved into my back. Not that he knew it.

Ascher had at least apologized to me for the part he'd played in kidnapping us into the fae realm. Xerxes had never said anything.

The man hunched over in the wind beside me was the one who'd walked beside my tormentor.

Served her faithfully.

For years.

Xerxes was inches away, but he screamed to be heard. "How could he make you do this when you look like..." He gestured to the bruises and stitches on my face.

For a second, I felt an irrational urge to defend Malum.

I shrugged and yelled back, "It was between me and one of the devils. They're mates. I never had a chance."

It didn't hurt to say the truth aloud.

I felt nothing.

Blank.

Emptiness.

Purple eyes narrowed, and Xerxes scoffed like he disagreed.

"How about you?" I asked.

Xerxes watched me fight with my hair warily, then said, "It was between me and Ascher. I didn't let Sadie choose. I decided."

My eyebrows rose with surprise. "Really, but isn't Sadie usually the one you protect?" Xerxes lay down until his stomach was flat on the grass, and I followed his lead as I yelled over the wind, "I'm sure Ascher could handle himself fine."

Xerxes jerked his head to the side at my words.

His face pinched as he shouted, “He’s my mate. It doesn’t matter what he can or can’t handle. What matters is that I can suffer so he doesn’t have to.”

Sun god. That was romantic.

Thunder boomed, and the grass shook.

“Must be nice,” I whispered, then closed my eyes and started counting.

There was nothing to do but wait.

Two hours later, the wind and thunder stopped.

I blinked open frozen eyelids.

The lawn was covered in a layer of frost.

Visibility was slightly better. The sky was a light shade of gray, and the realm was no longer shrouded in complete darkness.

Xerxes sat up beside me.

I tried to join him but convulsed with chills. My limbs refused to cooperate, and I manually repositioned my legs beneath me.

Xerxes sighed out a cloud of frost.

My teeth chattered with so much force that my jaw ached.

I knew the signs from my time in the shifter realm.

Hypothermia was setting in.

My clothes were a light material that was stretchy for fighting. It offered no protection from the cold.

Rubbing my hands over my arms, I asked Xerxes, “D-D-Do you think-k-k the s-s-storm is over?”

He offered his hand and helped me up.

“I don’t know,” he said with a grimace.

The four other competitors were spread out across the field. Everyone was looking around warily as they stood up.

I dusted frost off my clothes.

BOOM. SHHHHK.

I went still.

It had sounded like thunder, but there’d been a strange crashing noise at the end.

BOOOOOOOOOM. SHHHHHHHHKKKK.

That was the only warning we got.

Snow fell from the sky in flakes so small they were barely perceivable.

I dusted it off me, water pooling beneath my fingers as it melted.

I turned my hand over.

Stared.

Bright red streaked across pale skin.

My brain glitched.

I gasped as I realized what it was.

Holy mother of the sun god.

I stumbled backward and hyperventilated as I ducked my head low and shielded my eyes.

Xerxes studied my hands and asked, "How did you hurt yourself?" Tiny streaks of crimson trailed down his face.

"I-I-I-It's-s-s-s." My teeth chattered from both cold and fear.

"Take a deep breath." Xerxes coached like I was a weak woman that needed his protection.

Red trailed down his hands.

"Glass," I whispered as I looked up at him.

Wetness poured down my face.

Xerxes stopped.

Purple eyes widened.

He looked at my blood-covered face in silence as he touched his own crimson-streaked cheek.

"W-W-We need a p-plan." I took a step toward him and winced as particles of glass lodged in the bottom of my feet.

The visibility was getting worse.

Glass was falling like snow and piling onto the field.

If we left the arena, we failed.

A humorless laugh bubbled up my throat, and my shoulders shook from the cruelty of it all. It was hopeless.

We had to stay out here until morning.

It was freezing.

It was raining glass.

We had no shelter.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOM.

Xerxes and I startled as the loudest rumble yet burned my eardrums.

We stared at each other.

A shiver racked my frame, and I doubled forward with my arms wrapped around my body.

This was so much worse than the other three competitions.

Across the field, the angel competitor pulled two feathers off her wings and sprinted toward the devil competitor. The devil turned and brandished a

flame sword, but he was too late.

She slit his throat with the feathers.

He stumbled.

Fell over.

The angel stabbed both daggers through his neck and pinned the devil to the lawn. Then she sat down beside the body.

I blinked with surprise.

She warmed her hands over his sword. Then pulled the dead body up and over her for protection.

I stepped closer to Xerxes. *What a savage woman.*

I wished I'd thought of it.

The assassin and leviathan competitors whipped their heads back and forth frantically as they realized how dire the situation was.

My fingers throbbed from cold wounds.

"Think, use your brain!" Jinx's voice screamed in my mind.

"D-D-Do you think-k-k she'll sh-sh-share the sword-d-d?" I turned to Xerxes.

"No," he said. "We need to keep our faces pointed downward so we don't get glass in our eyes." He wiped blood off his face ferociously. "And we need a plan."

I nodded like I was thinking as I stared at the ground.

I had zero thoughts.

We were fucked.

Xerxes nudged me, and I realized he was expecting a plan. *When did I become the mastermind of this operation?*

I pressed bloody fingers against my temple.

Think, Aran.

We had no resources. The angel had just murdered the devil competitor. The three other competitors were going to get desperate, and desperate people were unpredictable.

We needed protection.

Think.

Wait, there was one resource we could use. I pointed to one of the towering posts on the edge of the arena.

Xerxes grunted in agreement as he understood my meaning.

I took a step backward and stopped as glass cut the bottom of my foot. Xerxes did the same and stilled.

We were about fifty feet away from the post.

“O-O-On three,” I said as I stared at the ground. I didn’t look up to see if Xerxes agreed with me.

I took a deep, fortifying breath.

“Three,” Xerxes said.

We sprinted forward with our faces tucked downward. Shards of glass particles whipped across our exposed skin. It was seconds, but it felt like minutes.

Finally, we collapsed in front of the post.

Trails of blood marked our path across the lawn.

The wind picked up, and we hunkered lower, the post offered a small amount of protection.

It was better than nothing.

I wrapped my arms around my legs and buried my face in my knees. “N-Now we w-w-wait,” I said.

The pinpricks of glass lessened, and I squinted.

Xerxes was sitting in front of me protectively.

“Y-You d-don’t have—”

“Keep your head down,” Xerxes ordered.

He wasn’t an alpha, but his tone had no room for argument, and I immediately complied.

With my bloody cheek smashed against my thigh, a warm feeling grew. Expanded. It filled my chest.

I was so grateful for Xerxes.

So glad I wasn’t facing this alone.

I was so used to living with the kings that I’d forgotten there were people in the world who helped others even if they weren’t close with them.

Glass particles fell from the sky; the temperature continued to drop; wind blew in a frenzy all around.

With nothing left to do but endure, I resumed counting.

And time crawled forward.

Painfully.

Four hours later my limbs were locked together with numbness and everything hurt from the constant weather conditions.

BOOOOOOOOOOM. SHHHHHHHHHKKKK.

My heart stopped beating at the sudden noise splitting the sky.

I jolted as agony streaked down my arm.

Looked up.

I immediately ducked my head because shards of glass the size of my fist were falling from the sky like daggers.

Pieces of glass piled around my bare feet.

The realm transformed into a crescendo of clattering noises.

I curled in on myself.

Xerxes moved until he was completely cocooning me with his body, and I huddled closer to him with appreciation.

He jerked like he'd been electrocuted, then swore as he ripped a glass shard from his shoulder.

I started to lean closer to him but stopped myself.

My stomach rolled.

Mind racing, my breath came out in shallow pants as the reality of our situation hammered through me.

I analyzed the situation and the pieces clicked together.

I realized what I had to.

For one last moment, I closed my eyes. Leaning forward I took advantage of Xerxes protecting me with his body.

"Do the righteous thing," Jinx whispered in my head. *"Don't be a coward, you know what to do."*

I rocked back and forth.

"Don't be a coward, Aran," I whispered to myself. *Don't think. Just act.*

I didn't move.

Sometimes I hated my brain.

Xerxes jolted against me as another shard of glass buried into his skin.

We still had *hours* until the next morning.

I pressed numb fingers against my eyes and screamed silently. With situations like these, no wonder I was depressed.

I hunkered lower behind Xerxes.

Jinx's voice was frantic in my mind. *"You're the bitch who ate her mother's heart. You're telling me under difficult circumstances, you can turn to cannibalism, yet you can't do the right thing when it's obvious? Embarrassing. You know what to do."*

Xerxes whimpered.

I did know.

I didn't let myself think about it; I acted.

With numb fingers, I shoved the shifter off me.

I shoved away my protection.

Immediately, glass scoured my skin and sliced through my clothes. It burned. I bit down on my lower lip to swallow a shriek as stitches were sliced. Wounds reopened.

My eyes rolled back in my head.

I fell face forward.

“What are you doing? Get under me!” Xerxes yelled.

“Shift,” I whispered. In my experience, shifters could die from enchanted bullets, ice daggers, and blood loss followed by decapitation.

From the size of the glass shards, it was currently a genuine possibility that Xerxes could die.

He grabbed my arms and tried to pull me beneath him.

I resisted and said with more force, “Shift.” My voice was hard and held no room for argument.

“What?” He stilled.

We both knew that since he was an omega, he didn’t shift into a beast like his alpha mates. He shifted into a tiny cat.

His animal form was small enough that I could protect him.

Of course, that would leave me alone. Unsheltered.

Being able to analyze a situation didn’t mean I had to like the conclusions.

I locked my jaw and refused to stutter.

On frozen lips, I spat, “I can’t die out here. You can. Shift into your omega form right now. I’ll protect you.”

We both whimpered and ducked our heads as the glass fell faster from the sky.

Bloody shards lay in a pile around us.

Twitching and breathing roughly through my mouth, I shoved at the glass beside me until there was nothing but a patch of bloody, frost-covered grass.

“I’m not shifting,” Xerxes said roughly, then ruined it by shrieking through his teeth as a piece of glass protruded from the top of his skull. He ripped it out.

I was going to kill him.

I didn’t have the energy to argue.

I wanted to cry.

“If you die, Sadie will kill herself.” I pulled a shard out of my arm. “She isn’t allowed to die.”

My best friend acted all tough, but we both knew that her mates meant everything to her. They'd all suffered and fought for years. They deserved to love one another and have peace.

She deserved more.

Xerxes's purple eyes glowed at the mention of his mate, and his expression shattered.

He looked at me with sadness and pity as glass shards rained around us.

"Fucking shift now!" I screamed, and tears poured down my face. *"I'll live no matter what. You won't!"*

Glass sliced through my skin, and it hurt.

So badly.

I sobbed.

I didn't want to live like this.

By some miracle the air around Xerxes shimmered, and a small, fluffy white kitten poked its head out of a pile of clothes.

He'd transformed into his omega form.

I lunged forward, grabbed his little fluffy body, and pulled him onto the cleared-out patch of grass.

I collapsed on all fours on top of him.

On my hands and knees, he was completely sheltered by my body.

Of course, that meant my back was battered by shards of glass. They slammed against my flesh like missiles and dug deep.

The only mercy was that my body was so cold it muted the pain.

It was all I had.

The wind picked up.

The clattering sound intensified as glass fell faster.

Xerxes mewled quietly.

I pressed the top of my head hard into the icy lawn and bit down on my lower lip as I shrieked into closed lips.

Missiles of pain stabbed my flesh.

I cried.

A raspy tongue streaked across my cheek, and I peeked open one eye to find the most adorable face cleaning blood off me.

"Doesn't even hurt," I whispered to the kitten as I forced a laugh. "Feels good."

Shards buried deeper into my wounds.

I cried.

Xerxes whined.

“Totally.” I choked on a sob. “Doing fine.”

I endured.

Time crawled forward, and my mind wandered as my body suffered.

Intense internal debate culminated with one poignant realization: kittens groomed themselves, so Xerxes had most likely eaten his own butt at some point.

I grimaced as he continued to lick my face.

This was the last straw.

“Okay, I’m clean,” I snapped when the little white face got way too close to my lips for my liking.

It made a small growling noise of distress.

My vision wavered, and I almost collapsed as a thick chunk of glass lodged in my shoulder.

“Fine,” I gasped shakily. “Keep cleaning.”

The kitten purred and licked my eyeball with its sandpaper tongue.

Great, now I was blind in one eye.

How mad would Sadie be if I “accidentally” crushed her mate to death? She’d recover. Eventually.

Purring, white fluff jostled closer to groom my forehead. A tiny wet nose booped against mine.

Clothes sliced off my body, my back was skewered with glass, a kitten licked my eyebrow, and a peculiar sense of relief blossomed.

At least I could save one person.

Glass cut through muscle, cartilage, and bone. I sobbed and shivered.

“I’m so proud of you,” Jinx’s voice said in my mind.

Warmth blossomed across my chest as my teeth chattered from the cold.

I hadn’t failed Xerxes.

Not like everyone failed me.

And just maybe...that was enough.

It had to be.

It was all I had left.

THE LEGIONNAIRE GAMES: REBIRTH

“The path into the light seems dark.”
—Lao Tzu

CHAPTER 40

ARAN

THE CLIMB

Rebirth—Day 56, hour 5

The clattering of glass stopped abruptly. It was as if the realm itself had reached its breaking point and couldn't handle it anymore.

That or the nurses in the psych ward had increased my medication dosage so I was no longer hallucinating sounds.

You could never tell for sure these days.

Either way, eerie quietness prevailed as the storm dissipated like an obscure nightmare.

I blinked, and the world flickered in and out of focus.

Streaks of scarlet dripped down my chin. The liquid was feverishly warm compared to my chilled flesh.

I'd been on all fours for hours, and my cold muscles were locked into place.

Like I was cosplaying as a cow.

The light of the eclipse trickled through the dark cloud cover and refracted off the piles of glass. The lawn sparkled. Smoke rose in lazy tendrils as the cold abated.

Everything was quiet. Pretty.

Tilting my head to the side, I jolted from pain, and my eyes rolled back from the agony.

In the storm's aftermath, I was grotesque.

Grotesquely sexy.

A long time ago—ten minutes earlier in the throes of an intense pain induced delusion—I decided that the key to survival was self-confidence.

The reasoning had made sense in the moment.

Down a tunnel far, far, far away, Lothaire's voice echoed, "The fourth competition is concluded. Competitors must now exit the arena of their own free will."

Free will is an oxymoron. The universe is nothing but a connection of horrors. Everyone is trapped in an endless loop of suffering. No one can escape.

Oh great, I was getting philosophical.

Never a good sign.

A furry body climbed out from beneath me and then a warm hand touched my shoulder.

I tried to turn my head, but I couldn't move.

The force of the pain was paralyzing.

My ravaged fingernails dug deeper into moist soil, and the dirt was soaked in blood, water, and fragments of glass.

Across the steaming field, as a crowd spilled out of a concrete building, shouts and fighting echoed. The noises quieted as the mob stood at the edge of the arena and waited.

I dropped my head and inhaled shakily through my nose.

"Your back," Xerxes said with horror. "There are letters."

The glass storm had shredded the fabric off my back, and my clothes were hanging in tatters off my body.

"You licked my eyeball," I whispered brokenly.

There was a shuffling noise and swearing. Xerxes mumbled something about being mentally unwell and knelt beside me as he said, "I can't carry you. You have to leave of your own free will."

"Please increase my dosage, I'm still hallucinating," I said loudly so the nurses in the ward could hear me.

Xerxes grabbed me beneath my armpits.

"Stranger danger!" I shouted, and he jumped back with surprise.

I blinked rapidly and waited for the hallucinating to end.

"I'll help as much as I can." Xerxes's voice cracked. "What you did for me was—there are no words. I will forever be in your debt."

The hallucinating continued.

Xerxes picked me up by my armpits and held me straight up like a doll.

I narrowed my eyes at him warily and said, “You’re a very emotional man, aren’t you?”

My legs dangled uselessly.

“You’ve been through intense pain,” Xerxes said slowly. “It makes sense that you’re confused and delirious. Just try to stay calm.”

Shredded clothes fell off my frozen body, and I was partially exposed. Glass shards dug into my frozen feet and made my soles burn.

“I’m nude,” I pointed out helpfully.

Xerxes grimaced and averted his eyes. “Try to put weight on your feet. You just have to make it off the arena, and then you’ve survived and it will all be over.”

Liar. It was never over.

Xerxes omega-whined. “Please, Aran. If not for yourself, do this for Sadie.”

My feet touched the ground as he slowly removed his grip.

For a second, I stood straight, then the sparkling field rose to greet me. I smiled at how pretty it was.

Closed my eyes.

Xerxes caught me inches before I face-planted.

He didn’t yell, swear, or get upset like I was used to with the kings. Xerxes picked me up and whispered encouragement as he set me back on my feet.

I nodded.

And fell back over.

Ten tries later, sweat poured down my face uncomfortably and burned my wounds.

“Okay, lock your knees now,” Xerxes said calmly as he took a step away from me.

I snapped my aching legs straight and clenched my butt cheeks tight.

Long seconds passed.

I stood upright and grinned triumphantly.

It was all in the ass.

Xerxes beamed like I’d done something miraculous, and he gestured across the field. The edge of the arena was a long way away.

“Okay.” Xerxes clapped his hands together. “I’m going to go forward and clear the glass. You just follow my path. One foot at a time.”

I shook my head to clear my delirium. I wet my chapped lips and winced

as the moisture burned.

“You don’t have to,” I croaked. Awareness that I’d been acting deranged made me flush. “Uh, sorry about yelling stranger danger,” I said awkwardly.

Xerxes lost his composure.

His princely features darkened, and he snarled, “You’re a queen, Aran, and from what I’ve seen, you’re going to make a great one. You must learn to expect people to serve you. Own it. Don’t apologize.”

I grimaced. Men being nice to me made me feel weird.

It creeped me out.

Xerxes wrapped his tattered shirt around his hand and used it to clear a path through the glass.

“Keep your legs locked,” he ordered. “One step at a time.”

I stared at him with exasperation.

“Now. Right leg,” he barked out.

I obeyed.

Salt burned my lips. Blood burned my eyes and coated my feet, making my steps slippery.

It hurt so fucking badly.

Huffing with what felt like punctured lungs, I followed Xerxes.

As I shuffled slowly across the field, I discovered firsthand why Xerxes had led armies for Mother. He was exacting and demanding, but he was also endlessly patient, and I wanted to obey him.

He was a natural leader.

I hobbled pathetically. Tiny shards that Xerxes had missed stabbed through my sensitive feet.

We proceeded at a snail’s pace, but he never shamed me or complained. Not once.

Halfway across, I narrowed my eyes at a strange structure protruding off the far side of the field.

Xerxes looked back and followed my gaze.

He halted.

We both stared.

The bodies of the devil, leviathan, and assassin competitors were piled in a tentlike structure. The devil’s long femur bone propped them all up.

We looked away at the same time.

Xerxes’s voice trembled as he said, “Left leg, step.”

We continued forward.

Neither of us mentioned what we'd seen.

Minutes later, we finally neared the crowd of students and competitors standing at the edge of the arena.

They watched my pained progression with wide eyes.

Horror on their faces.

My harsh breathing was uncomfortably loud in the silence. I nearly collapsed from the agony in my feet, but I didn't.

In front of everyone, the angel competitor tapped her foot impatiently with a smirk on her face. She was mostly unharmed and looked bored. Around her, the angel legion postured arrogantly with their noses in the air like they were better than everyone else.

They thought they'd be the ones chosen by the gods.

I was half-naked. Frozen. Covered in carnage and gore. Yet I knew in my bones that I'd experienced more in my twenty-four miserable years of life than they had in all their combined immortality.

You could see it in their eyes—wide and clear.

There were no shadows.

You could see it in their actions—the angel competitor had a fifteen-foot wingspan of crystal wings to protect herself with, yet she'd killed the others so she wouldn't have to suffer.

Disgusting.

The angel competitor fell to her knees as she covered her ears. The rest of the angels winced and covered their heads like they were blocking out some sound.

"I needed to protect myself. I'm sorry." She sobbed on the ground as she convulsed like she'd been electrocuted. She babbled incoherently to herself.

Just like their captain had after they'd lost a teammate in the second challenge.

Students backed away from the angels.

When I was ten feet from the edge of the arena, students turned their attention to me and whispered. Even the angel legion looked up from their knees to gape at my appearance.

Half of my chest was exposed, and what was left of my pants was hanging dangerously low on my hips.

I pulled my shoulders back.

Yes, my tit was out.

Yes, my feet were throbbing.

I lifted the corner of my mouth in a smirk.

From their expressions you'd think people had never seen a nipple before.

I stared straight back at them.

It wasn't that deep.

I wasn't the one on my knees convulsing, after all. I was walking of my own free will. Kind of.

"I just want to say," Xerxes said quietly so only I could hear, "I'm really sorry about the role I played in your abduction. I never apologized for serving her. I was a coward."

I licked my cracked lips and tasted copper. "Don't mention it."

"No, I really think we—"

"Please," I cut him off. "Please don't mention it. We're good."

Sun god, were all the shifter men this in tune with their emotions? I'd clearly been around the kings too much because I was having a lot of secondhand embarrassment from him.

Dr. Palmer would just love him.

Who talked about their feelings?

Xerxes nodded and changed the subject. "Right foot forward. You're close."

I hobbled forward.

Finally, we walked side by side between two of the towering posts that demarcated the edge of the arena.

We finished.

Lothaire's voice boomed, and there was an edge of excitement in it. "The fourth competition is concluded. The two legions chosen for the showcase test will be announced tomorrow. The gods will discuss."

A few feet away, Lyla walked out of the concrete structure and glanced over.

Runes shimmered against her dark skin, and her green hair glowed neon. The tiniest smile curled up one side of her mouth.

I didn't smile back.

Dick and Lothaire walked out behind her, and Lyla's expression went flat.

The three of them stepped forward onto an enchanted platform, and they levitated into the air.

My eyelid twitched.

This was why people bullied theater kids. They grew up to do stuff like

that.

“Why do they need to float in the air to discuss it?” I muttered.

Xerxes scoffed in agreement.

A small golden body hurled itself at me and Xerxes. It slammed into my frozen flesh with such force that I bit my tongue, and copper flooded my mouth.

There was so much pain streaking through the rest of my body that the sensation of biting my tongue was borderline pleasant.

A new low.

Sadie trembled against me and gasped, “I was so worried. I almost enslaved the judges to try to save you. I was freaking out so badly. Never do that to me ever again.”

I patted her head and pulled my hand away because her white hair turned pink.

“Thank you, Aran. You saved him.” Sadie pulled Xerxes and me lower so all three of our heads touched.

“Iddng humpfwv,” I grunted.

Sadie patted my head tenderly. “What are you saying, my sweet, precious friend?”

I tried to speak but gagged from the pain.

Jinx walked up behind her with a ferret wrapped around her neck like a scarf. She studied her cuticles. “She said, ‘It hurts,’ you moron.”

Sadie loosened her grip and pulled her head back. “Oh my sun god, I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you say anything, Aran?” She reached up and traced her fingers over an open wound on my jaw.

