

BEN ALDERSON

## PRINCE OF ENDLESS TIDES

# Darkmourn Universe Book 4

## **BEN ALDERSON**

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This book is dedicated to the little Ben who realised he was gay because he always fancied the Prince in the Disney films. Look at you now.

## Content Warning

Please be aware this novel contains scenes or themes which readers may be triggered by. This book deals with the topic of domestic abuse, gaslighting, physical abuse, mental abuse, control, death, talk of suicide, talk of parental abuse, murder, on page adult scenes.

Toxic relationships, murder, loss of family members, death, abuse, manipulation, anger, grief/grieving, depression, profanity, adult scenes, adult themes, blood/gore, mentions of suicide.

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Also by Ben Alderson

## A Deal with a God

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'A deal,' the god proposed.

'For his life?' I answered.

'No.' He laughed mockingly, his ancient eyes lapping over split flesh and blood. 'Not for life. For vengeance.'
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'And the price?'

'You.'

## Prologue



#### 27 Years Ago

I LURKED IN THE SHADOWS, where no creature could see me.

The stone pillars groaned beneath the weight of my tentacles. I wrapped each limb around the ruins of an old city, dragging myself through the murky water towards my destination.

The Above was painted in the dark jewel tones of dusk, stars winking into existence across the heavens. I wondered if they could see me lurking in the depths, stalking my prey from the doorway of what once was a building. If the gods still watched from their perches, would they be proud of what I had been or what I was forced to become?

Perhaps neither.

It had been the water which whispered of a disturbance. I had been miles from this forgotten place when the ripples alerted me to something... strange. But whatever I had expected to find was not what waited before me.

Death. It was everywhere.

In all my hundreds of years, this was something I had never witnessed before.

Clouds of blood danced within the ocean's currents, catching drifts which twisted around floating corpses. I could taste the iron tang beneath the kiss of salt across my tongue. And I wasn't the only one. There were so many dead, almost too many to count. Some were still whole, whereas

others had already been torn apart by the circling grey sharks, their bellies undoubtedly already full, yet still unable to resist the call of blood.

But I knew that the true predator had yet to arrive.

Soon the Mer would catch the scent of all of this humanity, and they would flock here. So I would wait, lingering in the shadows, trident aloft in my hand, ready to slay every single one of them.

I had seen no shipwreck, no proof that these people should've been this far out in the ocean. The nearest island was miles away, too far for so many to simply swim here. How did so many drown at once? Mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children.

I had to get closer to find clues before the true monsters of the ocean came. I didn't simply crave answers—I starved for them.

Stone cracked as my tentacle tightened its grip. I pushed closer to the scene just as a hammerhead dove in, snatching the blue-grey arm of a man who floated close to me. The shark's swishing tail made my white hair fan out around my shoulders.

As I moved forward, the dead were everywhere, hanging lifelessly like puppets on a string. I swam through a cloud of them, cautious to keep myself at a distance. The corpse of a woman passed beside me, chestnut hair waving in front of a paled, freckled face. Her arms lifted as though she waited for someone to embrace her, save her. But I was too late. Only death would hold her now.

She belonged to Gorgana now, the Goddess of Death. They all did. Fitting, I thought, considering this forgotten city I swam through was once a great feasting ground for death, a place which had known tragedy.

The ruins of this city had been worn down from years beneath the water. Coral clung to old stone and seaweed grew amongst mounds of rubble. This place was so old, even I did not remember the name of it. Karakos, God of the Oceans, had swallowed this city, raising the water high above it as he drew it into his embrace.

The god of the ocean was greedy. So greedy that he had once claimed the sky as his own domain, reaching up and threading his water into the clouds, imbuing the air with his moisture. I knew the stories of how that gluttony led to Karakos's demise.

This wasn't the first city Karakos claimed. Many had fallen beneath the tidal waves and vicious currents. Until one day that all stopped.

But these dead before me were not from the old world.

Where did you come from?

Propelling myself through the ruins of the city, I grew closer to its heart. The

further I went, the more dead there seemed to be. I held back, cautious; I didn't want to feel dead skin brush against mine. No matter the dead or the living, I desired nothing to touch me.

A pulse rippled outward, the beat of what sounded like a muffled drum. Fish scattered out of their shoals, eels whipped passed me fleeing in haste. The force of it snatched my hair back from my face, kissing my skin and filling my mouth with the salty taste of... magic.

A tree stood proudly in the centre of the city, a strange sight to see so far from land, deep in the ocean. But here it was, and here it had always been. Thick green foliage shifted languidly in the water. Dark brown roots dove through sand and stone, piercing Karakos's flesh like thorns.

A wall of corpses floated before me. I pushed out a hand, willing the water to clear me a path through them, already cringing at the thought of my skin being touched.

Corpses tangled themselves in and around the branches, wide eyes and mottling skin glinting in the glow of the ocean. The glare of moonlight barely reached this far down, but my eyesight allowed me to see everything in keen detail.

These bodies were... strange. They wore clothes I had never seen before, tight-fitting to their bodies. Some were even weighed down by thick bands of gold and jewels. What surprised me the most was the lack of wounds. Beside the blood from the sharks feasting, these dead were seemingly fine.

Their death was by drowning. Nothing else.

But how?

I didn't need to wait longer for what I truly came here for. The sharks broke formation, fins flicking, bodies writhing to get away. Something had spooked them. These kings of the sea only feared one thing.

The word formed in bubbles beyond my lips. 'Mer.'

I hid myself amongst the tree's branches. Out across the dark, I searched for the tell-tale glow of milky eyes, the flash of iridescent tails and sharpened teeth and claws. At my waist, my pale skin shivered where it met the sticky orange flesh of my eight limbs. Each one twitched with unspent energy.

But it was not the Mer who came, at least not yet. Another shudder passed over the ocean, spreading outwards as though someone, or something, lingered within the bark of the great tree. I thrust myself away, the need for distance loud as alarm bells.

Then I stilled at the impossible sight before me. Out the corner of my eye, I caught movement. Just shy of the thick, luscious crown of the canopy was a foot. It was small as the palm of my hand. Then there was a leg, chubby and stout. And... it was kicking, moving not because the water shifted it, but because the baby was *alive*.

One moment it had not been there, and the next it demanded my entire attention.

All at once my eight limbs contracted together, propelling me towards the impossible. The infant came into view, small hands grasping out for the tree as though it had enough awareness to latch onto something. It was so small, so innocent. So *strange*.

It had a crown of midnight-black hair which danced around its small skull. Wide blue eyes framed with long lashes. A small body barely covered by the white sheet which the ocean slowly unravelled. The baby opened its mouth to wail, inhaling water, filling its tiny little lungs with salt and brine.

My power ebbed