I saw stars from the pain.

Ever been best friends with a dumbass? Same.

A very humbling experience.

“She needs medical attention.” Jinx walked up, hit Sadie’s hand away, then narrowed her creepy dark eyes on me. “Congrats on not being a complete failure.”

I narrowed my eyes back. “You secretly love me.”

“You sure about that?” Jinx arched her brow.

As I stared down at the annoying thirteen-year-old, a familiar pain twisted through my back.

A crack echoed in my skull.

No. No. Not right now. I can’t.

Something shifted inside my skeleton.

Something bad.

Jinx's eyes widened as she stared at me like she knew something was happening.

Crack. Bones shifted in my back, and I was in so much pain that I did something I'd wanted to do for weeks.

I kicked Jinx.

"Did you just kick a child?" Sadie's jaw dropped, and Xerxes chuckled.

Jinx stumbled from the blow but didn't look surprised.

Sweat erupted across my skin from the harsh movement, and the world swayed. Experience had taught me I had a few minutes before I was inconsolable.

I tipped over.

This time, it wasn't Xerxes that caught me.

"You scared me, Aran. We need to get you back to the room," John said roughly as he pulled his sweatshirt off and gently helped me put it on.

Then he picked me off the ground and held me against his chest.

"Why am I wearing your clothes?" I asked between whimpers of pain.

John made a strangled noise. "I'm preserving your modesty." His voice filled with fear. "I would have gotten to you sooner, but the fucking shifters blocked us from getting to you. Malum was about to light them on fire when they finally let us through."

As he spoke my teammates popped into view around him.

They surrounded me.

"My man, are you okay?" Vegar asked with concern as he leaned closer to take a look at me.

Shivering from pain, I gave him the evil eye.

"Actually, I feel really great right now," I said through gritted teeth.

Vegar raised his eyebrows. "Really?"

I didn't bother to respond.

"Sweetheart," Orion whispered as he stared down at me with wide, watery eyes.

His tender expression shattered as he glared over at Malum, who was partially on fire and couldn't meet my gaze. I looked over at Scorpius, who was dragging his hands over his face tiredly.

Zenith stepped up beside Vegar and leaned close to me. Up close, the inky lines under his eyes expanded and thinned like they were breathing.

“You did not embarrass us,” Zenith said in a clipped tone. “For the most part.”

I squirmed uncomfortably under the weight of his profuse praise.

Everyone was in tune with their emotions today. Was a planet in this solar system retrograding?

Another wave of convulsions made me shake, and John squeezed me and said urgently, “We need to get her inside. Now. Everyone, move.”

The students surrounding us gawked and shuffled to the side, but the crowd was so thick there was barely any room.

I whimpered from the pain.

Malum exploded in flames and roared, “Everyone, clear a path for her or you’re dead.” Fire shot from his mouth into the sky, like a dragon.

A stampede erupted as students shoved at one another, desperate to get away from the unhinged king.

The kings pushed forward, kicking and punching people who didn’t get out of their way fast enough.

The crowd parted, and John jogged through.

When we got into the academy, tears streamed down my face, and I bit down on my lip to swallow a scream.

John began to sprint.

As the torment intensified, everything became a blur of pain and movement.

Vegar brought over a makeshift cot, and John gingerly laid me down on it before the hearth. He said something about needing to see my injuries as he gently tugged his sweatshirt off me.

As I stared at the fire, roaring flames disappeared into glowing embers.

I arched my back.

Screamed.

“We need to flip her over,” Malum barked, and multiple hands reached down to turn me over.

“I’m sorry for everything,” he whispered as he turned me, and I threw up from the jostling.

John pressed a cloth to my face to wipe up the sickness, but midwipe, he halted.

Everyone ceased moving at once, and the room fell creepily quiet.

No one breathed.

The sudden tension was a tangible weight.

Orion whispered something to Scorpius.

“Why,” Malum said roughly. “The fuck.” His teeth clashed together. “Is ‘WHORE’ carved into your back?”

Crack.

I opened my mouth and whispered my darkest secret aloud, “Mother did it. The night before I killed her.”

I sobbed and convulsed. Arched my back and jackknifed my legs.

“What!?” Scorpius bellowed.

I spat out between gasps of pain because apparently, I was feeling very chatty. “She used to light me on fire. For fun. Just like you, Malum.”

In my peripheral vision, the wingback chair burst into flames.

“Aran,” John whispered brokenly.

Someone’s fists slammed against the wall.

Malum made a broken noise, and he stalked over to the bathroom door, ripped it off the hinges, then cracked the flaming wood over his knee.

Orion fell to his knees beside me.

He screamed, and the sound was so high-pitched and lyrical that a headache throbbed in my temples.

The demons backed away from me with horror.

John draped himself across my back like he was hugging me. His large body trembled, and warm tears dripped across my skin.

More pain exploded across my back, and I couldn’t swallow the whimper that burst from my lips.

I bit down on my lip to hold in another scream.

“We need to help her,” Scorpius growled. “Orion, bring the first aid kit. Now!”

There was a loud sizzling. Scarlet flames turned purple, and the bathroom door disappeared into a pile of ashes.

My teammates fell to their knees around me.

Hands held me down.

Fingers pulled bloody glass shards from my back. A needle and thread were pulled frantically through my wounds.

Crack.

Bones shifted in my back, and nothing anyone was doing helped the agony streaking inside my spine.

“Should we try to stitch the letters?” John’s voice trembled.

Zenith said, “Yes.”

I opened my mouth to tell them no, but another bone cracked in my back, and all that came out was a high-pitched scream.

“We need more supplies,” Scorpius said, and there was a commotion as everyone searched the bathroom for more first aid kits and rags. Everyone was distractedly looking.

Malum pressed his lips against my ear and whispered roughly, “I don’t care that your mother’s dead. That is not enough. Whoever served her will burn by my hand. Whoever failed to help you will burn by my hand. Whoever was within a hundred-mile proximity to her when she did this will burn by my hand. I swear it on the honor of the House of Malum. You will be avenged.”

I tried to speak, but my throat was shredded from screaming.

Turning my head to the side, I mouthed at him, “I hate you.”

I didn’t want his vengeance.

I didn’t want anything to do with him.

As I glared up at Malum, silver eyes hardened into molten steel.

He looked at me sadly.

For a long second, he looked soft and young.

Devastated.

Then his expression hardened. “You don’t have to forgive me, just like I don’t have to forgive them. I will make this right for you. You’re not alone anymore.”

Crack. I whimpered from agony and the pain in my heart.

Did he know that was what I wanted?

My deepest desire?

To finally belong. To have a family that loved me unconditionally.

There was a reason I latched onto Sadie and John.

“It’s not that simple,” I whispered. “Everything isn’t black and white.” I panted as I tried to keep my thoughts straight. “You can’t just murder people.”

Malum’s expression turned dark. “When it comes to those I care about, I can. I’m the Ignis of the illustrious House of Malum. I’m the twenty-seventh immortal king to serve the sun god since the dawn of time. I don’t deal in shades of gray. I hurt those who hurt what’s mine.”

He tipped his head back and bellowed, and fire shot from his tongue in a long arc. “She carved a slur into your flesh, Aran. Everyone who served her is dead. They’re all dead.”

Unconsciousness pulled me under, and one thought rang clearly through my head.

He couldn't massacre an entire realm. Right?

CHAPTER 41

ORION

SCARS

Rebirth—Day 56, hour 6.

I turned to my Protector and said, “She has ‘WHORE’ carved into her back. It’s a dark enchantment.”

My lyrical voice rang loud.

I was too numb to control my power.

“Mother did it. The night before I killed her,” Arabella whispered.

Scorpius’s eyes widened, and he turned toward her with horror. He shouted, “*What?!*”

Arabella’s voice was drenched in pain. “She used to light me on fire. For fun. Just like you, Malum.”

As if something possessed me, I staggered forward and collapsed onto my knees beside her. Horror paralyzed me.

On her skin, blue letters glowed with enchantment.

“WHORE.” The *W* was too big, as if the person *carving* it had wanted to take up as much space as possible. The rest of the letters were jagged and cramped.

It was unmistakable.

That dead cunt had marked my sweetheart. Permanently. She’d tortured her with fire.

I pulled at my hair as I looked down at the fileted pale flesh.

Memories slammed through me.

We’d called her a slut. I ripped harder at my scalp because I couldn’t

remember. Had we called her a whore?

The bathroom door burst into flames as my Ignis ripped it off its hinges.

Corvus lit her on fire, and we watched him do it.

A hideous sensation twisted in my chest.

Recognition dawned.

I'd wondered why she was always scratching absentmindedly at her back. I hadn't cared enough to figure out why. I'd assumed she went into the bathroom to change because she was a woman. I'd assumed that was why she never took off her shirt in the bathhouse.

I ripped the hair out of my scalp, but it wasn't enough.

I needed to avenge her.

This wasn't supposed to happen. She was supposed to be my sweetheart. I was going to protect her and take care of her.

It was already too late.

She was marked.

I trembled as I knelt beside her, and tears streamed down my cheeks. John collapsed on top of her, and tears also ran down his face.

He cried for her.

I cried for myself.

Because for the first time in my life, I didn't just hate what I was—I loathed it. I didn't want to be a Revered. I didn't want to be the person who was sheltered and protected.

I wanted to protect her.

I wanted to be her shield and her sword.

I wanted people to tremble at the sight of her because they knew I was standing beside her. Ready to carve anyone up who disrespected her. I wanted to bring her mother back from the grave so I could skewer her body parts on the pikes in front of our mansion.

One thing was for sure.

Every person in the fae palace was dead.

Every. Single. One of them.

No exceptions.

They were all complicit.

A disturbing calmness washed over me as I stared down at my sweetheart. I had a new life purpose, and it was attainable.

Everyone would pay.

Brutally.

Just like my mates, I had no mercy.
They wouldn't stand a chance against us.

CHAPTER 42

SCORPIUS

SCARS

Rebirth—Day 56, hour 6

Arabella whimpered.

A chair sizzled as it caught on fire, and then there was a loud cracking noise as Malum ripped the bathroom door off its frame.

Orion and John gasped shakily as they knelt beside her body. They were probably inspecting the letters that were carved into her skin.

The demons stumbled, their feet tripping over the carpet as they backed away from the center of the room.

Arabella screamed in pain and kicked the floor with her foot.

So many sounds.

Everywhere.

I dug my fingernails into my palms to ground myself, but the pinpricks of pain did nothing. Every interaction we'd had with her flashed through my mind. All with perfect clarity.

We'd called her a whore.

Shamed her for killing her mother.

Made fun of her for being a prude and changing in the bathroom.

I remembered all the times she'd forgotten to breathe. Had she been in pain? Had she been suffering? I'd never bothered to find out why.

She'd told Malum that she'd experienced much worse than him. Was this what she'd been referring to? Her mother had lit her on fire and carved her up.

My hands trembled at my sides.

Bile crawled up my throat as an abominable thought hit me—Lothaire was her father. He hadn't protected her. He'd let this happen to her.

She'd said it like her mother had lit her on fire *frequently*.

I slapped my hand over my throat as I felt the eye tattooed on my neck start to open. *No. Not now.*

Lothaire would die by my hand.

We just needed time.

To figure everything out.

I'd thought I'd known rage when Orion had explained that Xerxes shifted and Arabella used her body to protect him. For hours. The coward had hid beneath her instead of helping her.

She'd been stabbed with glass shards for hours.

It was a miracle that she was even conscious.

I shook my head to clear my jumbled thoughts as the room fell apart around me. Everyone was freaking out and forgetting the important part.

"We need to help her. Orion, bring the first aid kit. *Now!*" I shouted, and the room went quiet as everyone stilled.

It took a second, then everyone started rushing around, trying to find supplies as they realized Arabella was bleeding out and all of us were having meltdowns.

I took a deep breath and went into the bathroom to fill up a bucket of water to clean her wounds.

My hands trembled, but I forced my mind to stay calm and analytical.

I was a Protector for a reason.

And my teammate needed protection, so that was what she was going to get.

We'd iron out the logistics later because there was nothing we needed to discuss now. It was simple. People would die.

Arabella wasn't the spoiled princess we'd stupidly assumed she was.

She'd been tortured.

Warm water sloshed over the side of the bucket as I absentmindedly seethed over what had been done to her.

I knew firsthand how cruel people could be. How they tormented with words and bludgeoned with fists.

The realms were not nice places.

The bucket cracked as I squeezed the sides tightly.

Suddenly it made so much sense why she'd disguised herself as a boy and hidden from her queendom.

She didn't kill for power; she'd killed for revenge.

She wasn't a pampered despot; she was an abused woman on the run.

We'd never been so wrong about someone.

A wave of relief washed over me as I rubbed at the snake-and-chain tattoo on my hip that tied all our lives together.

Thank the sun god we were connected.

It was obvious that no one was protecting her, that no one had ever protected her.

She forgot to breathe, sucked on her enchanted pipe, mumbled under her breath, and drank herself into oblivion because she was suffering without help.

Not anymore.

I was called a Protector for a reason, and she was under our care.

From now on, Arabella would be guarded from harm.

I picked up the leaking bucket and carried it back into the bedroom. Kneeling beside her whimpering form, I worked with the rest of my legion to help her.

I would make it up to her by guarding her with my life.

I vowed it to the sun god.

Then I would kill Lothaire because willful negligence was no excuse. He was at fault. He would suffer by my hand.

Arabella had been mutilated.

It changed everything.

CHAPTER 43

ARAN

THE CHOSEN LEGIONS

Rebirth—Day 57, hour 10

“**A**ll students and legions must proceed to the great hall for an announcement.” The enchanted male voice boomed through the room.

I stared at the ceiling.

A pipe loose between my lips.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I’d been covered in glass shards, hobbling off an arena half-naked.

The loud message repeated, and my teammates grumbled as they woke up.

I’d woken up an hour ago to find all six men passed out on the floor surrounding me. John’s fingers had been wrapped around mine tightly as he’d held my hand in his sleep.

They’d all exhausted themselves stitching me up.

Even the demons.

Despite every horrible thing I’d been through, tears welled in my eyes as I watched them grumble and wake up.

Gratitude made my head light.

John’s warm fingers curled against mine as he rolled over and yawned. He dragged his other hands softly across the top of my cheekbone. “You better now, bestie?” he asked softly.

I licked my cracked lips and whispered, “Never better, dude.”

For a second, we stared at each other.

John's thick dark lashes fluttered as he blinked his hooded dark eyes. Twin dimples flashed, then disappeared as he stared into my eyes. "I'm so glad you're okay."

I gave him a small smile. "I prefer barely functioning and extremely sexy."

John's callused finger trailed softly down my cheekbone, and he fingered the heavy necklace I'd forgotten was hanging from my throat. The tops of his cheeks turned pink as he gently tugged on the heavy diamond and used it to pull my face closer to his.

John whispered, "I'm so sorry for what you've been through." His voice cracked. "If I could go back in time and protect you, I would." He smiled at me sadly. "Aran, there's something I need to—"

The enchanted voice cut him off. "All students and legions must proceed to the great hall for an announcement."

Scorpius swore loudly, and the demons grumbled.

Malum sat up and said, "We need to go. Now." He clapped his hands loudly. "Everyone, wake the fuck up. We need to leave."

He turned his head like he was searching for something in the room.

When he landed on me, steel eyes filled with pity. His expression was shattered. "Are you feeling better?" he asked softly as red stained his cheeks.

I swallowed thickly.

Why was it so hard to breathe?

John released his hold on the necklace, and I tore my eyes away from Malum and asked John, "What did you need to tell me?"

John shook his head tiredly. "Later. Not now."

I reached up to grab him and pull him closer because I could tell from the sad expression on his face that it was important.

I needed to know now.

"Let's go, Aran," Malum's deep whiskey voice interrupted my thoughts. He stood half-naked and stared down at me and John. For some reason, he seemed angry again.

For a moment, I was distracted by the deep V line that framed his bronze hips.

"Why are you suddenly mad?" I blurted out.

He clenched his fists, and flames shot from his knuckles. "You were keeping secrets. You should have told us about your back. About what your mother did. I would have never..." He trailed off.

“Set me on fire?” I asked softly.
Everyone in the room stopped getting ready.
Six men gave me their rapt attention.
I sighed heavily. Exhaled with a long puff of my pipe.
My limbs tingled.
I felt numb.
My vision distorted.
I shrugged like I didn’t care about anything. “But you did.”
Malum’s harsh features shattered like I’d punched him in the face, and he whispered, “I didn’t know.”
“Would you have cared?” I laughed harshly. “Really, would you have cared? Because a few weeks ago, you were calling me your slave. Two months ago, you were calling women nothing but holes.”
Clothing sizzled as Malum’s sweatshirt caught on fire.
“I don’t feel that way anymore about you,” Malum spoke slowly like he was trying to force each word out. His jaw clenched and jumped as his voice alternated between rough and soft. “I respect you.”
I scoffed. “Good for you. What do you want me to say? Thank you for telling me you view me as a person? *Please*. I already killed my mother. There’s nothing else to talk about. You’ve made your choices. Leave me alone.”
I was standing outside my body.
It felt like I was watching someone else speak for me.
Malum clenched his fists, and his steel eyes filled with an unnamed emotion. Something flashed across his face.
“But why is it enchanted?” John’s voice shook with anger, but he spoke tentatively like he was afraid of the answer. “What does it do?”
“Nothing,” I lied in a monotone voice as I rocked forward and pushed myself into a standing position.
All three of the kings lunged forward to help me.
I slapped their hands away.
“Don’t touch me.” I stumbled and slammed into someone’s sharp elbow. It knocked the wind out of me.
A growling noise echoed.
In my peripheral vision, flames shot higher into the air, or were they on the ground? Everything was warped.
“Be careful,” Malum barked.

I slapped at him. “Don’t touch me.”

My head spun.

It was hard to tell the ceiling from the floor.

“Need to get dressed,” I mumbled as I staggered toward the bathroom but stopped and squinted in confusion at where the door had used to be. Where had it gone?

Behind me someone punched the wall.

Someone else swore.

Hands grabbed at me, and I shook with annoyance as I barked, “Don’t touch me.”

Pain was lighting up my neurons with every step, and it was too overstimulating.

I needed darkness and rest.

Time alone.

I needed death.

An enchanted voice boomed, and I jumped with surprise. “All students and legions must proceed to the great hall for an announcement. This is your last warning. Anyone who does not arrive in the next five minutes will be punished. Severely.”

Panic filled me.

I shuffled through my cubby with desperation. Where were my underwear? I only had one clean sweatshirt, since the servants weren’t allowed to enter after competitions.

I tried to pull the sweatshirt over my head, but the stitches littering my back pulled tight, and I swallowed vomit.

The feeling of detachment intensified.

I swayed on my feet.

What was I doing? Why was I freaking out? Where was I?

I needed to lie down and rest.

“Here.” John grabbed me as I fell forward. “Let’s get you into my sweatshirt. It’s large enough that it shouldn’t touch your wounds and will be easier to put on. I wish I could clean you up in the shower, but we don’t have time. Is that okay with you?”

I nodded in agreement.

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I was too tired to try to understand.

“That doesn’t seem appropriate,” Malum said from the bathroom door.

John ignored him and whispered to me softly, "Hands up, my dude."

I obeyed, and he gently maneuvered the sweatshirt over my head. It smelled amazing, and it was like being cocooned in a big, cozy blanket.

Instantly some of my anxiety abated.

John's fingers gently tugged down my pants, and I shivered as they traced over my hips. "Lean against me and step out."

I obeyed.

"Where are your underwear?" he asked.

Malum growled.

I shrugged. "They've been disappearing for a while. I think someone is stealing them."

John stilled.

"Excuse me?" Malum's voice cracked like a whip.

"Tell the others." John said forcibly, "Let's get the word out and find out who is taking them."

Malum stalked away in a whirl of fire and anger.

"You can wear a pair of my boxers," John said as he rummaged through his shelf of clothes.

I rubbed at my tired eyes. "Are you sure? That seems kind of inappropriate."

Instead of answering my question, John ordered, "Part your legs."

I obeyed.

"Lift your left foot." He pulled his black boxers over my leg. "Now the other."

Slowly he tugged them up my legs, and he curled them over at my waist so they wouldn't fall off.

John's hands spanned across my stomach, and his fingers dug into my hips.

Pain exploded down my spine, and I swallowed thickly.

His thumbs traced circles against my skin, and he said gruffly, "When it comes to you, Aran, I'm sure."

I blinked up at him, confused by what he was talking about.

Was I losing it?

He tucked a bloodstained curl behind my ear. "This will have to do for now. Let's go."

He went to wrap his arm around my shoulder but stopped. "Shit, your wounds."

I stared back at him blankly.

“Lean against my arm for support.” John offered his forearm, and I grabbed onto it with both hands. “Let’s go.”

A few minutes later I sat in the hall at my usual spot.

My pipe hung from the side of my mouth and dangled between my teeth.

The boards had been removed from the stained glass, and the usual red haze from the eclipse swirled around me. My back no longer was cracking with agony, but it ached in rhythm with my heartbeat.

Wetness trickled uncomfortably across my skin where some of my stitches had pulled open from the walk down the hall.

There was no food on the tables, and a low buzz of chatter and nervousness filled the space as everyone waited to find out the reason we’d been called together.

Malum and Orion stared at me, and Scorpius had his head tilted. I didn’t know how I knew, but my gut told me he was listening to every breath I took.

I traced my eyes across the room.

The leviathan competitor was still crucified to the tree, and his pale flesh was turning black as it rotted, but he was still alive. His head lolled back and forth.

Immortality was truly a bitch.

“The gods have chosen the two top legions to demonstrate their abilities in the showcase round,” Lothaire said loudly.

Had he been standing in front of the tree for a while? I didn’t remember him arriving.

Competitors muttered and shifted with excitement.

I felt nothing.

Lothaire stared straight ahead as he said coldly, “Team unity was an important factor the gods were looking for in these games when they were searching for their champions. Leadership and strength interteam translate to external leadership.”

Students leaned forward in their seats.

“The only teams that did not lose a single competitor during these games were the shifter and academy legions.”

“That’s bullshit.” The captain of the angel legion growled and slammed his chair back as he stood up. His yellow and black eyes flashed.

The vampyre snapped his head in the man’s direction. “Sit down, soldier.” Lothaire’s voice was filled with violence.

I shivered.

The angel sat down with a huff.

Lothaire dragged a hand down his long braid like he was calming himself, then he announced, “Other factors such as the psychological ability to endure, obedience during punishments, and the choice to protect other competitors were taken into account.”

I blew out a puff of smoke.

Leaning back in my chair, I ignored the sensation of wounds pressing into the wood. I tipped my chair backward and balanced on the back legs.

A proud smile curled across Lothaire’s lips.

Sickness welled in my throat.

“The shifter legion and academy legion have been chosen for the showcase. If the gods are satisfied with their exhibition of abilities, they will be named as champions. The highest honor in all the realms.”

His words echoed across the rafters.

Students cheered and stomped their feet as they all looked over at the chosen legions. Us.

Lothaire’s lips pulled into a smile as he looked at me with pride like I’d done it for him.

I stared blankly back.

The nothingness inside me expanded.

Surprisingly I wasn’t the only one glaring at Lothaire.

All my teammates sat ramrod straight and stared at the vampyre with varying expressions of anger. None of us celebrated.

Why are they mad at him?

At the shifter table, Sadie beamed as she hugged Jax and Cobra at the same time. Xerxes and Ascher clapped each other on the backs.

At the table next to them, the angel with heterochromia glowered angrily. His feline features hardened into a predatory expression. All the angels glared over at me like it was somehow all my fault. At the other table, the devil legion glared over at the kings like it was their fault they lost. The leviathans and assassins slumped forward with disappointment.

I inhaled enchanted smoke.

Students whistled and clapped louder as they gave us a standing ovation.

Only one person looked similar to how I felt.

Jinx stared at me.

Her forehead was wrinkled, and her eyes were sad. Her skinny shoulders

were slumped forward like she was buckling under an invisible weight, and she looked much older than her thirteen years.

I tipped my pipe toward her.

Unease curled in my stomach.

Lothaire continued and said, “The gods have requested that all members of the shifter and academy legions compete in the showcase tomorrow. This includes substitutes.”

Jinx pretended to tip an imaginary hat my way at his announcement.

She didn’t look surprised.

My eyes widened as I stared at her sad face. *What did he just say?* She was only thirteen.

Anger lit within me like Malum’s flames, and the world snapped back into clarity.

I sat up straight with outrage.

The heavy doors to the great hall slammed open, and Luka walked in.

My heart pounded in my chest.

John’s twin was back.

They were both here.

Lothaire nodded as he walked past him and exited the room. The vampyre called over his shoulder, “The showcase will start at ten a.m. tomorrow morning. For now, feast and relax.” Then he was gone.

The shifter legion jumped to their feet to protest Jinx’s involvement, but servants streamed into the room with plates of food and blocked the path like they’d planned it.

Lothaire knew the shifters would freak out, so he left. Coward.

Plates, utensils, and food were delivered to tables, and the aroma of honeyed ham was overpowering.

Amid the commotion, students watched Luka with wide eyes as he sauntered to our table.

Everyone looked back and forth between the twins.

Luka pulled out the open chair beside Zenith and sat down. “What did I miss?” he asked casually.

“What the fuck?” a male student shouted as the room erupted in conversation.

Someone else said, “Wait, are they the lost twins from...” The voice trailed off, and I missed what they said.

Scorpius narrowed his blind eyes and said, “You’re back.”

Luka grunted. “Yep.”

John leaned across the table. “How is this possible?” He looked at his brother with worry.

Luka’s expression was blank, and like usual, it gave nothing away. “I’ve handled it just like you did. He agreed.”

John’s jaw dropped.

Luka lounged back in his seat. “I’ll explain everything later.” He waved his hand dismissively like whatever his twin was freaking out about wasn’t a big deal.

“Care to explain just what game you two are playing?” Malum growled. “The rest of your teammates would like to fucking understand.”

“We can’t say,” John said instinctively as he blinked wide eyes.

“That’s not true,” Luka corrected him. “We can explain everything. Later.”

John shook his head and gaped at his twin like he was processing something.

I picked at the dried skin on my lower lip.

Luka looked away from his brother and stared at me.

His eyes darkened and a vein on his forehead throbbed as he took in my bloody appearance.

“How are you more injured than when I left you? What did they do to you?” he asked gruffly.

Everyone at our table went still at his question.

Shivering from cold, glass falling from the sky, blood everywhere, sobbing, Xerxes beneath me, hobbling off the field, my teammates staring at my back, Malum promising to commit mass murder.

I put my elbows on the table and leaned tiredly against my hands. “Everything,” I said morbidly.

Luka leaned forward to question me further, but a familiar male voice interrupted him and asked, “So did the whore have sex with John or that other guy?”

Whore.

I stared at the table a few feet away from the dais.

It was the guy who’d been running his mouth a week ago. You would think Cobra’s shadow snake and Malum burning his crotch would have shut him up. Some men never learned.

Of course every one of my teammates whipped their head in his direction.

John made a growling noise, and Scorpius broke his fork into two pieces, while Malum burst into flames and stood up.

Tensions had been running high, and everyone was looking for a target.

For some reason, my eyes were drawn to the shifter table, and I made eye contact with Jinx like I was looking for her permission.

She raised her brow at me.

Her insinuation was loud and clear.

Maybe it was the agony stabbing down my back, maybe it was just general exhaustion, maybe it was the haze, or maybe I'd just reached my limit and didn't care anymore.

Either way, something snapped inside me.

"Sit down," I said to Malum as I shoved my chair back. There was a loud scraping noise.

I stood up and pulled back my throbbing shoulders.

Everything was in sharp focus as I walked casually down the steps of the dais.

I rounded on the pathetic student.

He flushed as I approached, then grinned widely and made a sexual gesture with his hands. "Come to service me?" he taunted.

The room quieted as everyone turned to watch.

The man taunting me was traditionally handsome, and he wore his purple blazer with an air of arrogance. He'd probably been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and had never been told no.

I planted my hand on the table beside him and leaned forward so I invaded his personal space. He licked his lips and stared at my mouth.

I leaned closer.

His breath hitched. Pupils dilated.

I stabbed him in the crotch with the large serving knife I'd swiped off the table in front of him.

He opened his mouth to scream, but I grabbed his neck with my other hand and yanked him roughly out of his chair.

I held him up by his throat as he knelt before me.

"I want to reintroduce myself to the academy," I said loudly, and my voice echoed across the high, arched ceiling because everyone was silent.

Students stared at me with wide eyes. They held their breath.

Sari glared at me with a disgusted expression.

I smiled at her. "My name is Aran Alis Egan, and you've probably heard

that I'm the Queen of the Fae Realm." I paused. "That is false."

There were murmurs of confusion.

The man on his knees before me whimpered, and I choked him harder to shut him up.

"I'm not a queen." I smiled. "I'm a dictator."

I released my grip on the trash and let him fall to the floor as I casually walked away.

When I got back to my table, I collapsed into my chair.

Exhaustion hit me like a lead weight, and my hands shook from the leftover adrenaline. Cuts throbbed along my arms and legs.

No one moved.

Everyone waited.

I dug my spoon into a pile of mashed potatoes and brought it to my lips.

After a couple bites, everyone started to eat, like they'd been waiting for my permission.

"Shit, Aran." John nudged me with his arm. "How long have you been planning that?"

I hid my smile behind my hand.

Luka grinned at me from across the table and winked. I fought the urge to smile back. He'd given me the idea when he'd called me a little dictator.

Malum raised his eyebrow at me, and silver eyes shone with pride. My stomach swooped, and little pinpricks of pain danced across my spine. Orion and Scorpius looked smug.

I focused on my plate and said, "I don't want to talk about it."

In my peripheral vision, a little girl with a ferret wrapped around her neck beamed with approval. In my head, I heard her say, "*Good work.*"

This time, I couldn't hold it back.

I grinned from ear to ear.

CHAPTER 44

CORVUS MALUM

HUNTING

Rebirth—Day 57, hour 22

I gently picked up my Revered's arm and scooted from underneath him as I crawled out of bed.

The blinds were drawn, and the bedroom was dark.

Most of my teammates were asleep.

Scorpius mumbled and reached for me, and I held my breath, sure I'd been caught. He spread out in the space I'd left and cradled Orion against his chest.

They looked young holding each other. So perfect. A Protector nestled against a Revered.

I rubbed at my chest. They weren't the only two people I wanted in my bed. Lately I'd been dreaming about blue curls and haunted eyes.

Arabella should sleep with us so we could protect her.

The night she'd spent wrapped in our arms after the party was the best night of sleep I'd had in my entire life. I knew my mates felt the same.

The feeling of wrongness while watching her sleep in the twins' bed each night was getting worse. She didn't belong with them. She belonged with us.

The problem was—ever since I'd had to make the impossible choice in the fourth challenge, she'd been putting distance between herself and the three of us.

I could see it in her eyes.

We'd lost what little trust we'd gained.

My stomach rolled, and I tried to calm my racing heart.

As I stared at my mates, I wanted nothing more than to climb into bed beside them, but John and Luka had just tiptoed out of the room, and I wanted to know where they were going.

The showcase was tomorrow, to see if we could lead alongside the shifters, and my mates needed to rest.

I needed answers.

Pulling myself away from my precious mates, I hurried after the twins.

I peeked my head into the marble hall as John disappeared around the corner. Silent like a predator stalking its prey, I moved swiftly through the shadows.

I breathed shallowly through my nose and kept my flames contained.

The academy was eerily silent.

Everyone slept.

The grand crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling had been dimmed, and curtains were drawn across the stained-glass windows. Black marble floors were voids that swallowed any light. The only sound was the occasional creak and moan of wind battering the academy.

John took another turn far ahead, and I picked up my pace.

A few halls later, the twins stopped in front of a door, and I recognized the royal student quarters.

Was it some type of inside job? Were they working with a student to sabotage us? So many possibilities, each one worse than the last.

I breathed in shakily.

My bones ached as the urge to release my flames and punish them intensified.

They darted inside, and I debated my next move.

Before I could decide, the twins dragged a man dressed in pajamas into the hall.

I squinted.

Recognition dawned. It was the pathetic student from the hall that Arabella had stabbed in the dick.

Anger burned in my chest, and my hands lit on fire.

He'd called her a whore.

That word was carved into her back. She'd been much too merciful with how she'd treated him; he didn't deserve to live.

I would have made an example of him with my fire, but she'd looked so

proud of herself when she sat down that I couldn't make myself interfere.

It had been intoxicating.

The way she'd grinned from ear to ear.

It had made me realize that I hadn't seen a genuine smile on her face since the Legionnaire Games had begun.

My chest panged at the thought.

The twins dragged him down the hall closer to the corner I was hiding behind.

John held him up by the shirt front and whispered menacingly, "We've asked around, and it turns out you've been doing more than running your mouth. You've also got a little operation going."

The student stopped struggling, and his eyes widened. "Now, man, it's not what you think. It's harmless fun."

John smiled. "So you admit you've been stealing Aran's underwear and selling them to perverts? I've heard people will pay good money for a little piece of the infamous queen. Right?"

My jaw dropped.

Fire exploded across my head, and I stepped out of the shadows to reveal myself. "He did what?" I asked roughly.

John nodded over at me. "Glad you could join us, Corvus." From his lack of surprise, he'd known I was following them.

I focused on the waste of space kneeling before John.

"Is it true?" I asked.

The idiot must have sensed how much danger he was in, because his eyes darted back and forth like a wild animal's, and he wet himself. "P-P-Please, it's not that big of a deal. W-We can talk about it. No one was hurt."

"False," Luka growled. "You will be hurt."

Darkness shimmered in the air around the twins and expanded until it formed a floating shape that resembled a doorway.

John lifted the man off the ground and chucked him into the darkness.

The flailing body disappeared.

Luka nodded at his brother and cracked his knuckles. "I will find out who he sold them to." He stepped into the darkness and shimmered out of existence.

As soon as Luka was gone, the doorway poofed away like it had never existed.

John wiped at his sweaty brow and brushed off his hands as he walked by

me casually and headed back to our room.

“Care to explain what you just did to him?” I said as I followed behind him.

John sighed loudly. “All you need to know is that the student has been taken care of. For all intents and purposes, he’s dead.”

I arched my brow incredulously. “But Luka survived wherever you sent him?”

“Yep.” John popped the *p* obnoxiously but said nothing else. He’d picked up the mannerism from Arabella.

When we got back to our room, I rounded on him. “I want answers.”

John glared back at me. “You’ll find out soon enough. Right now, I’m too tired for this shit, and I need to sleep. Wouldn’t you rather both of us explain everything with everyone present?”

“No,” I snapped. “I want to know. Now.”

John shoved past me and said, “Too bad.” He sauntered into the room casually like a flaming devil king wasn’t enraged behind him.

I wanted to swear and have a fit, but I didn’t want to wake up my mates.

John climbed into his bed and grabbed Arabella around her waist. He tucked her flush against him, and she mumbled contentedly in her sleep.

He traced his thumb slowly across her cheekbone possessively and smirked back at me.

I swallowed a growl.

Mine.

Rubbing with annoyance at the tattoo on my hip, I turned to my mates and lay down beside them. Both my Revered and Protector immediately turned in their sleep and wrapped themselves around me.

I held them. Tightly.

Conflicted emotions scoured against my psyche.

Lately my emotions were getting so intense that it was scaring me. A part of me was terrified that the tattoo was warping my mind.

At the end of the day, even if Arabella was all grumpy and brave in an endearing way, she was still just a fae woman.

She wasn’t my mate.

But she was my teammate, and I respected the way she’d handled herself in the challenges. She wasn’t pampered and spoiled like I’d first thought. She’d suffered and overcome abuse.

In a lot of ways, she reminded me of Scorpius.

Their suffering had changed them into creatures that embraced pain. Scorpius was addicted to the physical kind. Aran was addicted to the mental kind.

A crushing sensation expanded in my chest as I glowered over at John.

My head was jumbled.

Fear spiked in my gut that the tattoo was making me act a certain way and in reality, I would feel nothing for Arabella.

She was nothing but a woman, after all.

I cared for her as a teammate; that was it. It would never be anything more.

I squeezed my arms and pressed a kiss to the top of Orion's soft blond hair. The men lying in my arms were all that mattered in my life.

Nothing would change that. Ever.

I wouldn't let it.

CHAPTER 45

ARAN

THE SHOWCASE

Rebirth—Day 58, hour 10

I was sandwiched between the twins.

We followed the rest of our legion as we walked toward the arena.

The rocks from the island were sharp beneath my callused feet. Water lazily drifted out with the tide, and a few white clouds meandered across the maroon sky.

It was a calm day.

If it weren't for the occasional glass shard glinting off black rock, I would have believed the storm had been a figment of my imagination. A horrible nightmare.

It was easy to imagine that I was trapped in a psych ward somewhere drawing on the wall muttering about legions and the gods.

Pain lanced across the wounds covering my back as if to punctuate how real it all had been. Bruises and cuts throbbed with every step I took.

John's arm was draped over my shoulder, and he fingered the necklace he'd given me.

I narrowed my eyes up at him. Was he my best friend in the psych ward? Or maybe he was my rival and we both had a crush on the same male nurse.

Sun god, I hoped the nurse chose me.

Luka glanced down at me every few steps. His gaze flitted over my face and John's arm.

John nudged me. "We got this, Aran. Everything's going to be fine." He

squeezed me to offer encouragement.

“Are we locked up in a room together?” I blurted up at him.

John didn’t falter he just flashed his dimples. “I hope so, that sounds pretty hot.”

Luka frowned and said nothing.

I sighed and let it go. Pulled my pipe out of my pants and closed my eyes while I inhaled greedily. Drugs flooded my lungs, and my hands trembled at my sides.

Pretending wouldn’t change reality.

With every step I took toward the arena, the noose around my throat tightened until I gasped desperately for air.

I asphyxiated.

It wasn’t funny anymore.

Squeezing my eyes as tight as possible, I stopped walking and whispered, “I can’t do this again.”

I fell to my knees.

Gravity crushed me to the rocks.

I shivered.

A person could only take so much.

I couldn’t step into that arena. Not again.

I refused.

Warmth surrounded me. I blinked, and I was wrapped up in powerful arms.

John and Luka knelt next to me and hugged me like they could squeeze the fear away.

“Aran, listen to me.” John pressed his lips against my temple. “It’s only one more challenge. One more contest and you’ve survived.” He breathed harshly. “What’s been done to you is”—his voice cracked—“so fucked up. But we just have to play their game a little longer. And I promise you, once we’re free, we’ll hunt down the gods to get retribution, if that’s what you want.”

I pressed my head against Luka’s chest.

“But I can’t,” I said pathetically.

Luka said gruffly, “We can leave this place right now. You don’t need to do this.”

John and I stilled.

“Really?” I pulled my head back and stared into his hooded dark eyes.

Luka nodded. "Just say the word. And we're gone."

John had told him about the word on my back, and ever since he'd found out about it, he'd been falling all over himself to help me in any way he could.

John nuzzled against the side of my face and sighed tiredly. "Technically we could leave, but the gods will hunt her. It won't be safe."

"We'll keep her safe," Luka said fiercely.

My eyes widened.

The twins held me tenderly and casually offered to defy the gods.

The man crucified to the sacred tree flashed through my mind. John and Luka would risk *that* for me.

The choking sensation around my throat transformed into something warm.

Moisture welled in my eyes, and a tear dripped across the bruises and cuts that marred my face.

I blurted out, "I love you guys." My face warmed with embarrassment.

I tried to hide my eyes behind my arm, but John pulled my wrists back so I couldn't hide.

"Aran, look at me," he said roughly.

Tentatively I looked up at him.

"I've already told you why I call you bestie." John's smile wobbled. "Because I love you, dude. I have since the moment I woke up to find you above me on the cot, choking me out. The moment you opened your perfect lips and blamed *me* for your violence, I was a goner."

A watery laugh escaped my lips.

John pulled me closer. "I loved you when you were a pretty boy. I loved you as a breathtaking woman, and I love you right now, my little wounded warrior. I will always love you."

Luka nodded silently beside him.

Tears poured from my eyes.

It all felt so romantic.

We were teammates training and competing in awful circumstances. The twins never asked to date me or bought me flowers.

Maybe I was delusional, but I couldn't imagine caring for someone as much as I cared for them at this moment.

I choked on a sob.

Wasn't love caring for someone more than you cared about yourself? It

was about being there for them. Standing up for them. Laughing with them. Love made the darkest days feel brighter.

The twins were that for me.

Sometimes it felt like I'd just met Luka, then I remembered I'd known him for months. Lived beside him. He'd been there as much as John.

I didn't care that we didn't call one another "baby" and whisper soft words as we touched each other. I didn't care if John meant love in a platonic, friendship way.

I loved them like lovers did.

People were annoying.

They weren't.

Case in point, I was having a panic attack and blubbering pathetically, but they were holding me up.

They always held me up.

From the first challenge where we'd been thrown into the sea to suffer, John had held me up for hours. When he'd left, Luka had done the same.

Memories of the punishment with John made my stomach hurt, and I blurted out, "But I've hurt you." I couldn't go another day not knowing if he was okay.

John traced his thumb gently under my eye and caught a tear. "Aran, you've never hurt me. You saved me."

My lips trembled.

Luka wrapped his arms around both of us and said, "Same."

I wept.

The universe had blessed my life when it had created not one but two of these amazing men.

I wasn't alone.

Luka cleared his throat as he rubbed his chin across the top of my hair. John's eyes were suspiciously shiny as he continued to stroke his fingers under my eyes.

"What are you three doing?" Malum ruined the moment by barking angrily, "We need to get to the arena. We don't have time for this."

John and Luka didn't move.

"What do you want to do?" John asked me like Malum hadn't spoken.

I wiped away my tears and pinched my cheeks, then used the shoulders of the twins as a crutch to pull myself to my feet.

They stood up with me.

Luka pushed me behind him like he was protecting me from Malum.

“We don’t have time for these theatrics,” Malum sneered, and flames shot across his temples in a creepy crown while his mates flanked him.

Orion stared at me without blinking. Scorpius scowled with his arms crossed over his wide chest.

The demons looked at me with sympathy, then turned to glare at Malum. It felt like I had people on my side.

I leaned forward, and for a long moment, I pressed my forehead against Luka’s back and let him shelter me from my problems.

Taking a ragged breath, I ripped myself away from the twins.

I stood up straight and sauntered lazily toward Malum. “Sorry for my theatrics.” I tossed my hair over my shoulder. “Some of us have had some unpleasant experiences in the arena.”

As I walked past, I raised my hand to my head and gave Malum a middle finger salute.

“I am still your captain. You will show me respect,” he shouted behind me.

I didn’t look back.

Gone was the blushing man.

He was *angry*.

“Go fuck yourself, Captain.” I waved at him with my third fingers.

He growled like a wild animal.

I kicked a rock at Malum. “Can you stop lollygagging? We have a showcase to compete in.”

Sun god, messing with him filled me with an immense amount of personal satisfaction.

There was a loud crack as said rock slammed dead center against his flaming chest.

Malum exploded into flames, but he didn’t move. He arched his brow slowly like he was taunting me.

I narrowed my eyes back. The irrational urge to scream at him, hit him, yell at him until he released his flames and lost all control overwhelmed me.

I tapped my foot and pretended to examine an invisible watch on my wrist. “Oh, look, it’s time for you to pull the stick out of your ass.” I pursed my lips. “Also, we’re going to be late.”

Malum growled, and I smirked.

Getting under his skin always gave me little bursts of pleasure.

I wanted him furious. Uncontrolled. At my mercy.

Before Malum could respond, Zenith stomped forward. "Let's go. Enough with this bullshit. It's getting old."

Everyone reluctantly followed him.

"Zenith for captain," I said loudly.

Malum choked and stumbled.

I smirked.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" John whispered down at me as he and Luka resumed flanking me like they were my personal bodyguards.

I gave him a manic smile. "Of course, why would you ask?"

Luka grunted.

They could see right through me.

John wiggled his eyes suggestively. "So, tell me about this room we're in."

I laughed and told him about my theories. I told him we were competing over a hot nurse.

"No way," John shook his head. "If anything, we're both fucking him. That's the only thing that makes sense."

A sharp jolt of pain lanced my spine.

I ignored it.

As we walked toward the lawn, adrenaline and fear mixed until I practically vibrated with energy.

When we made it to the arena, the student section chanted, "Let's go, academy legion." They stomped their feet in unison like this was a sporting event and not literal hell.

Every day, I hated people a little more.

The other legions sat beside them and scowled at us. The angel with heterochromia spat on the ground, and he mouthed, "Sinful blood."

I rolled my eyes and turned away.

In the middle of the field, six people waited for us.

My breath caught. Jinx looked impossibly small pressed against Jax's side like the child she was.

Anger made my chest throb from the force of my heartbeat. My skin felt too tight for my body as a whiplash of emotions boomeranged through me.

If I were Malum, I would have exploded into flames.

She shouldn't be here.

Sun god, she's only thirteen years old.

This was so wrong.

Lothaire's voice echoed, "Welcome to the showcase round. To begin, each competitor is to climb to the top of a post. Further instructions will be given at the top."

No one moved.

All of us looked around at one another warily as the silent question hung loudly in the air. Were they going to make us jump?

"Now, competitors!" Lothaire shouted, and we each moved reluctantly to a post.

I focused on my nails, and a now-familiar zap of energy traveled down my spine. Sharp ice daggers erupted from my nail beds.

The kings similarly brandished their claws. Ink dripped from the demons' hands and formed into a row of eight shiny black daggers. They tossed two each to John and Luka, who nodded their thanks.

Across the field, the shifter legion was in a huddle arguing over something. *How is Jinx going to climb?*

The only power she'd ever manifested was when her jaw had dropped open in the beast realm and her scream momentarily paralyzed people. Also, she apparently could make people forget things.

None of that would help her climb the wooden post that towered hundreds of feet into the cloud cover.

Physically she was scrawny and weak.

Before I could walk over and try to help, Sadie shifted into a saber-toothed tiger and tossed Jinx onto her back like a doll.

The shifter men ripped off their shirts and gave them to Jax. He tied them into a rope, then wrapped it tightly around Sadie's neck and Jinx's body.

After inspecting the harness for what felt like forever, Jax nodded.

I held my breath as Sadie leaped off the ground and grabbed the post with all fours.

Jinx screamed but didn't fall. *Thank the sun god.*

"Are you okay to climb?" Malum asked, and I realized the kings were standing, waiting for me.

He was staring at me like he was waiting for me to admit I'd been secretly a damsel in distress this entire time.

I rolled my eyes and stabbed my razor-sharp claws into the posts.

"Be careful," Scorpius snapped at me as he started to climb.

I stabbed unnecessarily hard into the wood and called back, "Worry about

yourself.”

“Stop talking. You’re wasting your energy,” Malum snarled angrily.

I tipped back and yelled, “Okay, got it!” as loud as I could just to make it clear I was wasting energy.

Malum growled, and I smiled. The four of us stabbed our claws into the posts and hauled. Upward. Straight into the cloud cover.

Unlike the first time I’d climbed it, it wasn’t easy.

Every pull of my muscles reopened stitches on my back, and the irrational fear that my organs were going to spill out of my numerous wounds had me breathing roughly as I climbed.

When I finally made it to the top, I collapsed onto the post with a relieved gasp.

Fluffy white clouds drifted below, and everything was eerily quiet and still.

There was no wind up this high.

The eclipse appeared ten times larger. If I reached my fingers up, I reckoned I could touch it. Instead of its usual dark red, the air was a light pink like a sunset at a beach in the fae realm.

Everything was prettier up high.

Softer.

I wanted to close my eyes, spread my arms wide, and take a nap on the fluffy cloud below.

Across the way, there was a commotion as Jinx climbed off Sadie’s back.

Jinx collapsed onto her butt and tucked her legs against her chest. She shook back and forth, and her teeth chattered with fear.

An angry bear roared as Sadie flung her furry body off Jinx’s post. She sailed at least twenty feet through the air toward an empty post.

My heart went into my throat.

Sadie’s momentum pulled her over the side of the post.

At the last second, her claws stopped her progress and hung still. She clawed herself up and plopped her fluffy white ass down. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth as she delicately licked her paw.

She delicately stuck out her hind leg and licked her privates.

No one ever accused her of being classy.

I let my head fall back with a crack.

At this rate, I was going to have heart problems from too much stress.

“Now the showcase truly begins,” Lyla said from a floating platform

nearby.

I didn't bother to look over and acknowledge that inane statement.

If the next word out of her mouth was "jump," then I was joining the underground radical atheist fae cult. I'd secretly always liked their message about how we were all going to die and no one was going to save us.

It really rang true with me.

If I jumped now, I'd be bedridden for weeks. My bones still hurt from the first competition, and I'd been much healthier back then.

No way was I jumping.

They'd have to push me.

No one could convince me to subject myself to that type of pain.

Not again.

Lyla said, "The gods have requested that the three kings showcase their powers right here and now. They want to see if you can fight alongside the shifter legion without unanticipated casualties. They want to see if your legions are compatible."

My stomach dropped. *Unanticipated casualties.*

"What?" Malum asked incredulously as he stood up straight. "We can't."

I sat up.

Sadie finally stopped grooming herself.

"You will release your powers now, or you will be treated as a deserter," Lyla said with no inflection.

I lay back down and cracked my head on the post.

I prepared for the worst.

CHAPTER 46

ARAN

THE SHOWCASE

Rebirth—Day 58, hour 11

For a long moment, Lyla's words hung in the still air and nothing happened.

No one moved.

Click. Click. Click. The gold hardware atop each of the kings' ears floated upward and separated into shards of a crown.

Their eyes darkened, and the talons on their nails lengthened.

Unlike before, that wasn't the only transformation the kings underwent.

Malum said roughly, "As the Ignis from the illustrious House of Malum, I invoke the power of my mates."

My skin prickled with warning.

Malum put his fingers to his flaming neck. "As the crowned King of the Sun God, I invoke the power of my mates."

A long, wickedly sharp silver dagger appeared in Malum's hand.

No.

The dagger hadn't appeared.

My jaw dropped.

His tattoo was gone. He'd pulled the dagger from his flesh.

"Venimus!" Orion shouted in a loud, lyrical voice. "We came."

My eyes snapped over to the quiet devil as he spoke the word tattooed across his shoulder.

Pink cherry-blossom petals drifted off Orion's neck and swirled in the air

around the posts.

Scorpius said, "Vidimus. We saw."

The eye tattoo on his neck blinked open and looked around. At the same time, his milky blind eyes started to glow.

Malum growled roughly, "Vicimus. We conquered."

He held the dagger high above his head, and flames poured off him, filling the air.

I was so busy staring at the kings that I almost missed it.

A flame about the size of a fist hovered in the air above everyone's heads, including my teammates' and the judges'.

The kings were the only ones who didn't have one.

I tipped my head back, but there was nothing above me. Maybe I couldn't see it?

Every person's flame was white.

Déjà vu ripped through me.

Back in the beast realm, when I'd been high, smoking my enchanted pipe for the first time, I'd sworn I'd seen a white flame hovering above Sadie.

What is going on?

My hands shook as I pulled my pipe from my pocket and slammed it between my teeth.

I waited for an explanation.

A commotion.

The only sound was the whooshing of flames as they poured off Malum.

I turned and said, "John," but my friend didn't stop staring straight ahead at the kings and gave no sign he'd heard me.

Everything was so still that I had half a mind to think time itself had stopped.

I brought my shaking fingers to my temples.

No one else moved.

"The day of wrath is here," Orion sang loudly, and his voice was unbearably sweet, like poisoned honey.

The decibel level sent goosebumps erupting across my skin and all the hair on my body stood up.

I whipped my head in his direction and shouted, "What are you doing?"

White-blond hair floated with cherry blossoms around Orion's golden head. He looked possessed.

His voice was beautiful as he sang, *"The day of wrath is upon us."* His

voice was so perfect that it stroked a part of my brain but so haunting that it hurt my chest and made it hard to breathe.

I understood with disturbing clarity why he always whispered.

His voice was enthralling. Literally.

Scorpius tipped his head back to the sky. Bright light shot out from all three of his eyes.

The white flames above everyone's heads flickered.

Scorpius turned his head and looked at everyone with his glowing three eyes. His powers did something to the color of the flames.

It hit me like a punch to the face—*he's judging their souls.*

Jax's and Lyla's flames were the only ones that stayed pure white.

Everyone else's changed color.

The edges of the flames above the demons, twins, Sadie, Ascher, and Xerxes turned black.

Three quarters of Dick's and Cobra's flames turned black.

All of them still had white. I shivered at the implication. They'd been judged and found to still have goodness in their souls.

"*You stay where you are,*" Orion sang loudly as he pointed his finger. Cherry blossoms swirled in a mini storm and rose across the air.

Malum pointed his silver dagger in the person's direction.

Orion sang, "*Your soul has been found lacking. You have committed a heinous crime against those you love. Redemption is not possible. You will be exterminated.*"

The pink petals stopped spinning. All of them hung suspended in the air around one person.

Jinx.

A pure-black flame flickered above her head.

There was no white.

Her soul had been judged, and the kings had marked her unworthy.

Orion's voice was poignantly beautiful. "*You have committed a heinous crime against those you love.*"

I paused in horror because Jinx had sobbed and told us that she'd made us forget "so much." We were the only people she loved.

The kings were wholly focused on her. Their purpose was clear.

Extermination.

"No!" I shouted with horror.

Flames poured off Malum faster.

Sweat dripped down my face and I screamed at the kings, "Stop it!"

"*Judgment is here,*" Orion sang like he hadn't heard a word I'd said.

The three kings took a step forward on their posts until they hovered on the edges.

Jinx stared blankly back at them.

Her body was frozen like she was being immobilized by the force of whatever they were doing.

Malum transferred the knife into his right hand and pulled back his arm.

None of the shifters moved to help her. No one did anything. For some reason, I was the only one who was aware of what was happening.

I backed up on my post.

About thirty feet of air separated me from Jinx.

I didn't care what she'd done to me.

They didn't get to take her away, not while I still breathed.

Before Malum could throw the dagger, I sprinted and threw my legs forward. Midjump I kicked backward to propel myself ahead. For long seconds, I hung suspended.

There was nothing but air beneath me.

As I traveled, my momentum took me slightly left of Jinx.

I reached out my fingertips. They tangled around shirt material.

With all my strength, I flexed my arms and ripped Jinx off the post at the same time Malum flung his dagger.

In slow motion, the impossibly sharp point grazed a lock of her long black hair. That was all it hit.

The blade missed her.

I didn't have time to celebrate.

I was free-falling with a child in my arms, and we had no way to stop.

I wrapped myself around her small body and turned so I would fall onto my back, but I knew in my gut it wasn't enough.

It didn't matter what type of creature Jinx was. All adolescents were more vulnerable until they turned eighteen.

Sun god, I wouldn't have survived this drop a few weeks ago if it weren't for my queendom and the tattoo on my hip. Only an extremely powerful creature, like an adult shifter, devil, or demon, could survive such a fall.

My talons dug into her skin as I clutched her desperately.

We were rapidly approaching the ground.

Free-falling.

Toward her death.

It didn't matter what irredeemable atrocity she'd committed against us. She was the little sister I'd never had.

That meant something.

It wasn't my job to judge her; it was my job to love her. Period.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I did something I'd stopped doing after the first time Mother had lit me on fire. I prayed.

Please, sun god, allow Jinx to live. Take my life instead. She's too young. Please. I'll do anything. I don't care what she's done.

Wind whipped our hair in a frenzy as we plummeted.

Nothing happened.

Tears streamed from my eyes, and I pulled her limp body against mine as we tangled in the air.

We spun out of control.

I clutched her body with desperation. I didn't want to live in a world where Jinx wasn't in it to make fun of me. She was a little storm cloud of darkness. She was the mean younger sister I'd always wanted growing up.

Please. I can't live without her, I begged the gods.

Jinx was too smart to die like this. She had too much to offer the world. There would never be anyone like her. She was special. Unique.

I sobbed brokenly.

She was a part of my family.

If you save her, if you let her live, I'll do anything for her. This isn't right. Take me instead. Please.

The green lawn approached.

Rapidly.

I sacrifice myself. Take me instead. Let her live, I screamed silently into the void. *I don't care what she's done to me. It doesn't matter. She does.*

I reached desperately for the post to my right. Ripped my fingernails off my hands as I clawed at the wood like I could somehow stop our momentum.

Flesh pulled off bone.

I left a bloody trail behind.

But it didn't slow us.

Suddenly, a male voice whispered, "Welcome to the Consciousness. We've been waiting for you. You are more righteous than we thought. Your service begins. Now."

Memories flashed through my mind—the angels muttered to themselves

and clutched their heads after challenges. Convulsed like they were electrocuted. Like someone was speaking to them.

My eyes shot open.

A stinging sensation like nothing I'd ever experienced exploded down my spine.

My back bowed, and I screamed.

A thousand cracks erupted at once.

The ground was rapidly approaching as I writhed and bucked in the air—a frenzy of convulsing limbs.

We torpedoed.

Blue exploded in my peripheral vision, and there was a loud clattering noise.

The grass was disturbingly close.

My back throbbed with agony, but there was something *new* protruding from my flesh.

It was skin and bones.

A network of cartilage holding thousands of ice daggers.

No.

Holy fuck.

Midplummet, adrenaline exploded through my senses, and my jaw dropped open.

Time stopped.

I hung suspended in midair, unmoving, as the neurons in my brain took the new information and put the pieces together faster than I could consciously process.

The irregular shape of my ice daggers. Long and flat at the end and narrow at the other. Impossibly light, razor-thin, and sharp.

They had never been weapons.

My daggers were feathers.

Probabilities, statistics, and facts rushed through me as I struggled to make sense of what was happening.

The feather was all it took.

Sodium and potassium pumped signals across my nerves at lightning speed.

My eyes widened as the pieces clicked into place.

I understood. Everything.

Mother had had blue flames that differed from the rest of the fire fae.

Instead of the typical red flames, hers had been blue. Instead of a hot fire that burned, her flames had hurt but never left a single mark. After she'd torment me for hours, I'd lay shivering on the floor with my teeth chattering.

When the angels slammed their ice swords together, flames shot out.

It was the alchemy law of extremes: At its hottest temperature, fire mimics the properties of ice. At its coldest temperature, ice mimics the properties of fire.

When ice was cold enough, it formed flames.

It was obvious in hindsight.

The angels called me "sinful blood" because they knew *what* I was, and they knew what *she* had been.

Mother had been an angel without wings. And the others knew it.

For some reason, the High Court had positioned an angel on the throne of death. It was an inside job.

A cover-up.

I'd never developed fae powers as a child because I was never a fae and Mother had known it.

Her taunt about how I'd never be more than her made so much sense.

The slur carved into my back was a statement. Mother had wanted to make me in her image and ensure I never achieved what she couldn't.

In the beast realm, a maid had confronted Sadie and me. Her voice had been warped and distorted as she said,

*"One must join, and raise the rear,
Other must break, and bring the kings,
One must grow, and lose the fear,
Other must die, and rise with wings."*

It was the same voice that had just spoken to me and welcomed me into the Consciousness—some type of connection among angels.

It had found a way to speak to me even before I'd earned my wings.

It had guided me.

To this exact moment.

I'd assumed, since I was depressed and fearful, that "one" referred to me and "other" was a metaphor for Sadie embracing her powers.

Now it was obvious.

I was the *other*.

It was all predetermined: I'd been broken, I knew three heinous kings, a piece of me had died in the competitions, and I had wings.

Free will was a lie.

I snapped back into the moment.

My brain had processed everything in 0.2 seconds, but I was still free-falling.

I screamed as my body twitched from the force of the change that had ripped through me.

There was no time left and no miracles to be had.

I was back at square one, with the problem I'd always had at the academy. Knowing wasn't the same as doing.

No one was coming to save us.

No god would stop this fall.

Understanding everything didn't change the reality that Jinx was plummeting toward death and no god was going to step in and save Jinx from her fate.

There was only me.

Doom was a few seconds away.

Gritting my teeth, I tensed and flexed every muscle in my body. Sweat poured down my face as I tilted my shoulders to the side and spread cartilage wide.

Bones clicked and jarred together. Wings fanned behind me and caught against the wind.

We banked rapidly to the left.

Spiraled sideways toward a post.

I barely had time to shift Jinx in front of me before my back slammed against wood and crystal feathers clattered.

The wind exploded from my lungs, and Jinx tumbled backward out of my hands. She fell limply through the open air.

Paralyzed with outstretched arms, I could do nothing but watch.

As she fell.

For a long, horrible moment, my momentum kept me pinned to the post as Jinx disappeared out of view. Then I tipped forward and plummeted face-first after her.

It was a short fall.

I face-planted, and my nose exploded beneath me.

Blinking in dirt, I lay immobile.

Behind me the student section screamed encouragement, and their shouts jumbled together.

Jinx.

I strained to roll over as the heavy weight of my wings pinned me down.

They crushed me.

With every ounce of strength I possessed, I pulled myself upward. Tipping backward, I threw myself forward to counteract gravity and managed just barely to stay on my feet.

I staggered toward a child's limp body.

Bruises were already forming on her skin, but her limbs were attached. When her chest rose with a shaky breath, I nearly collapsed with gratitude.

The relief didn't last long.

Whoosh. Three kings landed on their feet with a crack as the dirt cratered beneath them.

The three devils had jumped from the tops of their posts and landed on their feet. It should have been impossible.

I forced myself to stand up straight, and I stepped toward Jinx.

White light still shot out of Scorpius's three eyes, and Orion's pink petals floated around him.

Malum pointed a flaming finger at Jinx.

No.

Still winded from the fall, with heavy wings holding me back, I couldn't move fast enough.

One second, Jinx was lying mostly unharmed.

The next moment, Jinx's leg was on fire.

Orion sang, "*Judgment is here*," as Malum's scarlet flames spread rapidly up her leg and left nothing but ashes behind.

"*Stop!*" I shrieked like a maniac as I flung myself at Jinx. I landed atop her small body, and turquoise leapt from my hands as I patted at Jinx's leg desperately.

Ice fought fire.

I nearly wept with relief when the flames dissipated.

The kings took a step forward and towered over us, blocking out the eclipse, casting us in cold shadows.

Three nightmarish villains with unbelievable powers.

Three men built for murder.

Death incarnate stood before us.

They were mindless killing machines.

Judge. Jury. Executioners.

As I stared up at them, visions flashed before me: cities on fire, people screaming for help as they burned to death. You could feel it in the air around the kings—the capacity for atrocity and the sheer lack of control.

How were they allowed to live? How could the sun god name these *creatures* his kings?

How could a god allow such monsters to live?

They were more weapons than men.

Who could stop them?

No one.

The potential for mass murder was written in the harsh planes of their faces, in the perfect cuts of their high cheekbones, in the muscled lines of their immense heights. I saw it every day at the academy. They lacked empathy for others. Everything was about dominance and asserting themselves.

They were more beast than man.

My stomach churned. Horror exploded across my synapses.

There was no way to reason with them in this state.

With monumental effort, I spread the bones of my wings and splayed my limbs so I covered Jinx's smaller frame with my own.

"To get to her, you'll have to go through me," I snarled up at them.

Scorpius's three eyes glowed creepily as he stared down without blinking. Silken petals drifted across my skin as Orion sang loudly, "*Justice must be served. She has committed an unspeakable wrong. Her soul is black.*"

Malum pointed his flaming finger down at us.

This was going to fucking hurt.

I held my hands up in front of me uselessly.

Once again, the world was drenched in shades of crimson.

I drowned in fire.

Burned.

Opened my lips and screamed.

Then—

Something exploded.

My ears rang like the sound barrier was broken.

Flashes of scarlet and teal lit up around me like bombs until my vision went white, then blank.

My thoughts disappeared. I was cocooned in a peaceful song. The tune was so soft and lyrical that it sounded like silence.

But it wasn't simply quiet.

It was fate.

Destiny.

A predetermined life path.

I floated lazily in the melody of a song that soothed every jagged edge of my existence. Pure contentment flowed through me.

I was yanked out of the safe place.

The world snapped into focus as someone grabbed me roughly.

Orion held me by my arms and shouted down at me.

Malum and Scorpius hovered beside him but they didn't look fully conscious. There was a glassy sheen to their expressions like they were still out of it.

Orion shouted something at me, but I didn't understand.

My ears rang.

I blinked, and Orion was gone. A crowd stood around me.

Beside me Jax cradled Jinx as he screamed at someone.

Cobra ripped off his pants and wrapped them around the stump where Jinx's leg had used to be. Jinx's body arched as she flung her head back. Her face twisted with pain.

I blinked with relief.

She was conscious. She'd be okay.

Sharp feedback stung my ears like someone had spoken with enchantment, but I couldn't make out any individual words.

Everything was garbled.

Jax gathered Jinx into his arms and sprinted toward the academy, and the rest of his legion followed. Sadie looked back over her shoulder at me with a tortured expression, but then she disappeared from view.

I blinked.

The angel with the mismatched eyes was saying something to the kings. The rest of the angels were staring down at me with wide eyes.

Malum shoved at the angel's chest, but no flames leaped off his skin.

The angel said something, and Orion threw a fist at his head. An angel shoved him backward, and all hell broke loose. Scorpius and Malum threw themselves at the angels, and they clashed in a spray of fists.

Was I hallucinating?

I opened my mouth to ask, but no words came out.

My lungs burned like I'd smoked a thousand enchanted pipes at once.

Luka wrapped his arms around my chest. The world spun as he lifted me off the ground, and I put my arms around his neck.

John grabbed my legs and positioned them around Luka's waist.

I tipped backward from the weight on my spine. John lunged forward and caught me. His fingers pressed against the overly sensitive skin, and I shivered.

Vegar and Zenith pulled the kings away from the angels and dragged them over to us. The twins carried me toward the academy with our teammates close behind.

When we passed the student section, I was glad my ears were ringing.

Students shouted things in my direction. Some pointed. Others made rude gestures. The rest gaped at me in shock.

Lothaire stood to the side with his mouth gaping.

He looked like he'd seen a ghost.

I buried my face in Luka's neck and breathed in his spicy scent. He smelled like warm male and safety.

When we entered the academy, I began to shake.

An ache throbbed through my muscles, and the burning sensation in my lungs was worse across my chest.

I felt disoriented and shaky.

Like I had a fever.

Luka laid me down on a makeshift cot, and I held on to him desperately. Fear skittered through me, and I was afraid to release him.

My wings were heavy and painful against my back, and I flexed my shoulder muscles to ease the pain.

Their weight disappeared as I felt them retract tight against my spine. It was a bizarre sensation. I could still feel their heaviness weighing me down, but they no longer protruded from my body.

I didn't know what was happening to me.

My teeth chattered from the sensation of cold while my chest burned like I was too hot. It was overstimulating and confusing.

I blinked back tears as I shivered.

Luka and John lowered themselves to the floor like they knew exactly what I needed. They lay beside me on the ruined mattress pad and pressed themselves flush against me.

I was sandwiched between them.

I was safe.

John pressed a gentle kiss against my temple, and everything went dark.

CHAPTER 47

SCORPIUS

REVELATIONS

Rebirth—Day 62, hour 7

The room was unnaturally silent when I woke up. Something rubbed me the wrong way, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

Something was different.

I had no memory of what happened after Lyla ordered us to reveal our powers. It was blank. The only thing I remembered was the angel captain telling us that Arabella belonged with his legion and all of us losing it.

I listened carefully. Only four people breathed in the room, and I could identify the sounds in my sleep.

I was alone in the room with my mates and Arabella, and I had no clue where the twins or demons were.

Muscles pulled and groaned as I sat up.

My body hadn't hurt like this since I was a kid. Not since five children had ambushed me after school with a crowbar and beaten me bloody while they mocked me for being blind. Back then I'd gone into a coma and hadn't woken up for days.

Now I felt the same, if not worse.

Agony scoured down my back, and every breath hurt my sternum. Corvus must feel the same, because he groaned as he shifted in the bed.

Something or someone had hurt us so badly that we'd needed days to recover.

That didn't happen to us as adults.

Ever.

Corvus swore violently as he realized Orion was still asleep in the bed, not moving. I pressed my ear to our Revered's chest, and his heart beat slowly.

He was in a deep healing state.

Silence was loud between us. My Ignis and I didn't need to speak to know we were thinking the same thing.

We'd failed our Revered.

Again.

Some Protector I was. My hands shook with the urge to find a knife and hurt myself.

Across the room, a familiar feminine voice sighed and distracted me from my thoughts. There was a low whistle as she blew out smoke.

Corvus's neck cracked as he snapped his head to look at her.

When my Ignis spoke, his voice was like broken glass. "Why do you have angel wings?"

I stilled.

"I'm practicing retracting and extending them," Arabella said calmly like she was talking about the weather.

We both sat still in shock.

I could practically taste my mate's unholy rage.

Corvus flung himself across the room at her with insane speed. For the next hour, he grilled Arabella about what had happened in the showcase.

The story she told was unbelievable.

"Tell us what happened," Corvus growled, and the bed creaked while Arabella's teeth chattered together like he was shaking her back and forth.

"I already told you," Arabella said with a heavy sigh.

Corvus growled for the tenth time in five minutes and snarled, "Give us the truth."

Arabella blew smoke from her lips and said with annoyance, "For the millionth time, I already told you."

"No, what you told us was an impossible lie. Now tell us the truth of what happened."

The wall cracked as Corvus punched it.

"Why don't you do me a favor and shut up? How about that?" Arabella's voice dripped with venom. "I'm done trying to reason with you. I already told you the truth!" Bedsheets rustled as she rolled over. "Leave me alone."

Corvus laughed cruelly. “No. I can’t do that. Not until I know what actually happened. My Revered is still unconscious. I can’t let this go!”

“*Oh my sun god!*” Arabella yelled. “*Then go hold your precious Revered and stop bothering me!*”

“No!” Corvus roared as he gnashed his teeth together loudly. “*You somehow stopped us, and you did something to him!*”

His voice dropped, and he said menacingly, “Do you understand that we’ve never been able to control our power once we started? Ever. Yet you tell me the girl was marked for death and she’s still alive? And that somehow you just *lay in front of her* and poof, you’re both fine?”

“Hmmm,” Arabella said sarcastically. “Yes. That’s exactly what happened.”

There was a struggling noise as Arabella tried to crawl out of bed but Corvus pinned her to the mattress.

A strange tightness burned my chest, and I stepped closer to my Ignis. Grabbing his shoulder, I tried to pull him back from her.

Arabella might be the most infuriating person ever to walk the realms, but she was still injured, and Malum was being rough with her.

For sun god’s sake, she had a slur carved into her back, and apparently, she’d sprouted angel wings.

Even I could see that she needed space.

Her voice might drip with aggression, but her breath was choppy like it hurt her to inhale. She was suffering, and Corvus was hurting her.

My Ignis was acting deranged around her lately.

It was like he lost all his common sense in her presence.

“Let her go,” I snarled at my Ignis as I grabbed onto his shoulder and pulled him back.

Corvus ripped himself away from my grasp, and Arabella swore. Bedding rustled, and skin smacked skin as he grabbed at her.

What was wrong with him?

“*Stop it, Malum, fucking stop it!*” I shouted as I once again grabbed him and tried to wrestle him away from her. “What are you doing?” I put him in a headlock. “She needs to heal. Leave her alone.”

“What’s going on?” Orion mumbled sleepily as he finally woke up.

I was too stressed to be relieved.

“You’re mated to an idiot,” Arabella said dryly.

Corvus lunged forward in my arms, and it took every ounce of strength I

possessed to stop him from getting to her.

He snarled like a rabid animal.

“Sun god, calm the fuck down. Now,” I ordered him.

Corvus stopped struggling. “She’s lying. She hurt us, and now the disguised fae queen just happens to be an *angel*. Please. Wake up, Scorpius. How many more secrets can a person have?” His voice deepened. “She’s been playing with us, and it ends today. *I want the truth!*”

Orion made a noise in the back of his throat, and he padded toward us. “Angel, sweetheart, are you okay?” he whispered breathlessly.

Arabella ignored him and scoffed at Corvus. “What are you going to do? Kill me?” She chuckled like the idea was absurd. “Since I just stopped your flames while you were a killing machine, good luck with that.”

Corvus’s muscles tensed as he said, “No one said anything about killing you. But there are other ways.”

The strange pressure in my chest became worse.

I bristled.

Arabella laughed cruelly. “Oh, what, are you going to stick me on a pike in front of your little hut?”

“*It’s not a hut, it’s a manor, and maybe you’ll finally get to see it from the stake!*” Corvus screamed back at her.

Every instinct in my body lit up.

“Fine,” Arabella said dryly. “It’s not a hut, it’s a shack. Feel better?”

My Ignis growled like a beast.

If he was fire, then she was kerosene.

I didn’t like how unstable he acted around her. Just three days ago, he’d whispered to me at night a plan to kill every person in the fae palace who’d allowed her mother to hurt her. He’d told me he was starting to care for her. Now we were talking about staking her?

He’d lost his mind.

Something about her made my Ignis crazy, and he needed to figure his shit out.

“We will *not* be hurting her,” I growled and shoved Corvus roughly across the room, away from Arabella.

Orion whispered loudly, “No. We will not.” His lyrical voice rang around the room like a threat.

Corvus made a choking noise. There was an explosion as it sounded like he chucked the remains of the wingback chair into the wall.

He shouted, “*See what she’s done? She’s tearing us apart!*”

Arabella let out a dry, humorless laugh. “This is why I’m going to exterminate all men.”

Orion chuckled, and I arched my brow in the direction of my Revered.

“*She’s not funny!*” Corvus screamed.

She smacked her lips around her pipe. “Orion laughed.”

Silence.

The wall cracked as Corvus punched it rapidly.

“What’s going on here?” John’s voice sounded from the door, and the demons made noises of disbelief behind him.

“Malum’s having a mental breakdown.” Arabella whistled softly as she blew out smoke. “What Dr. Palmer likes to call an episode.”

She rolled her eyes and mumbled, “My gut is telling me that giving him a journal is not going to resolve the problem.”

I barely stopped Corvus as he lunged at her. I put him in another headlock while Orion held his arms behind his back. He bucked against our hold.

She murmured, “Told ya.”

“Why is he acting like that?” Vegar asked cautiously.

“Because she’s lying.” Corvus gnashed his teeth aggressively. “She won’t tell us what actually happened in the showcase.”

“I told him, he just won’t believe me,” Arabella grumbled.

There was an awkward pause.

“Uh, we actually were just watching it,” John said. “Lothaire recorded it with the same enchantment he uses for all his battles. Apparently, the gods wanted us to—”

“I want to see it now,” Corvus cut him off and stopped struggling against us.

Goose bumps of premonition prickled my arms.

Orion and I released our hold on our mate, and he demanded, “Show me.”

John made a noise of agreement. “Lothaire was still in the classroom when we left. I’m sure he’ll show us if we—”

“Let’s go,” Corvus cut him off again as he stalked out the door.

I followed behind him but paused in the doorway. The pressure in my chest became a terrible ache like my soul was being ripped to pieces. My Revered made a choking noise beside me, like he also felt it.

“Arabella.” I turned. “Aren’t you coming?”

She grumbled and huffed as she got out of bed. There was a loud

clattering noise, the same one the angels made when they moved.

My mind blanked.

She really is an angel.

The sound disappeared, and I realized she must have retracted her wings.

Panic was quickly replaced with pain. Agony throbbed across my back, and weird pinpricks of discomfort streaked down my limbs. My face ached, and the skin beneath my eyes ached.

What had happened during the showcase?

I hadn't felt this much physical pain since childhood.

"Here, let us help you, bestie," John said to Arabella, and she grunted a thanks as clothing rustled like she'd leaned against the twins.

My knuckles cracked as I fisted my hands.

"Move," John said when they got to the doorway.

Orion made an aggressive noise in the back of his throat.

"Let's go," Corvus shouted from down the hall, and I reluctantly moved out of the way.

As we walked down the hall, Orion whispered in my ear, "Luka and John are supporting her. She's covered in bruises and cuts and looks like shit. She had huge blue angel wings, but she retracted them."

"I know," I snapped at him. "I can hear."

Orion scoffed at my attitude, and regret filled me. A Protector didn't treat his Revered poorly. Ever.

Lately I'd been testy with him all the time. It was unacceptable.

"Sorry," I whispered and wrapped my arm around his shoulders.

He leaned against me.

For the first time in my life, the touch of my Revered wasn't enough to calm the sensations boomeranging through me.

Something was very wrong.

Everything felt off.

When we entered the classroom, Lothaire was speaking to Corvus. "Yes, you can watch. Take a seat."

We sat down at our usual desk.

Orion pressed his lips near my ear as he prepared to describe everything that the enchanted projector showed. Our routine.

I dug my fingernails into my Revered's palm.

He tapped his fingers impatiently against the desk.

Corvus slumped down in his usual seat next to me. He huffed at Arabella

and the twins. “Stop cuddling in the classroom. It’s disgusting.”

He was *really* in a mood today.

“Take the stick out of your ass,” she grumbled under her breath so quietly that only I could hear.

Corvus sneered loudly, “What was that about an ass? You want me to beat yours?”

The twins breathed harshly.

“Are you threatening her?” Lothaire spat at the front of the classroom.

The three of us sat up straight. “No, sir,” Corvus growled as we all waited for the blow to fall.

There was a scratching noise as Lothaire rubbed at the stubble on his jaw. Then he said, “I have a feeling what you’re about to watch will be punishment enough.”

I swallowed thickly.

The desk creaked beneath us as my mates shifted uncomfortably beside me.

There was a familiar ticking as the enchantment began to play.

Orion whispered in my ear.

His tone changed as the projection played, disbelief dripping from his lips. Then horror.

I gripped his thigh when he said Arabella didn’t have a flame above her head.

My nails created holes in his sweatpants when he said she jumped and pulled the girl off the platform.

When wings exploded from her spine, I gouged his skin.

I drew blood when she slammed into the post.

Orion’s thigh muscle bunched as he described Arabella throwing herself atop of the marked girl.

Corvus held his breath when on the screen, Orion said he pointed his flaming hand down at her.

“She’s on fire now.” Orion’s voice broke.

All three of us went still.

Orion gasped, “Holy sun god.” He didn’t elaborate.

I shook his thigh. “What happened? Tell me.”

“She—” He swallowed thickly as he repeated what was happening on the screen. “—somehow put out Corvus’s flames. Both she and the child are unharmed.”

All three of my eyes widened.
Then he gasped like something worse had occurred.
I was afraid to ask, "What just happened?"
Orion's voice shook. "We stopped using our powers. Now we're fighting with the angels. Whatever she did pulled us out of the killing state."
"No," Corvus whispered.
Orion repeated, "We regained control because of her."
The room fell quiet as the projection stopped.
"Told ya," Arabella said snottily.
I keeled forward.
Cold sweat broke out across every inch of my body, and I pressed my face against the chilly desk.
Corvus wretched beside me.
Orion hyperventilated.
"What's happening to them?" John asked, and our teammates murmured with confusion.
Lothaire responded, "They've realized what we, the judges, did when we watched the tape."
"Realized what?" Arabella asked.
Corvus gagged louder.
"You're their missing mate," Lothaire said.
The realm stopped spinning as he spoke our realization aloud.
She laughed loudly. "No, I'm not."
"I don't think—" Orion's voice cracked. "I don't think that—" He broke off and breathed shakily. "I want to protect her."
Liquid splashed across the ground as Corvus lost the contents of his stomach.
Trepidation transformed into pure horror.
The desk shook from the force of my trembling. "It can't be," I said weakly. Desperately. Futilely.
But it made sense.
Orion's reluctance to being coddled.
His urge to defend us.
His aggressive characteristics.
We'd assumed he was just unique.
I'd always known in my bones that he wasn't a gentle guy.
We'd characterized him as such because he was quiet and physically

smaller than Corvus and me. Plus, he was breathtakingly stunning. Corvus always said he was the prettiest male devil he'd ever seen.

It had always made sense.

It had always been the most obvious explanation.

Until we'd met someone physically smaller than all of us—someone who spiraled and fell apart during battle; someone who grieved over the people she killed while the rest of us felt nothing; someone all of us wanted to protect.

The only person Corvus had described as prettier than Orion.

A person who all three of us were obsessed with.

A person we irrationally wanted to protect.

The woman that had given us something we'd never had: control.

A woman that had all the famed characteristics of a certain type of person. Someone who was different, physically and mentally, from the three of us.

A person who had my infamously grouchy Ignis apparently blushing and tongue-tied whenever she spoke to him.

The silence had started after she'd taken off the enchantment that disguised her.

I loved the quiet. It calmed me and allowed me to hear the world around me better.

The silence was peace.

The silence was our new mating song.

Our complete one.

"I think she's our Revered." Orion cleared his throat. "And I'm the other Protector."

Skin smacked against the desk, then the floor.

Our Ignis had passed out.

CHAPTER 48

ARAN

DESIGNATIONS

Rebirth—Day 62, hour 14

We stood in a line on the lawn of the arena.

Pipe hanging loose from my lips, I stared at the ocean. My wings were retracted tight against my spine, but it felt like boulders were sitting on my aching shoulders.

Salt burned my eyes.

The angel legion stood in a line with their wings proudly extended behind them. It was all for a show.

“Everyone here today has been blessed,” Lyla’s enchanted voice echoed across the island, and my ears buzzed. “The gods themselves have analyzed every second of the games.”

She paused. “And after careful consideration, the gods have determined that no more competitions are necessary. All teams will be given their demarcations for the war.”

The student section cheered.

Hollered and clapped.

They stomped their feet against the metal bleachers.

Lyla spread her arms wide as she said, “Every few millennia, a red giant explodes in the galaxy. It collapses in a solar system that contains a portal connecting it to realms within the jurisdiction of the High Court.”

White caps crested and crashed.

Sea-foam sprayed across black rocks and glistened maroon under the

eclipse.

I didn't blink.

I felt the weight of the kings' gaze on me, and I made a point to not look over at them.

Lyla's words were straight from a nightmare. "The resulting energy flow forces all portals open for indeterminate amounts of time. Centuries at the least."

The arena was hushed as everyone leaned forward to hear better.

I leaned back.

"The High Court works with the leaders of realms to guard and protect these points of entry. This phenomenon has occurred hundreds of times in history, and in most cases, it is not a problem," Lyla said calmly. "Until it is."

Another wave crashed against the shore.

The tide pulled it back before it could get away.

Wind stung my cheeks.

Lyla's voice had a dark edge. "The universe is infinite, and the location of all portals is unknown. When Red Giant 46B3 exploded three centuries ago, it forced open a portal to a realm that contained a sentient species. This opening allowed them to stream into other realms within the High Court's jurisdiction."

I took a deep breath.

"The species is called the ungodly, and they have infested multiple realms. Attempts to reason with them and eliminate infestations have been unsuccessful. They have taken over a realm and are on track to wipe out all civilization as we know it, if they are not stopped."

The sea shimmered crimson as light sparkled across water.

It was pretty.

"The gods are bound by higher oaths to protect all sentient life," Lyla's soft voice rang across the silent arena. "Unfortunately, in this case, that includes the ungodly. Their hands are tied."

People blanched and whispered.

Staggered.

Lyla paused, then said, "But the gods have not invested in our realms just to watch us fall. Gods cannot kill. But we serve them, and we can."

Her green hair glowed. "Today I will announce the players in this war. Tomorrow they will lead armies." Her voice rose. "Today I will name their roles. Tomorrow they will stand in front of our civilization and protect us

from this threat. Today they pick up the mantle of leadership. Tomorrow, they bleed to defend us all.”

Another wave crashed.

Foam gripped the rocks as it clung desperately to land and as it was dragged violently back into the churning sea.

“Behold these men and women!” Lyla flung her arms wide in our direction.

Students clapped thunderously as they gave us a standing ovation.

Legions shuffled into straighter lines as everyone stood taller. Pulled back their chests with pride.

I hunched lower. Blew out a smoking crow that settled on my shoulder. Talons stabbed through cloth and pinched my skin.

“First, the gods viewed the showcase as a success. The gods have chosen the shifter legion and academy legion to be their champions, with the understanding that the child will be separated from the kings on the battlefield.”

The cheering increased, and it reminded me of the screams of the dying.

I looked over at where Jinx was holding on to Jax’s back.

The *child* was Jinx and she would never see a battlefield if I had anything to say about it. From the way the shifters were glaring at Lyla, they agreed with me.

Lyla waved her hands wide. “Next, the angel legion has been named the generals. They will work closely with the champions to coordinate the war efforts.”

I imagined the ocean on fire.

Bloodred flames burning across the horizon.

“The next three teams will work specifically within their designations. The assassin legion will lead the spies. The devil legion will lead the assassins, and the leviathan team will lead the foot soldiers. All the legions will answer directly to the champions, who will work directly with the representatives of the gods.”

My right eyelid twitched.

She described the structure of a classic war machine.

The type designed to keep everyone close enough to commit atrocities but far enough away from one another to shield culpability.

Those at the top doing most of the former with the least of the latter. Wonderful.

I stared at the ocean.

Lyla smiled broadly. "That concludes the Legionnaire Games. Congratulations everyone. Students and competitors can mingle and rejoice. Well done."

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Bullets exploded and adrenaline pounded through my chest.

I froze.

But there was no scent of gunpowder. No gore.

Enchanted fireworks sparkled all around, and students cheered and streamed onto the field.

Bodies everywhere.

Competitors moved around me as they congratulated one another and gossiped about the war.

Frozen in time, I dissociated from myself.

Colors and textures disappeared.

Everything blurred.

A soft hand on my neck pulled me down, and I broke my staring contest with the ocean.

Large ruby eyes leaned close to my face.

"Thanks for saving Jinx," Sadie whispered brokenly. "They showed us the film, and I can't believe we came so close to losing her."

I inhaled enchanted smoke and exhaled slowly. "It wasn't like I had a choice," I mumbled.

Sadie threw her arms around me and buried her head in my shoulder. She trembled against me as tears soaked my sweatshirt, and she whispered softly, "I don't want to go to war."

I held her tighter. "Same, bitch."

"I'm too pretty for war," she whined.

I nodded in agreement and said sarcastically, "Military uniforms have never been my style. I don't have the boobs for a slutty soldier look. It will make me look too boxy."

Sadie gasped on a watery sob. "I just want to read smutty books and have family dinners. Maybe stab a couple of people who deserve it and call it a day. Not lead a *war*."

She cried harder, and I shook.

"Don't laugh at me," she wailed pathetically.

I couldn't hold back the noise that exploded from my lips. "Sorry, I know

it's a serious moment."

Sadie sobbed louder. "We're all gonna die."

"That is the goal. Why are you crying so violently?" I asked between chuckles.

"This is not helping, Aran," Sadie whined pitifully. "I'm trying to have a moment."

I snorted. "Is this because you're technically not the only champion anymore? Are you having a pity party because you're not special?"

"A little bit." Sadie smiled against my shoulder.

We chuckled at the joke as we hugged each other like touch alone could save us.

"Can you two stop embarrassing me?" Jinx snapped her fingers in my face. "Seriously, people are looking, and I'm tired of being asked if my mothers are lunatics."

We pulled back to stare up at her.

Jax grinned down at us as he gave Jinx a piggyback. Where her leg had been was a stump with a white bandage, but other than that, she looked healthy and hale.

Well, as healthy as a five-foot-tall emaciated pale maniac could look.

"People think we're your mothers. Me and Aran?" Sadie asked incredulously. "They actually think the two of us created you?"

If looks could kill, Jinx would have annihilated her on the spot.

Jinx spoke slowly like she was talking to idiots. "Yes, because you spread the rumor yourself."

Sadie's eyes widened. "But they actually believe it?"

"Yes," Jinx said through gritted teeth.

Sadie slowly turned around and lowered her forehead against my shoulder. She burst into sobs. "That's so beautiful."

Clearly, she was not handling the thought of war well. Sadie wailed loudly, and I patted her back awkwardly.

"I can't believe you're an angel." She cried out louder. "So beautiful."

I patted her harder.

Jinx wasn't wrong; other legions were staring at us with expressions of disgust.

I glared at them until they looked away.

Jinx stared down at me from Jax's back, and a strange expression crossed her face. "Good work, Aran." She cleared her throat. "You were impressive."

Thanks for saving me.”

I beamed up at her.

She mumbled something about me getting too cocky, but she blushed as I blew a kiss at her.

I loved this moment for us.

Before I could needle the bizarrely bashful teenager, the three kings were looming above us, blocking out the light, and if that wasn't a metaphor for my life, then I didn't know what was.

Malum growled, “Why is she touching...” He trailed off as I arched my brow.

Flames danced across the top of his head as he fisted his hands and stared down at me. He relaxed his posture and tried to seem calm, but smoke puffed from his nose and ruined the effect.

“Yes, Ignis?” I asked haughtily.

He swallowed thickly.

Scorpius dragged his hand across his jaw, and Orion shifted back and forth uncomfortably.

I smiled as I squeezed Sadie tighter against me. “What was it you were going to say?” I asked.

Malum's silver eyes gleamed with unspoken emotion.

Did I know what an Ignis was? No.

But I could pick up on context clues, and it obviously had something to do with devil mates. Did I care? Also no.

But Malum clearly did, and that was all that mattered.

It was nice to watch him squirm.

Truly the highlight of my day.

Ever since they'd had a delusional episode and convinced themselves I was their mate, they'd been acting all weird toward me. It was freaking me out.

They kept following me around, which they always did, but now it just seemed pathetic.

Malum had dark circles under his eyes, and they were bloodshot.

A familiar look.

I pressed a kiss to the top of Sadie's forehead, and all three of the kings doubled forward like I'd punched them.

I rolled my eyes and covered her face with kisses.

Sadie moaned dramatically like she was getting aroused, and I gently

kicked her to make her knock it off.

“So hot,” she mumbled like a moron.

Malum moaned pitifully like I was torturing him, and I swallowed down laughter. It was *too* easy with them.

Horse screamed expletives and flapped aggressively on my shoulder.

I agreed with his sentiment.

Malum bit down on his lower lip like he was physically trying to stop himself from screaming at me. Scorpius stared at Horse with wide eyes, and Orion winced and rubbed at his arm.

“As much as I enjoy this little moment,” I said sarcastically, “I also don’t like it. Like, at all. For the tenth time, let me be very clear. I am not your missing mate. I *hate* the three of you.” I enunciated each word like I was talking to a child, “You were not nice to me. You started to treat me kind of okay, and then you left me to suffer as it rained glass.” I scoffed. “Then you accused me of being a liar.”

I narrowed my eyes like I was thinking. “I believe there was something about putting my body on a spike in front of a shack?”

Malum blanched and he looked like he was going to be sick. His bronze face paled.

He looked distraught.

Good.

“I will never be your mate,” I said cruelly.

Malum’s wide shoulders expanded as he fisted his hands and took a step toward me.

Flames shot out of his mouth as he spat, “It doesn’t work that way. You’re our Revered, which means it’s our life purpose to protect you.” He clenched and unclenched his fists. “Even if you’re a woman and an angel. You’re *ours*. I said certain things in the heat of the moment that I regret. It will *never* happen again.”

Scorpius nodded. “You don’t understand. You’re the center of our mate bond. We were born to cherish you. You’re our purpose.”

Who bought their crap?

I pointed at Orion as I glared at Malum. “I thought he was your purpose for living? Two weeks ago, you didn’t hesitate to sacrifice me to save him.”

All three of them made wounded noises.

“No offense,” I said to Orion. “I honestly don’t hold that against you, since they—” I mimed punching myself in the head and stuck my tongue out

like I was dead.

Warm brown eyes widened, and he took a step toward me.

His stunning features looked sad, and it broke my heart to step away from him.

But someone had to do it.

I shook my head, and Sadie stumbled as I pulled her back with me. “But I still am not interested in being your mate.” I waved my fingers at them. “The three of you can find someone else.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Malum snarled through gritted teeth.

He dragged his hands over his shaved head like he was losing his shit. The dagger tattooed on his neck glinted. Pink petals floated across Orion’s collarbone, and I was 90 percent sure the eye on Scorpius’s neck winked at me.

I took another step backward and said, “We have a working relationship and nothing else. We’ll remove the slave tattoo, win the war, and part ways.”

“No,” Orion said loudly, and the lyrical note echoed around the arena.

Everyone stopped moving.

Every single competitor and student went still.

Like zombies.

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you threatening me?”

“No,” Orion mouthed. “That’s not what I meant.” His eyes filled with sadness as his perfect features became crestfallen.

He was so lovely I wanted to tell him I didn’t mean it.

Like a switch had been flipped, everyone resumed talking and moving about like they hadn’t just been frozen.

Goose bumps exploded down my spine, and my feathers fluttered.

The power the kings had was obscene.

It was ghastly.

Instead of taking the hint, they walked toward me like they were going to attack.

Sadie squeaked in my arms and wailed dramatically, “Protect me, Aran.”

“Really.” I pushed her off me.

“What?” she asked. “Technically, you’re the only one who can protect me from them.”

“Go bother your mates. I need to deal with the psycho devil men.” As soon as the words left my lips, Cobra swooped in and grabbed Sadie by the back of the neck.

Her mates piled around her protectively like they'd just been waiting for us to stop hugging so they could grab her.

"You know we can hear you?" Scorpius sneered.

I rolled my eyes. "That's the point."

"She's pretending to shoot you with a finger gun," Orion whispered, and Scorpius snapped back, "I don't need to know that."

I pretended to shoot him faster, with both hands as quickly as I could.

"Now she's shooting you rapidly," Orion said.

Scorpius's eye twitched.

"Aran!" John shouted, and I swiveled toward him, grateful to have a buffer between myself and the kings.

He jogged over with Luka following behind. "Sorry for the delay. Luka and I just wanted to confirm before we came and asked."

John's easygoing grin wobbled, and he clutched onto his twin's shoulder for support. He blushed a deep red as he gazed at me intently.

I arched my eyebrows back at him. "Hit me with it. I mean, it's not like we just found out we're leading a realm-wide war."

John relaxed and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll keep you safe, Aran." He grinned and trailed his fingers across my back where my wings were retracted underneath the skin. My knees wobbled.

Pleasure spiked.

Then pain.

Scorpius cocked his head to the side with a scowl while Malum and Orion stared at where John's fingers were skating across my back.

Luka took a step closer and flanked me on the other side.

Their body heat chased away the chilly air.

I leaned closer to the twins and relaxed into their friendly embrace.

"Will you accept this?" Luka pulled a glittering diamond bracelet out of his pocket.

The diamonds were stunning and bright and dripped with black jewels.

I fingered the cold weight of John's necklace; I'd honestly forgotten I'd been wearing it.

He looked so unsure and earnest that I smacked his shoulder with a grin and said, "Of course, I'd never turn down diamonds. I'm not dumb."

Luka beamed down at me.

I almost staggered backward from the amount of happiness radiating off the normally stoic man.

“That’s not all we wanted to ask,” John said as he stepped away from me and stood beside his twin. Standing side by side, they were physically identical, but their energy was like night and day.

You could see it in the way they held themselves.

John’s posture was loose, like he was aloof and perpetually unbothered by life. Luka stood ramrod straight. His muscles were tight like he was ready to fight at any second.

Both their cheeks turned pink as they stared at me.

Then they fell to their knees in tandem.

John’s voice shook as he said, “Aran, will you accept our betrothal jewelry and agree to link your life with ours in love? For all of eternity?”

I blinked.

“What?” I whispered as confusion filled me.

Luka raked his hand through his messy dark hair and stared up at me like I meant everything. “We were bound by an obligation somewhere else, but we’ve been released from our obligation to pursue our true love. Our future wife.”

I pressed my hand to my chest.

“Um, are you sure?” I asked incredulously. “You know a war is coming, right?”

My heart was pounding against my sternum.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life,” John said in a serious tone. “We want to be by your side, no matter the circumstances.”

I forgot how to breathe.

John grinned bashfully. “As you’ve probably guessed, bestie, we’re only part human.” He winked and flashed his dimples. “If you want to get technical.”

I blinked rapidly.

“We’re the Princes of Darkness,” Luka said.

John nodded and looked chagrined. “We’d tell you more, but then we’d have to kill you.” He winked, then his expression fell. “But this isn’t some scheme to bond with you and get out of our duties. We’ll always have obligations elsewhere. It’s just we both met you and knew that we didn’t want to be away from you.”

Luka stared at me intently. “We couldn’t do it.”

“Plus”—John smiled—“we have lots of cousins, and none of the kings or queens in our family had approved a betrothal request. They always found

them lacking.”

“Until you,” Luka said.

“Father actually demanded we unite with you after we gave him your name. You’re wearing the Necklace of Death, and it is the only one in all the realms. Many people have died to possess its beauty.” John winked cheekily. “It reminds me of you.”

Luka pointed to my bracelet.

“And that is the Bracelet of Power. They both are rumored to bring their wearer glory. It’s glorious, just like you.”

My face warmed impossibly hot.

“Wow,” I whispered.

The precious stones burned where they lay across my flesh.

“Aran, will you be the wife of the Princes of Darkness?” John asked softly as he looked up at me with wide eyes.

“Please,” Luka finished for him.

The world was shades of suffocating gray.

Time kept slipping through my fingers.

Nothing made sense half the time.

But they made sense.

For once in my life, I wanted to be someone’s first choice. I was tired of fighting against people.

I wanted people standing by my side.

“Yes,” I blurted out impulsively as tears spilled down my cheeks. As soon as I said the words, a sense of calm washed over me. It felt right.

I threw myself into their warm arms. “I’ll be your wife.”

“What?” Malum roared and tried to pull me away from them. “No, you can’t accept it. I let that charade go on because I knew it didn’t matter. You’re *our* Revered.”

Standing tall, the twins shoved me behind them protectively.

My twins.

Darkness glimmered around them.

“You can’t bond with them,” Scorpius sneered beside Malum. “You’re ours. We know we messed up, and we’ll make it up to you. But this. This can’t happen.”

Orion nodded as Malum smoldered.

I smiled over John’s shoulder at the kings, eyes still watering from emotions, and said, “I already told you. I refuse to be your Revered. I accept

their proposal. Get over it.”

John turned around and pulled me into his arms.

I wrapped my legs around his waist and buried my face in his neck. Luka hugged my back and sandwiched me between them.

Malum exploded into flames as he hurled expletives at me, and his mates held him back.

“Dude, I really love you,” John whispered.

I peppered kisses across his jawline and asked, “Bestie, are we worried that we’re acting rashly?”

“Fuck no,” John snarled with uncharacteristic vehemence. “You’re everything to me. Do you think I hold everyone up in the freezing ocean for hours?”

Luka grunted in agreement and said gruffly, “We’ve only ever felt this way for you.”

I couldn’t hold back my chuckle. “You guys are so obsessed with me.”

“I know,” they said at the same time.

Suddenly Sadie was squealing like a lunatic and hugging the three of us. “We’re all going to be one big family,” she wailed.

John and Luka stiffened.

“Don’t touch her. She’s ours, not yours,” John warned.

Sadie and I laughed together.

We rejoiced like we didn’t have a care in the world.

The rest of the hour passed in a blur of celebrating with the twins while Malum stalked us across the arena.

The party continued into our bedroom with competitors and students passing around bottles of demon brew. Somewhere along the way, our room had become the designated party space, and everyone filtered in.

I was on the bed. John and Luka sat flush against me on either side, passing a bottle back and forth.

Our legs hung off the edge of the mattress.

Knees kicking back and forth.

Music filtered in, and there was a cheerful buzz about as everyone chatted and rejoiced the end of the Legionnaire Games. Every few seconds, someone passed by and congratulated us.

I was wearing John’s oversize sweatshirt, puffing on my pipe.

Coziness seeped through me.

Both the twins’ arms were flung over my shoulders.

“I can’t believe you both want to marry me,” I said with a chuckle as I took a long sip of the demon brew and chased it with some enchanted smoke from my pipe.

A nice full-body buzz had my limbs feeling light.

Head buzzing pleasantly, I poked at my cheeks and wondered when my face had gone numb.

John’s fingers were tracing a circle on my arm, and it was highly distracting.

Luka’s spicy scent made my mouth water.

Their thighs were pressed on either side of mine.

The buzzing in the room increased as more and more people filtered in. Someone closed the curtains, and the room was once again shadows and flames.

There were so many people that I couldn’t see any of my other teammates. Sadie had disappeared with her mates, and the bedroom was a sea of strangers.

“I can’t believe you agreed to marry both of us,” John countered as he nudged me with his shoulder.

I took a bigger gulp of demon brew and nudged him back.

“Do you...” I couldn’t get the words out and tipped my head back to chug the drink like my life depended on it.

John elbowed me and flashed his dimples. “What were you going to ask?” He grabbed the bottle from my hands and took a swill.

Luka stared at both of us with an inscrutable expression, the one he always wore.

His silent energy was intimidating.

I sucked on my pipe with so much force that it hurt my cheeks, and my lungs burned from a large quantity of enchanted smoke.

“Spit it out, dude.” John clapped me on my back, above where the wings protruded from my shoulder blades. He flashed a dimple as he grinned at me. His eyes were glassy, dark hair messy, and energy easygoing and friendly. Familiar.

“Are you sure—” I paused to grab the bottle out of John’s hands and chugged. “Are you sure you like me as more than a friend?” I blurted out.

The thighs pressed against me tensed.

Both John and Luka straightened their spines and looked down at me with similar expressions.

Eyebrows raised.

I felt a blush burn my cheeks, and I stared down at my cut-covered hands. *Why would you ask them that when you still haven't healed? What are you thinking?*

They'd told me they loved me, but John had said it before with Sadie when we were talking about friendship. A marriage proposal seemed black and white on the surface, but in the realms, alliances were all about power and strength. It could have nothing to do with romance.

"Aran," John whispered.

I couldn't swallow around the lump in my throat. "It's fine, don't worry about it," I mumbled as I stared down at my blurry pipe.

There was a pressure behind my eyes, and everything became blurry.

Somewhere among John taking care of me after the first competition, the punishment, and Mr. Hyde being Luka, I'd stopped thinking of the twins as friends. I'd started noticing how entrancing their dark eyes were and admiring their whipcord strength.

It hadn't happened all at once; it was gradual.

But now the emotions were real. Suffocating.

My lower lip trembled.

Luka moved his hand and rested it on the back of my neck gently.

His grip tightened. He choked me and yanked my head back.

Luka's dark eyes stared down at me intently. "I thought John made it clear what we felt."

I opened my mouth to respond, and soft lips stole my breath away.

CHAPTER 49

ARAN

MOMENTS

Rebirth—Day 62, hour 23

John kissed me like he was trying to crawl under my skin. He pressed me back with his punishing lips as Luka choked me.

Demon brew made my head spin.

Enchanted drugs gave me a full-body tingle.

Little zips of pain streaked down my spine, but I was so intoxicated I barely felt them. I was really glad I had decided to keep the side effect of the enchantment a secret.

The twins wouldn't be touching me like this if they knew.

But there was nothing else in all the realms I wanted to be doing.

When John pulled his head away from mine, he was breathing heavily and his lips were deliciously swollen. I reached up and ran my fingers through his dark locks. His hair was soft as silk.

"We seem to have an issue here," Luka said with an odd tilt to his voice. I looked over to find him studying me and John with a gleam in his hooded eyes.

During the kiss, the three of us had shifted closer together.

I was sandwiched tightly beneath them.

The bed was comfy. Bodies danced and mingled around us in the darkness of the party.

My heart pounded, and my breathing was erratic.

A tingling sensation coursed through my bloodstream and made

everything fuzzy in the best sort of way.

John leaned closer so his face was inches from mine. “Did Aran just ask if we thought of her as more than a friend?”

Luka’s face hovered right beside his twin’s. “I think she did, brother.”

“I think I know how to rectify that.” John’s minty breath mixed with Luka’s spicy scent and made my mouth tingle.

John activated his powers, and a wall of sparkling black spread along the bed and created a barrier. It shimmered, translucent, and I could still see the party beyond.

“We can see them, but they can’t see us,” John explained. “But they can still hear us.”

I dragged my tongue across my lips. I tasted them.

Luka groaned, and John made a rough noise.

John placed his hands on either side of my hips. His fingers trailed gently across the skin underneath my sweatshirt.

Music played softly.

People laughed and talked.

Luka pressed the demon brew bottle to his lips, then he leaned forward and captured my mouth with his.

“Drink, Aran,” John whispered as Luka pressed the warm liquid into my mouth with his tongue.

The intensity in Luka’s dark eyes was overwhelming. He looked wicked in the firelight.

I tipped my head back and swallowed.

“Good girl, taking it from his tongue,” John whispered in my ear as his twin took another sip from the bottle and kissed the liquid into my mouth.

Little pinpricks of pain shimmered down my spine.

Everything was hazy and I barely felt any pain. All I could concentrate on was the spicy taste of Luka on my lips and the way John’s callused fingers danced across my skin.

Luka licked across my lips and groaned roughly into me.

John reached further up underneath my sweatshirt and he tweaked both my nipples.

Stars exploded behind my eyes, and it was my turn to moan into Luka’s mouth.

“So perfectly sensitive,” John whispered in my ear as he casually rolled my nipples between his fingers like he wasn’t making my core spasm with

need.

Luka's tongue pressed further into my mouth as he said, "She's exquisite."

The pain dancing down my spine was far away, and it felt like it was happening to someone else.

The twins were all I knew.

Where they began, I ended; where they ended, I began.

A drunk partygoer stumbled into the side of the bed and looked confused as they hit the shield. We bounced on the impact. Neither John nor Luka looked over at them. Their attention was focused on me.

Like I was the center of their world.

All of a sudden, John picked me up and pulled me off his brother's mouth so I was sitting draped sideways across his lap. His hardness pressed against my ass.

Luka sat on the bed to our right. He shifted closer to us and wrapped both his hands around my neck above the diamond necklace. Both his thumbs rested on the front of my throat.

He gradually exerted pressure until I couldn't think.

I angled my head to the side and gasped for air into John's mouth as his twin reached across us both and choked me like he loved me.

Luka released my neck and grabbed my thighs. He pulled them slightly apart. I balanced on one of John's muscular legs, spread open atop him.

"Lift your hips," Luka ordered.

I obeyed.

Luka ripped my sweatpants off and threw them aside. Cold air wafted across my sensitive flesh, and I squirmed against John's leg, hyperaware that I wasn't wearing underwear and he could feel my wetness.

I pulled my head back and gasped. "There are people around."

Luka grinned wickedly. "So?"

"Good point," I mumbled as my cheeks flushed from the embarrassment of momentarily forgetting my slutty values.

Sun god, it was hard work being a whore. But somebody had to do it.

Luka fell to his knees in front of the bed. The shield expanded backward to include him.

John grabbed my thighs and positioned me so I was facing forward on his leg.

He pulled my knees open. I was exposed as he whispered in my ear, "Let

Luka show you what it means to be betrothed to the Princes of Darkness.”

“What does that...” My question was cut off by John turning my head to the side and capturing my mouth with his swollen lips.

The man kissed like he was drowning and I was air. He consumed me like he was trying to meld himself with me. Like he was trying to crawl under my skin.

He didn't kiss me like a friend.

He kissed me like he was my destiny.

He kissed me like he was my fictional lover who couldn't live without touching me. Like he would raze the realms and kill anyone who looked at me wrong.

I shivered from the intensity and almost forgot that his hands had my thighs pulled wide open and Luka had fallen to his knees before us.

My eyes flew open, and I tipped my head back against John's shoulder. And he leaned down to kiss me from above.

I fucking remembered.

Luka's tongue licked against my most sensitive flesh. My knee-jerk reaction was to close my legs against the foreign sensation, but John's grip was like a vise, and I couldn't move an inch.

He kept my legs wide open for his twin.

A group of glamorous women in purple dresses laughed loudly a few feet away. They looked around the room greedily like they were searching for a competitor or someone important to fuck.

A drunk leviathan competitor backed away from the shimmering black wall as he stumbled through the party.

The room was cast in darkness, but it wasn't pitch-black. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

Luka's tongue moved leisurely through my folds. He slid his hands underneath my ass and squeezed my cheeks. He tipped my hips up wantonly.

The pleasure was so intense, and I was so drunk on demon brew, that I barely noticed the zinging sensation down my spine.

Luka moaned loudly.

“People can hear,” I whispered as I buried my face in John's neck. Sandalwood and musk filled my senses.

Instead of letting me go like I expected, John gripped me harder and pulled my legs wider. “Good.” He turned his head and nuzzled the side of my neck.

“Let them hear who you belong to,” Luka growled into my sensitive flesh.

I’d forgotten how dangerous Mr. Hyde was.

How intoxicating he was.

“Fuck, she just gushed all over my tongue,” Luka groaned into my core, and I tipped my head back further as blinding pleasure made everything tingle.

“Good.” John lapped gently on the top of my collarbone. “Such a good girl. You’re so wet for us. Such a perfect little bestie.”

Luka licked me from my clit to my taint, and I moaned loudly.

John shifted his hips beneath me and ground his hardness against me, creating the most delicious friction.

It was overwhelming.

Luka sucked my clit into his mouth and flicked his tongue rapidly over it. He plunged his thumb inside me while his pointer finger traced against my other hole.

John nibbled on my neck.

I moaned loudly as white spots danced across my vision, and my core clenched with impossible tightness.

The group of women looked over. One of them narrowed their eyes with confusion.

I whimpered. “Cover my mouth, I’m too loud.” I looked at John pointedly.

John released my skin with a loud smacking pop and looked down at me. “Why would I do that?” His voice was rough, and his eyes were glazed over with lust.

He pressed his erection harder against my backside as his twin traced along my hole.

“People,” I gasped. “Looking.”

Luka pressed his face harder into my core, and he licked at just the right angle. Everything went black as it felt like I was falling away from myself. All I knew was pleasure.

John chuckled darkly and pushed his finger between my lips. “Suck, Aran,” he ordered.

I mindlessly obeyed.

He smirked as he slowly pressed that same finger into my back hole, the one his twin had been tracing.

Luka pulled his thumb out of my core and inserted two fingers while he licked greedily.

The stars became fireworks.

The streaks of pain along my spine were so faint that they somehow added to the intensity of the moment.

John kissed me openmouthed, leisurely exploring me with his tongue, while he held my butt with his finger resting against the rim of my asshole. He pushed forward the smallest amount, just enough that I felt overwhelmingly full.

John mumbled against my lips, "I want everyone at the party to hear who you belong to."

Luka added another finger into my core as he ate me out like a starving man. When he sucked on my clit, John forced his finger deeper into my ass, and the pleasure became too much.

It exploded inside me.

I tumbled into bliss.

Waves of pleasure pulsed through me as Luka lapped at me greedily. I moaned as I squeezed my eyes shut and rode the waves.

John's teeth grazed gently along my neck as he licked my skin like I was a popsicle.

My moan became a small shriek.

"Let them know," Luka ordered as he sucked on my clit, "what it means to be our betrothed. Let them hear you."

I moaned loudly. Unashamedly.

And I didn't care if everyone at the party heard us.

All I knew was that John held me on his lap while Luka had his face buried in my heat. My pants were around my ankles, and partygoers danced inches away. It was the hottest thing I'd ever experienced in my life.

Between the twins I was safe.

My head spun with lightness, and the world glimmered.

Warmth washed over me. Everything became unfocused and dreamy in the best way.

I felt like I was drifting away from my body on a high of incorporeal pleasure.

Luka stood up with my essence all over his face, and I smiled at him without a thought in my mind.

"Aw, she's such a good girl that she went into subspace," Luka said as he

stroked my chin softly. “You want to do more or is that enough for you, my little dictator?”

I shook my head and nuzzled my face against John’s neck.

John chuckled, and the warm vibrations made me smile against the side of his neck. I nuzzled against him. “You’re so adorable.” He pressed a gentle kiss to my temple.

Luka tipped my chin up. “You have to use your words.”

I closed my eyes as I pressed my face against Luka’s palm. Deliciously spicy. They were both warm and cozy.

My head floated away.

“Okay, looks like bedtime it is,” Luka said firmly as he pulled his hand away.

I jerked and shook my head.

It took me long moments to remember how to speak. Everything was foggy and warm. Safe.

Finally, I was able to say, “No. I want to do more.”

I needed more.

Even in this hazy lust of wonderfulness, I knew that there was something serious at play. It was important that I enjoyed this while it lasted. I needed to experience the pleasure while I could.

It mattered that I was extremely intoxicated on demon brew. It was numbing the pain.

“Are you sure?” Luka asked with a serious tone. He stood in front of the bed and tipped my head back to study my face intently.

“Yes.” I begged shamelessly, “Please. I want to so badly.”

“Shit, don’t say that, bestie.” John’s dick jumped beneath me.

Luka’s eyes darkened as he stood over both of us, holding my chin. After a long moment—where it felt like he was looking into my soul—he nodded. “Then you’re gonna fuck us both right here.” His thumb traced slowly over my lower lip. “You’re going to be our wife after all. It’s only fair.”

I nodded eagerly up at him.

The warm, dreamlike state made everything feel amazing.

John flashed his dimples as he kissed my neck and reached down to drag his fingers through my core. “Aran, you’re dripping for us.”

My cheeks flushed, and I squirmed as his fingers touched me intimately.

“Take me,” I begged, then flushed harder and hid my face against John’s warm chest.

He laughed and whispered against my temple, “Dude, you have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for you to ask.”

Sunshine burst inside my chest.

What I felt for the twins went beyond words. It went beyond destiny.

The three of us were inevitable.

CHAPTER 50

JOHN

BETWEEN BETROTHED

Rebirth—Day 62, hour 24

She was perfect.

Luscious turquoise curls tumbled across her shoulders and pooled around her waist. Large blue eyes were glossy with desire. The prettiest red stained the tops of her high cheekbones. She sat sprawled across my thigh, and I held her waist to support her.

Luka stood in front of us, trembling from arousal and the sheer intoxication of tasting such an exquisite creature.

I was jealous that he'd gotten to go down on her first, but I knew it was irrational. I'd taste her soon enough.

Aran had her pants around her ankles, and her long, stunning legs parted while she sat on my lap. She looked back at me with pure desire and trust. Completely trusting.

I groaned and bit my knuckles.

Luka reached into his sweatpants and gripped the base of his dick harshly to stop himself from coming at just the sight of her. I understood.

His cheeks were red, and he was biting down harshly on his lower lip. My recalcitrant twin was staring at the woman on my lap like she was his salvation.

Everything about sharing her with my twin was better than I could have ever imagined.

Beyond my wildest dreams.

She was so powerful and strong.

She was everything.

But above all else, she was my best friend.

Pressure built behind my eyes from the force of the emotions whipping through me. How had I ever gotten so lucky?

Aran smiled prettily back at me.

Luka gripped his dick and ordered, "John, pull down your pants."

I understood immediately what he was getting at, and I obeyed.

He gently grabbed Aran under the armpits and lifted her up off my lap while I pushed my sweatpants down to my ankles.

I spread my thighs eagerly and leaned back on the bed as I rested on my forearms.

Luka gently sat our girl back down positioned across my lap. My eyes rolled back in my head as Aran leaned forward.

Our pants were around our ankles, and Aran was sitting on my lap with my cock jutting up obscenely between the juncture of her thighs.

She leaned forward and rubbed her delicious wetness against my length. It was so different from when we'd been on the field during the punishment.

I could actually relax and enjoy what was happening without being stressed about her mental health and safety.

She rubbed against me, and both of us groaned loudly at the friction.

Luka pulled out his cock, and silver glinted. A large ring hung from the head. He stroked his dick slowly as he watched us.

Aran reached down and gripped my dick with her hand. "It's so thick," she whispered as she tried to wrap her fingers around it but couldn't.

Luka's hips jerked as she ran her fingertips over the weeping head.

Her innocent touch and words inflamed both of us.

"You're going to fuck that cock," Luka whispered as he reached forward with his free hand and traced over her delicate cheekbones. Bruises and cuts still marred her flesh, but they did nothing to detract from her beauty. If anything, they showcased how resilient she was.

Our little warrior.

Aran nodded up at Luka with a glassy expression as her face flushed warmer. Her side profile was beyond stunning.

He stared down at her with unconstrained lust.

Of course my funny bestie would respond to us beautifully and fall into subspace under his dominance.

She was perfect for us.

I couldn't remember the last time a partner, man or woman, had trusted us enough to lose themselves completely during sex. She was letting us take care of her.

She nuzzled her head against his palm like a ferocious kitten.

Luka gripped her cheeks firmly and pulled her face toward his. He peppered kisses all over her cheeks and forehead as she rubbed herself against my dick wantonly.

"You're such a good girl. I'm going to get you so many jewels," Luka promised as he fingered the priceless jewelry we'd given her.

She gripped my dick tightly, and I jerked my hips forward. I moaned, then said breathily, "There's a diamond crown in the family coffers that would look perfect with your curls, bestie."

My weeping cock juttled up between her legs.

I made a mental note to request the crown immediately. I wanted her dripping in diamonds.

"Are you ready to take him?" Luka asked her as he reached underneath her sweatshirt and plucked at her nipples. She arched prettily when he touched them.

As he played with her, she closed her eyes and whimpered. She shifted, and wetness coated the side of my dick where she was pressed against it.

She was drenched.

"Are you going to take his cock like a good girl?" Luka asked softly as he plucked her nipples.

Aran's eyes were completely glazed over, and her nod was jerky. She pressed herself against me to create more friction. We both moaned.

"Not like that, little dictator," Luka said roughly, and she flung her head back with a groan. He must have pinched her nipples.

"Fuck," I gritted out as she writhed on my lap. I couldn't take any more teasing. I sat up and scooped us forward so I was sitting on the edge of his bed with my feet pressed against the floor for support.

Luka pressed a kiss to the top of her forehead and whispered, "Now be a good girl for John."

She nodded as she flushed brighter.

I groaned again at how perfectly responsive she was. It was unreal.

I spread her legs wide and gave Luka a view of her pretty, glistening pink flesh. Then I easily lifted her up by her thighs and slowly pressed her down

onto the mushroom head of my cock.

She threw her head back and moaned wantonly.

I pulled her back so I could see where we were connected. My thick cock looked obscene as it slowly stretched into her flesh.

“You’re so tight, Aran, but you take me so deep. You were made for me,” I said roughly as I held her on my lap and pushed her down on my dick.

Aran’s eyes were squeezed tight shut. Her thighs trembled as little breathy gasps of pleasure fell from her lips.

Luka stroked his pierced dick slowly as he stared at where we were connected.

Partygoers danced around us, and someone called my name to get my attention. I ignored them. The only things that mattered were the two people in front of me.

And the exquisite heat sinking down on my dick as Aran trusted me to take care of her.

She was so comfortable with me she lost herself and let me take over. She trusted me to take care of her.

My best friend was perfect.

I bounced her up and down and rubbed her clit. We both panted as I said, “I’m going to fill my bestie up with cum. Wanted to do this again since the challenge. Pump you full of me. It’s all I’ve been able to think about.”

Aran moaned louder and louder, her voice getting raspier as she bounced on my lap. Wetness flooded across my fingers as I rubbed her clit harder.

The music covered most of the noises, but there was no mistaking what was happening on the bed. Anyone who listened would know we were fucking our betrothed on the bed.

Everyone would know she was more than just my best friend.

She was mine.

Period.

At the thought, I slammed her down roughly on my cock, and Aran tipped her head back. She opened her mouth and twitched as she fluttered around my dick.

Wetness gushed over my fingers as she came.

My eyes rolled back, and I buried my nose in her ice-scented neck as I joined her in release.

Luka fisted turquoise curls and pulled her head forward.

“Be a good girl and swallow, wife.” He pressed the pierced mushroom

head of his cock to her swollen cherry lips. The throbbing veins running across the top looked obscene next to her pretty pout.

“I told you I’d let you feel the rest of my piercings,” he growled between deep groans.

Aran parted her lips, and he massaged her neck with his fingers as he flooded down her throat.

He didn’t pull out.

Neither did I.

Luka stood with his softening dick in her swollen lips and massaged her scalp gently. She whimpered and didn’t pull away.

Cum dripped from where we were connected, and I reached my fingers down to catch it.

I pushed my coated finger into her mouth beside my brother’s cock.

“Suck us both, little dictator,” Luka ordered with hooded eyes.

We both moaned as she slurped obediently.

People danced and bumped into the bed. Sang and talked loudly around us as they celebrated.

Luka and I didn’t move.

We ran our hand gently over Aran as she closed her eyes, content to keep both of us inside her.

I whispered, “You’re so pretty and strong and ferocious.”

“Such a smart, brave little killer,” Luka said as he stroked along the side of her neck.

“Not little,” Aran mumbled. “Sleepy.”

Luka pulled himself out of her mouth and tucked himself back into his sweatpants.

I didn’t move. Her warmth surrounded my dick, and it was perfection.

Aran yawned and said sleepily, “I’m not your wife yet.”

Luka and I both smirked.

“You will be,” we said at the same time.

As soon as she’d accepted our betrothal necklace and bracelet, the enchantment in the jewels had begun to initiate a bond among the three of us.

Our future was in stone.

We were one another’s destiny.

I gingerly maneuvered both of us so we were cuddled under the covers and still connected.

I whispered about how perfect she was as I massaged her shoulders.

Luka disappeared to go get towels.

When he came back with a glass of water in one hand and a clean cloth in the other, the dancing crowd parted and revealed the kings.

The three of them were sitting off on the side of the room in the shadows, staring at us. They couldn't see what was happening because of the wall of our power, but Scorpius had his head tipped to the side and a murderous expression on his face.

Women and men crawled all over them, but they didn't touch them back.

I let the darkness fall and revealed our bed.

How I was wrapped around Aran under the covers, both of us flushed from sex.

Flames exploded across Corvus's arms, and he stood up in his seat like he was going to do something. Orion's eyes widened, and he whispered in Scorpius's ear. The blind devil clenched his jaw and looked murderous.

As Orion stared at us, his golden skin turned a sickly pale.

"Don't mess with our wife," Luka said, and the air shimmered dark around him.

More flames exploded across Corvus's shoulders, and he opened his mouth to say something, but I looked down at Aran, and Luka turned his back to him.

We didn't care.

The only person who mattered was lying in my arms.

Luka climbed under the covers and gently cleaned Aran's folds, which were still swallowing my cock.

"We got you, Aran," I whispered as I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She smiled and snuggled against my chest.

My brother and I shared women and men all the time. Because of our separation anxiety, we preferred it that way.

It had always just been the two of us versus the world.

When we were in middle school, Lothaire had rescued us from the human realm.

Luka and I had grown up in the human foster care system.

It hadn't been pretty.

Things had gotten especially bad when we'd started to manifest our abilities. It had started as little wisps of shimmering darkness around us and escalated to walls and doorways.

Since our adopted parents were extremely religious, they'd thought we

were possessed.

They'd tried to beat the darkness out of us.

But our abilities had only escalated.

One day, our adoptive father had taken us on a hike. He'd said something about me being possessed by Lucifer himself as he beat me near death and pushed me into a ravine.

Luka had screamed and fought as I fell.

Apparently as I lay half-dead, bleeding out, Luka's darkness had exploded.

Lothaire had RJE'd to the location based on the sheer level of power he'd displayed. He'd quickly realized what and *who* we were. He saved my life and brought us to our biological family on the condition that we attend Elite Academy when we were old enough.

Our family had agreed, but only if one of us always stayed in the realm to fulfill our duties as the Princes of Darkness.

Growing up, we'd never been apart from each other.

Luka was my constant shadow, the darkness to my light. We complemented each other perfectly.

He was the Mr. Hyde to my Dr. Jekyll, as Aran loved to say.

Now she knew firsthand how accurate that was—in and out of the bedroom.

When it came to sex, Luka had a domineering personality and liked to be bossy. Meanwhile, I brought a softness and lightheartedness to the bedroom that mellowed the sting of my twin's aggression.

However, what we'd just shared with Aran hadn't felt like normal sex.

She was different.

She meant so much more to both of us.

The betrothal jewels sparkled around her neck and wrist. They refracted the warm, muted glow from the fireplace.

I wasn't sure how the newly forming bond would react, since the devils claimed she was their mate, but it wasn't unheard of to have different bonds connecting people.

They'd marked her as their slave and still considered her their mate.

The mere thought of the tattoo filled me with rage, and I breathed deeply as I held Aran close.

Around the room, competitors talked, kissed, danced, fucked, as they mingled.

I couldn't care less about any of them.

I'd stopped caring about anyone else the minute the exquisite creature with curly blue hair and a pipe between his lips had moped about being chosen to be a recruit.

There'd been something about Aran's dry sarcasm that entranced me.

When Aran had first arrived at the academy, I'd known immediately that I wanted to be his best friend.

It was probably my separation anxiety from my twin; I'd latched onto the first person I'd met whose energy reminded me of his. Dark, but not stifling and arrogant. A unique and hard combination to find.

Most powerful people were all ego.

Finally, I'd found someone who didn't take themselves too seriously. Someone funny I could hang out with and who could make this academy seem a little brighter.

I'd trusted my gut and befriended Aran immediately.

It was the best choice I'd made. Ever.

If I was being 100 percent honest, I'd gotten hard around Aran a couple of times while we wrestled and played in bed. I'd been embarrassed and worried I was taking advantage of my best friend, so I'd forced my body to calm down by imagining Lothaire naked. Thankfully, Aran never noticed.

However, it had become quickly clear to me I didn't view him in a brotherly way.

Especially when Sadie had visited and I'd had to listen to them fucking each other in the shower.

I was generally an easygoing guy.

When Sadie had screamed Aran's name in the shower, I'd wanted to rip out the short woman's vocal cords.

Aran was *mine*. My best friend. No one else's.

To this day, the sight of Sadie filled me with rage. If I had my way, she'd never lay her hands on Aran ever again. Especially now. After Aran had dropped the enchantment that concealed her true identity, everything had changed.

I hadn't been hard just sometimes; I'd had a permanent boner in her presence. How could I not?

Aran was the funniest person I'd ever met. I was addicted to his sarcasm and violence.

Then she'd revealed her true face.

Aran had the type of beauty that made artistic geniuses travel across time and space just for the opportunity to spend ten seconds in her presence. She was the definition of a muse.

She was ethereal.

She was hilarious.

She was breathtakingly gorgeous.

She was grumpy and violent.

She was going to be my wife.

She was lying in my arms with a content little smile on her face, and that was where I was going to keep her.

A matching smile split Luka's face, and I fell asleep beside my twin with my arms wrapped around the two best things that had ever happened in my life.

CHAPTER 51

ARAN

WAR IS COMING

Rebirth—Day 65, hour 4

We filed into the war room.

The space was narrow, with no windows.

Strategizing boards covered the dark-blue wall, and thirteen ornate wooden chairs were positioned around an oval lacquered table. The gold insignia of the High Court was carved into the center of the table. It was also painted on the ceiling.

In front of each seat was a thick white binder.

I rubbed at my bleary eyes and leaned my head against John's shoulder.

Our arms were draped across one another's shoulders like usual. We might be at the High Court's headquarters in an undisclosed location, but some things never changed.

Sex had changed nothing between us in the best way.

As we shuffled sleepily into the room, Luka rested his hand on the back of my neck and he massaged his fingers against the bottom of my skull.

The demons and kings entered behind us.

Flames danced along Malum's arms as he stared at the twins.

Luka's fingers tightened around the back of my neck in a possessive show of ownership.

I smirked at Malum, and his fingers cracked as he gripped the back of a chair.

Luka pressed a kiss to my forehead.

There was a crackling noise as the expensive-looking wooden chair went up in flames beneath Malum's hands.

I slumped down into a seat with a heavy sigh.

It was four in the morning—too early to be dealing with Malum's bullshit.

I rubbed my eyes until I saw stars.

Since the competition had ended and my food had stopped being poisoned, most of the bruises and cuts littering my flesh had healed up and disappeared.

Only one wound on my face had scarred over. It was probably because the cut had been deep and repeatedly reopened.

It was an angry red streak under my left eye.

My jaw dropped when I'd woken up to find the massive ugly mark on my face. Then the emotion set in.

I was ecstatic.

The scar was sexy yet understated; slutty yet slightly horrifying.

It made me feel dangerous.

I leaned back in my chair and tried to seem mysterious.

I winced at the pressure across my spine. Even with my wings tucked away, my back was still overly sensitive. I could *feel* their heaviness inside me.

I was also still wearing John's sweatshirt.

I sniffed the fabric and shrugged. Considering I'd worn it for the last three days and slept in it, it smelled pretty good.

Zenith glared at the kings as he pulled out a chair for Vegar next to John and sat down.

I agreed with him. Lately all the kings did was stare at me and mope.

They were a bizarre mix of repentant and angry.

It was so weird.

In the last day and a half since the end of the competition, each of the kings had cornered me and begged for forgiveness while also insulting me.

They were aggressively sorry.

Emphasis on the aggressive part.

Of course, I'd done what any gracious woman would do when they faced a suffering male who was finally taking accountability for his actions.

I pretended I couldn't hear them speaking.

The method was mostly a success.

However, it was getting harder to pretend the kings didn't exist, because Malum kept setting things on fire. Yesterday it had been a plant, and the day before that he'd melted a stained-glass window.

He *really* needed to find a hobby.

"Let's do this thing, bitches." Sadie burst into the room with her mates following behind.

I high-fived her as she walked past and took a seat next to the demons.

Jax patted my head. Xerxes and Ascher bumped my fist as they moved around the table and took the open seats. Cobra flipped me off, and I dragged my finger across my neck to mime slitting his throat.

Jinx hobbled in on one leg with a tall boy supporting her.

"Why is he here?" I asked as I pointed at Warren. The teenage omega was no longer in his shifted ferret form. He wore combat boots, camo pants, and a black shirt.

"He's my bodyguard and crutch," Jinx said in a "duh" tone, but she looked tired. There were large dark circles under her eyes. "Lothaire cleared him, since I obviously need the protection."

She nodded her head toward Malum.

Since he was still standing behind his burning chair, she had a point.

Warren glared at the kings like he wanted to murder them with his eyes while the rest of the shifters glared at him.

"We're trying to hunt down an enchanter with a degree in prosthetics," Jax said as a way of explanation. "There are few in the realms, and it's taking longer than we'd hoped."

Cobra's eyes flickered to slit pupils, and he hissed, "Until then, we're stuck with the perverted ferret."

Xerxes pulled out his knives and made a show of sharpening them, and Ascher cracked his knuckles.

Warren gently sat Jinx down in a chair, then leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. His posture was relaxed, like he didn't care that most people in the room wanted to kill him.

Oh, to be a delusional teenager.

Must be nice.

"I see that fire ass still hasn't gotten the psychological counseling he needs." Sadie gestured to Malum. "I'd recommend you to Dr. Palmer, my and Aran's therapist, but she told us that she was considering reporting us to the authorities."

Orion narrowed his eyes at her, and Scorpius said something derogatory under his breath.

A flume of smoke trailed out of Malum's nose as he exhaled.

"Sit down, you're embarrassing our legion," I snapped at Malum as I rubbed at my temples. I wanted to be back in bed, cuddling the twins.

Why in the sun god would Lothaire schedule a meeting at 4:00 a.m.? Who did that?

Malum pinned me with his steel-colored gaze, and a flush stained his cheeks. "So you can speak to us? It would have been nice if you'd acknowledged us the last fifteen times we've tried to talk to you."

Not to get political, but men suck.

Leaning forward I buried my head in my arms and squished my face against the smooth table.

"Is the wind loud in here?" I asked petulantly.

"I didn't hear anything," Sadie pointed out helpfully as she went along with my joke.

The crackling noise increased as the chair burned hotter.

"You will fucking—" Scorpius began to snarl, but Luka cut him off and snapped, "Watch how you address our wife."

"You're not married yet," Malum snapped back at him.

"Yet," John said gleefully, and I could hear the smile on his lips.

He massaged the back of my skull, and I relaxed into his hands. Pinpricks of pain shot across the enchanted wound on my back, and I winced as I gently pushed John's hand off my head.

The enchanted wound sucked when demon brew wasn't obliterating my senses.

I made a mental note to get drunk.

Soon.

"Sit down and shut up," Jax alpha-barked, and I sat up straight. Even if we weren't shifters, his commanding tone was like a punch to the gut, and it made me want to obey him.

For a long moment, Malum stood behind his flaming chair and stared Jax down.

Tension swirled across the long table.

Malum slowly took a seat, but his chair was still flaming behind him.

Jax's tone was commanding as he spoke, "Lothaire said we need to read whatever is in these binders and begin to formulate a strategy for the war."

He opened the white cover. “We have a meeting to discuss our preliminary plans with the angels later today, so we need to be on the same page. Let’s start reading.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Malum snapped, but he opened his binder like the rest of us.

Big red letters spelling “CLASSIFIED” crossed the first page.

I swallowed thickly.

Memories of skin ripping as ungodly exploded out of villagers made my stomach roll. I didn’t want to know what was in this binder.

The page shook as I slowly turned it over with trembling fingers.

The top of the next piece of white parchment read, “Phase I: The ungodly have taken over Planet 003XF. The planet needs to be cleansed of all primitive inhabitants. They are all infected. It is mostly civilian ungodly. It is recommended that the champions complete this task by themselves and other resources are saved to handle the outposts of battle ungodly.”

I sat back in my chair and refused to read further.

My pipe clattered against my teeth as I inhaled with all my might.

Across the table, Sadie and her mates looked at one another with uneasy expressions. They swore quietly and paled.

Jinx smiled as she read.

On the other side of the table, the kings, demons, and twins kept reading, completely unfazed by the words on the page.

After all, we’d fought these creatures in multiple battles; we’d slaughtered villagers as they screamed for help.

We’d sliced them open mercilessly.

For hours.

I exhaled a puff of enchanted smoke, and Horse settled onto my shoulder.

Cracking my neck back and forth, I forced myself to turn the page and keep reading like the rest of my legion.

I needed to concentrate, because this was real. The ungodly weren’t going to disappear because I didn’t want to think about what they were doing.

Hours later, all of us stumbled out of the room on shaky legs.

No one spoke.

The horrible things I’d read echoed through my brain.

“I need time alone in the bathroom,” I muttered as I walked across the pristine white hallway to the restrooms.

John called after me, “We’ll get you breakfast from the dining hall.” The

shifters said something about going with them to get food, but I'd stopped listening.

I nodded hastily and shoved through the door.

Gripping the modern glass sink, I splashed water on my face. Counted to ten. Breathed shakily through my nose.

The door opened, and I turned to hug Sadie.

I stopped.

It wasn't Sadie in the women's restrooms.

The three kings took up all the space in the small room.

"We need to talk," Malum said forcefully as he raked his hands over his buzzed head. Orion nodded beside him and stared at me with unblinking eyes.

Scorpius clenched his jaw and said bluntly, "We need to take care of you. You're our Revered. You can't ignore us."

I slammed my pipe between my lips and sucked on enchanted smoke.

When my lungs felt like they were burning, I released it with a puff and said, "Yes, I can. Now get out of the women's bathroom."

Orion reached his hand forward and whispered, "We're tied together, sweetheart."

"You don't get to decide," Malum snapped forcefully. "I know we've made mistakes, but this bond between us is unbreakable. Let us prove that to you."

"Hard no." I clapped my hands sarcastically. "Immediate. No. Now move out of my way."

A roll of paper towels began to smoke.

"You're our destiny," Scorpius said slowly like he was trying to hold himself back from sneering at me. "It is our life's purpose to protect and cherish you. We exist to care for you. We need to pamper and touch our Revered."

I blinked.

And punched him in the throat.

"How's that for touch?" I asked. "Also, it looks like there's no reason for you to be alive." I smiled sarcastically. "Too bad. Might as well just end it all now."

The paper towels burst into flames.

"You will let us care for you," Scorpius said darkly as he massaged his throat then lunged toward me. His fingers wrapped around my throat and

slammed me back against the mirrored wall. It cracked beneath me.

Personally, I was not feeling pampered, cherished, or protected.

Who was going to tell them?

The pressure hurt my sensitive back, but I refused to let any pain show on my face.

Nails gouged my skin.

“Good job of asking for forgiveness,” I spat as I kicked out and slammed my feet against his shins. “Really makes me want to be your mate. Not.”

Smoke streamed out of Malum’s nose. “You’re already our mate.” His voice rose, and he bellowed, “*It is not a choice to be made!*”

“Oh, really.” I widened my eyes like I was surprised, then drove my knee into Scorpius’s crotch. “It’s still going to be a *no* from me.”

Somehow the blind king moved quick enough to avoid my kick.

Scorpius pulled me forward and slammed me back against the mirror. I saw white spots from the pain streaking down my back.

Shards fell around my feet.

“If I need to hurt you before I can protect you”—Scorpius leaned close so his breath fanned my face—“then I’ll make it deliciously painful, Arabella.” He leaned forward and licked across my cheek.

Zips of pain did not streak down my back. Nope. Not at all.

“You’re disgusting,” I growled.

“Sweetheart, we just want to take care of you,” Orion whispered in my ear as he pressed his body against my side. Chocolate and raspberries overwhelmed my senses. He pushed at Scorpius and said, “Be gentle with her. She’s not like us.”

Scorpius dug his nails deeper into my skin.

Orion nuzzled his face against the side of my neck.

Malum stood behind them with a crown of red flames leaping off his shaved head. The bathroom became feverishly warm.

Orion slowly dragged his teeth down my sensitive neck at the same time Scorpius licked my face. I shivered.

Zips of pain shot down my spine.

“You’re ours,” Malum snarled roughly, and his erection tented his pants obscenely. “Our Revered.”

Orion palmed my breasts, and an inadvertent whimper whistled through my lips.

Everything was overly warm and hazy.

“Sweetheart,” Orion whispered reverently against my ear. “Let us care for you.”

Scorpius loosened his grip on my neck as he leaned his head forward. He nuzzled the exposed skin at the base of my throat, then bit down. Hard.

I yelped and twitched beneath them.

“Relax,” Orion breathed into my ear. “We already own you. Just relax. We won’t let anything bad happen.”

His lyrical voice was soothing, and I found myself going limp in Scorpius’s grip.

The blind king licked my sensitive skin, then bit down again.

Pain exploded across my back.

Malum grabbed at his crotch as he shed flames.

Scorpius released his grip on my neck, and I dropped to my knees before he could realize what I was doing.

With one quick movement, I grabbed a mirror shard, pulled down my sweatpants, and dug the sharp edge deep into my flesh.

For a second, I felt nothing.

Then I started sawing.

White spots danced in my vision, and I bit down on my lower lip to muffle the high-pitched scream that left my lips.

My vision narrowed, and my fingers shook.

Every neuron in my brain screamed at me to stop what I was doing. My slippery hand cramped around the shard as I forced it deeper and deeper under my skin.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime of agony but was most likely a few seconds, a thick chunk of skin with a snake and chains flopped onto the pristine white floor.

Pain streaked across my senses.

I whimpered pitifully on my knees as a cold sweat broke out across my forehead. Red dripped from my fingers and side. It spread beneath me at an alarming rate.

“WHAT DID YOU DO!?” Malum bellowed. He was a ball of red flames staring down at me with a horrified expression. His voice cracked, and he whispered, “Why would you hurt yourself like this?”

“No. No. No,” Orion repeated brokenly.

Scorpius swore vehemently.

I stood up shakily and slipped on my blood.

Bang. The door slammed open, and there was a long second where the twins' eyes widened as they processed what they were seeing.

"You fucking assholes," John said darkly as he ran forward and pulled me into his arms.

Luka let out a war cry and started throwing punches at Scorpius and Orion.

John gathered me into his arms.

I felt like I was going to be sick.

Orion stared at where I was cuddling against John for protection with wide eyes. He buried his hands in his blond hair and tugged manically. "We're supposed to protect you," he whispered brokenly.

Crack. Luka slammed his fist into Orion's nose.

Blood sprayed across the room.

I squeezed my eyes shut and buried my face in my best friend's shoulder, overwhelmed by the intensity of the agony streaking across my hip.

"Let's go, Luka, these filth aren't worth it," John said hastily as he ran from the bathroom with me in his arms. He pressed his sleeve to the wound to stanch the blood flow.

Luka wrenched himself away from where he was tussling with Scorpius, and he sprinted after us.

"Where are we going?" I gasped in between whimpers.

"To get you first aid," John said frantically as he ran faster down the unfamiliar narrow white halls. "We need to find Lothaire."

All my neurons exploded with a different type of pain, and I screamed violently. "*STOP MOVING!*" I shrieked at John as my body convulsed.

He came to a halt.

Luka patted his hands over me with a terrified expression. "What's happening?"

"I don't fucking know," John said frantically.

"*Let us help you!*" Malum snarled angrily as he turned the corner and stalked toward me. Flames rolled off his tongue as he spoke.

Scorpius and Orion flanked him, their wide shoulders filling the narrow hall.

The pain lessened and I gasped with relief.

"You can't keep running forever," Scorpius sneered. "It's not possible."

A horrible understanding washed over me.

Darkness glimmered around the twins as they warily watched the kings

approach.

Scorpius wiped the blood off his face where Luka had broken his nose. He dragged his tongue across his red fingers.

I gasped.

“Sweetheart, are you okay?” Orion whispered. His stunning brown eyes filled with concern as he rubbed at his chest.

I hyperventilated.

“But I cut off the tattoo?” I asked in between shaky breaths. “Why are we still connected?”

John’s arms tightened around me.

Luka stepped protectively in front of us.

“You’re our Revered. You can’t escape us.” Malum rubbed at his chest, his expression concerned as he stared angrily at where blood dripped down my sides.

“That’s why we’ve been trying to talk to you,” Scorpius sneered meanly as he continued to lick blood off his fingers. “We realized yesterday that it wasn’t the tattoo tying us together. It was bond sickness.”

“What?” I asked loudly.

Malum’s voice was cold, a sharp contrast to the flames pouring off his bronze skin. “When an Ignis and Protectors fail their mate, the bond becomes corrupted to ensure this wrong never happens again.” He shook his head. “We thought we’d experienced it with Orion because we couldn’t eat or sleep when he was hurt. But we were wrong. It’s much more than that.”

Scorpius smirked and said, “When you dropped your enchantment, our souls recognized the presence of our Revered and our mating song changed. It became soft and peaceful.”

“But then you got the tattoo,” Malum growled. “And you underwent intense agony while we watched and did nothing to protect you.”

“The incomplete soul bond tying us together became corrupted,” Orion whispered.

Flames tumbled off Malum’s tongue as he said, “Bond sickness.”

Scorpius laughed, and it wasn’t a nice sound.

“You can’t run from us, sweetheart,” Orion whispered. “We *need* to take care of you. Let us help heal you. Our souls are forcing us to stay together so we can fix what we’ve broken.”

My soul’s taste in men was officially a form of self-harm.

Malum nodded. “Let us fix our wrongs.” A muscle in his temple jumped

as he gritted his teeth, and he said, "Please." His cheeks blushed crimson. "We care. I care about you."

"Put me down," I told John with a shaky gasp.

John looked at me skeptically with worry in his dark eyes. "You're still bleeding a lot. Are you sure you can stand?"

I nodded and tried to appear strong. "Do it now."

John gently put me on my feet.

The world spun around me, and I pressed my fist over my mouth. Cold sweat poured from my face.

I felt like I was going to pass out.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, I faced the kings.

They stared at me like they were starved men before a feast.

I recalled Lyla's prophecy:

You will not be who you need to be until you embrace the dragon.

Mid argument I'd realized something.

I didn't care.

I turned and pumped my arms and legs hard as I sprinted down the hall away from them as fast as I could.

My side burned with every step, and I left a trail of crimson behind me.

I would *not* be embracing the dragon.

The pain in my hip made my head spin, and the hallway warped around me, making me stumble.

"*Fuck!*" Malum bellowed. "*Don't run from us, Arabella! You'll hurt yourself! You're hurting yourself right now! Stop it!*"

Footsteps pounded behind me as the kings gave chase.

Nausea churned in my stomach.

"Don't run, sweetheart," Orion sang loudly, and goose bumps exploded down my spine.

Malum shouted, "We'll protect you. You're our Revered. We want to care for you."

"We're sick for you," Scorpius called gleefully.

I moved faster than I ever had in my life, and my feet didn't touch the ground, but it wasn't enough.

"*Let us make it up to you!*" Malum growled, and a flaming hand reached out. It wrapped around my clammy throat.

And ripped me back into hell.
War wasn't coming.
It was here.
The blood was in the water.

CHAPTER 52

JINX

GUARDIAN

Rebirth—Day 58, hour 3
One week earlier

The clock struck 3:00 a.m.

It was the morning of the final showcase.

Today I'd be competing.

I lay rigid on top of the bed.

Warren the ferret nuzzled his face against my cheek to try to comfort me. He was wrapped around my neck like a scarf, the position he always took when he was trying to offer support.

I didn't pet him.

"Arabella Alis Egan must earn her wings today," the Angel Consciousness said loudly in my head. *"The council has been impressed with her performance, but she needs to sacrifice more. They are still worried that she is too much like her mother."*

I rolled my eyes and thought back, *I know.*

People annoyed me, but the voice in my head—that had been bothering me since I'd agreed to be Aran's guardian—made me downright homicidal.

The bed bounced underneath me from the force of my tremors.

In thirteen years of life, I'd never slept.

I'd never known a single night of peace.

How could I?

Invisible metal cuffs were cold and heavy on my wrists. Layered with

dark enchantments that emitted electric shocks, the hardware kept me in perpetual pain. Every. Single. Night.

The only consolation was they failed to fully serve their purpose.

The cuffs were supposed to keep me docile.

I wasn't.

I'd describe myself as truculent, ornery, and bumptious.

Never docile.

Unfortunately, my jailer recognized this.

When Dick had looked at me across the arena a few weeks ago, he must have seen something in my carefully crafted expression that he didn't like.

The pain at night was getting worse.

He'd turned up the voltage.

Now I convulsed on the bed. Twitched. Trembled in silence.

If my jaw weren't aching from electric pulses, I would have grinned.

It was humorous that Dick went to such extreme physical measures to contain me when physically I was as weak as a human. Maybe weaker.

Sadly, his actions weren't surprising. Everything about the realms of the High Court was ghastly and primitive.

The people in these realms worshipped brawn and feats of toughness. Didn't they know anyone could learn to be strong?

It was intellect that couldn't be taught.

Wit was the true differentiator.

At least, it was back at home.

My fingers twitched, water streaked down the sides of my face, and my tears provided a few lucky micrometers of skin with insulation from electric shock.

I sank deeper into my mind and focused on my plans, the revenge that I would successfully execute in the future. Violently.

Ten years ago, my thoughts never would have turned so primitive.

These realms were getting to me.

Dick had treated me like a dog for so long that a part of me had learned to think like one. Like the rabble that surrounded me.

My adoptive brother, Jax, and his mates snored on the three beds they'd pushed together.

Every muscle cramped in my body as the volts of electricity caused a migraine to throb through my skull.

As always, I suffered in silence.

My life was defined by a triumvirate of imprisonment: cuffs, electric shock, and secrets.

So many secrets.

The tangle of lies was so knotted that there was no “truth” anymore. There was just blackmail and distortion.

One word summarized my entire existence: exploitation.

I was a rare species from a faraway galaxy that didn’t go through puberty until twenty-five years old.

I was twenty-four years old.

Dick forced me to masquerade as a child.

It shouldn’t have been that large of a lie; after all, I was still technically prepubescent, and it was only a ten-year difference.

But it made all the difference.

No one could truly comprehend what could be accomplished in a decade of exploitation.

Ten years.

In my case, it was the difference between a war being won or lost.

The things I’d been forced to do were so shocking that it hurt to think about them.

Electricity burned my neurons.

One more year until adulthood. It was so close. Yet so far away.

Not that it mattered. Adulthood couldn’t change the fact that as a child, I’d been sold by rare species traffickers. It wouldn’t change that I was enslaved to the High Court.

I was nothing more than a tool.

“For the greater good,” Dick loved to say.

He had no remorse.

I had misery.

I convulsed silently as the projection of the night sky swirled on the ceiling above me. It was audacious of the High Court to refer to this primitive island as “Elite.”

Lately, everything felt like a joke of cosmic proportion.

But no one was laughing.

I swallowed roughly as my eyes glossed with tears, and I cursed my fragile physical state for the millionth time.

My weak body had allowed for this complete incarceration. Still, crying, whining, or talking about it with other people was a useless endeavor that

would do nothing to alleviate the reality of the situation.

Warren whimpered against my nape.

The shifter was the only person who partially knew what I was going through. I'd wiped his memories a few times in the beast realm, but he'd kept catching me having episodes, and it was too exhausting to silence him.

He'd agreed to not share my secrets on the condition that he stayed by my side for protection.

It was pure blackmail. It almost made me respect him.

Warren whined again as his whiskers tickled against the tears streaking down my cheeks.

Almost was the key word.

"Stop complaining," I whispered. "You'll alert the others."

Warren was insufferably melancholic about the entire ordeal of me being electrocuted against my will at night. I flagellated myself every day for being blackmailed by such a pathetic person.

But I had much bigger problems than a clingy teenage shifter.

My fingers twitched as my cranium throbbed.

"Do not fail us in the showcase, Guardian. If you do, you will be exterminated," the Angel Consciousness said snootily into my mind.

The throbbing intensified.

Speaking of idiots.

There were layers to my subjugation.

My purpose wasn't linear, it was circular and convoluted. The various threads wrapped around my neck like a noose.

Each one more dangerous than the last.

More deadly.

About ten years ago, Dick forced me to do the unthinkable and two lives were irrevocably changed. Ironically, I'd been fourteen years old when I'd committed the atrocity. About the same age I masqueraded as now.

At such a tender age, I'd used my abilities and mutilated two people.

Forever.

My only excuse was the High Court had promised me freedom if I did it.

I'd learned that day that even I could play the fool.

Dick had kept me locked away.

Four years later he'd told me I had a new task to complete.

I'd been brought to the shifter realm with three young girls who were backup genetic experiments. They provided the perfect cover.

My task was to infiltrate the family and get close to everyone. All with the aim of forming a relationship and becoming the guardian of one of the people I'd mutilated four years earlier: Aran.

This time, they hadn't pretended to offer me freedom.

Dick had ordered me to follow his directive.

Or die.

Mortality was the universal motivator of all species.

The High Court was direct with me. They didn't manipulate me like they did to every other person in the realms.

They were desperate because my initial task had messed with Aran in unexpected ways, and because of what I'd done, I was the only person who could connect with her and join the Angel Consciousness.

Apparently, all angels were assigned a guardian to help them earn their wings and keep them in check after they did so.

Someone strong who could help them.

It was an extremely prestigious position.

They had no choice but to give it to me because no one else could form the mental bond with Aran.

After an angel earned their wings, their guardian could send shock waves of punishment through their mental connection if they acted out of line.

The angel captain with heterochromia had it happen to him after the second competition.

The measure made sense.

As one of the few sentient species with wings and the ability to wield ice, angels were powerful in ways that weren't easily controllable. They were also highly intelligent. As a result, the first angels had committed horrible atrocities in other realms and were unstoppable.

Angels were strong enough to commit horrors and cunning enough to evade capture.

The High Court had intervened to keep the peace.

The Angel Consciousness and guardian system were ways to keep them in check, and I was the unlucky person assigned to help guide Aran.

Some angels never earned their wings, and from what I could tell, there were no repercussions for the assigned guardian.

Not in our case.

Dick had cheerfully informed me that both of us would be murdered if Aran failed. It was imperative that she earned her wings.

According to him, the fate of all civilized society rested on her earning them.

I highly doubted it.

But it didn't matter what I thought. I hadn't been given a choice.

How bad could it be? I'd asked myself at the time.

Indubitably, it had gone way worse than I'd expected.

Aran was the most difficult and infuriating person I'd ever met. How someone so intelligent could act so self-deprecating and depressive was beyond my scope of understanding.

It was like she *wanted* both of us to die brutally.

At first, I'd been suitably impressed when she'd eaten her mother's heart in the fae realm. When she'd had darkness in her eyes and blood dripping down her chin, I'd understood what all the fuss was about.

I'd *gotten* why angels needed guardians to help them do the right things.

Her capacity for violence was inspiring.

She had raw potential in her bones and a physical strength I could never hope to achieve.

My task had seemed doable. Difficult but still possible.

But then we'd gone to the beast realm, and Aran spiraled. Her mind couldn't wrap itself around the sheer depth of depravity she'd displayed.

A pity.

Meanwhile, the Angel Consciousness argued back and forth in my brain.

They were divided on whether her gruesome murder of her mother was a positive—the woman had been an abusive bully—or a negative, for obvious reasons.

While they'd fought it out, nothing was asked of me.

I missed those days.

Once Aran had been brought to Elite Academy, the Consciousness had started making more demands. The voice had become more frequent and urgent.

Whatever happened in training and battles had convinced some members of the Consciousness that Aran might be worthy of earning her wings. Enough people that the voice had hope.

When she fought against the ungodly, they agreed she was a candidate to earn her wings.

They partially removed the mind enchantment that inhibited the expression of angel genes.

This step had prepared her body so if the Consciousness decided to remove the full blocker, the angel genes would express themselves fully and she'd earn her wings.

They'd told me to tell Lothaire to put Aran in more positions of danger.

I'd talked to Lothaire and made up a story about the High Court wanting to monitor Aran's strength. I pushed him to give her more perilous tasks without revealing that she was an angel. He'd agreed to help.

His compliance was ultimately useless because the High Court had stepped in and instituted the Legionnaire Games.

Their timing had been a little too perfect.

After Aran had sacrificed her life to save Scorpius in the second trial a few weeks ago, the Consciousness decided she was more than a candidate.

They completely removed the blocker.

Aran was officially on the path to earning her wings.

The only step left was for Aran to act righteous enough to trigger the full expression of angel genes. Then she'd earn her wings.

It was obvious that the High Court was getting desperate for Aran to earn her wings because they kept choosing her for each competition.

It was the only hope we had.

Both our lives were hanging in the balance.

If only she knew.

The hourglass was slowly running out.

Aran was currently being shoved across a chessboard, barreling toward either success or failure.

Closing my watery eyes, I focused on the faint buzzing in my head that signaled the connection the Consciousness had given me to Aran.

The link that only I had been able to form with her.

She couldn't be joined to the main line until she earned her wings, but guardians were given a separate channel uniting them with their angel when they accepted the role.

That hadn't stopped the voice from the Consciousness trying to interfere in her life. He'd gone so far as to open up channels with random people near her to guide her forward.

Since the angel laws forbade guidance from anyone other than a guardian before wings were earned, he'd tried to speak indirectly in riddles and praise her when she did something positive.

Everyone was desperate for her to succeed.

If only she knew.

The things they'd done to her.

The things they'd forced me to do.

I shivered, a foreign sludgy sensation crawled up my throat. Regret burned like bile.

In my opinion, the entire process was convoluted and ridiculous; boundaries had been crossed in ways that could never be undone.

But nobody asked me.

Huffing, I opened the channel between us and repeated into Aran's head, *Do the right thing. Be righteous. Make the right choices.*

I could link to her, but the connection was fuzzy and unclear.

It was broken because of what I'd done to her.

Once again, it was a result of the injustice that I had personally served upon her.

This was my penance.

Aran was asleep, but I hoped my words would sink into her subconscious. It was all I had.

Or we were both dead.

Night was the only time I could try to cajole Aran. It was when the connection between us was the strongest.

During the day, she was constantly zoned out and spiraling in her own head. My mental words barely got through.

The only way to get her attention was to snap at her in person.

Aggressively.

When I taunted her, the glazed, faraway look would disappear from her eyes and she'd actually see me. The resulting rage always brought her back into the present.

It was exhausting.

All my muscles spasmed at once, and I sobbed silently in the dark room.

Sometimes I felt so alone. No, Warren did not count as company.

Every time I made a pained noise at night and Jax or his mates found me convulsing, I had to wipe their memories.

It was exhausting.

The first few nights after I'd partially revealed my ability, Sadie had tried to sleep beside me in bed and hold me. Dealing with her insufferable mouth breathing had been worse than any migraine.

They thought the worst of my transgressions was wiping their memories.

If only they knew.

The truth was heinous.

None of them would talk to me ever again.

Not even Jax.

He'd never hug me as he smiled down at me. He'd never call me his little sister like it was something to be proud of. He'd never ask me again if I was okay with worry in his eyes.

I'd seen a glimpse of it the night they discovered I'd wiped their memories.

They no longer looked at me like I was theirs.

I'd felt the distance between us, and a chasm splintered through my chest.

There was no longer a we.

It was a *them*, and a *me*.

For some reason the realization hurt worse than the electricity vibrating through my bones.

Moisture welled in my eyes until everything was blurry.

Maybe Dick was an expert at breaking people after all.

It was nights like these where all the facts, logic, and reality coalesced into one throbbing truth: everyone would be better off if I had never been born.

I twitched silently in the sleeping room.

The showcase was here.

I didn't know how tomorrow would play out, but I knew my heritage had something to do with it.

Aran had somehow convinced herself she had a special relationship with me. She'd deluded herself into thinking she cared about my well-being.

They would use that against her.

The voice I spoke to in the Angel Consciousness wanted her to succeed—he was most likely working on behalf of the High Court—but while the rest of the angels had approved her as a candidate, they didn't think she'd actually prove herself righteous enough to earn her wings.

The voice had said they'd been pleasantly surprised by her actions in the third and fourth competitions.

They needed her to do something big.

The genes wouldn't express themselves without a monumental display of selflessness.

I gnawed harder on my teeth.

Aran had sacrificed her physical well-being repeatedly in the games, yet they claimed it wasn't enough for them.

From what the voice had told me, anyone else would have earned their wings already.

They'd put more blockers inside her than normal. She was being punished for her bloodline.

After all, even when her angel genes had been inhibited, Aran had been able to access some of her powers.

She could create ice claws and summon her feathers.

Most angels couldn't wield any power until they earned their wings.

There was only one other angel in recorded history who could do so, and they had been the most powerful political pawn ever to grace the High Court: her mother.

Aran was being punished for the sins of both her parents.

The Angel Consciousness didn't care that a daughter was being treated unfairly or that a guardian was being tortured nightly. All they cared about was controlling the powerful angel population and preventing another mass genocide. That was their directive. Period.

Any collateral suffering was beyond their purview.

That's what happened when a species valued strength over intelligence. Power didn't exist without the weak.

A twisted cycle of damnation.

As I convulsed on the bed, tears dripped down off my cheeks and soaked my pillow.

Many factors were weighed against us.

The odds of Aran earning her wings today were low.

Extremely low.

Her life was a tangled web of politics.

According to Dick, civilizations would rise and fall by the choices Aran made, and the High Court knew it.

Her power was so unfathomable that the Angel Consciousness was scared of her.

Yet she moped around and lived inside her head.

You will do the right thing, I repeated down the fuzzy connection that led into Aran's sleeping subconscious. *Sacrifice yourself to help others. Show them you are righteous.*

Tears dripped.

My limbs twitched.

Warren whined as I lay wide awake in the dark bedroom, paralyzed with pain.

Luckily for Aran, I also lived inside her head, and I was a monster.

Today Aran would walk into the arena for the showcase, and she would earn her wings. There was no other choice.

Arabella Alis Egan would rise above the atrocities that I'd committed against her. The Latin translation of Alis was "wings," after all.

She would claim her birthright.

And the realms would never be the same.

To be continued...

Read Orion's POV of kissing Arabella at
blog.jasminemasbooks.com.

Also, preorder [*Psycho Gods*](#) now on Amazon

Finally, please leave a review on Amazon! It allows me to keep writing books. Thanks so much for reading :)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jasmine Mas loves writing about Alphaholes and the powerful women who bring them to their knees.

She attended Georgetown University and the University of Miami School of Law. She is a full time lawyer who loves hanging out with her readers, playing field hockey, and reading Harry Potter fan fiction.

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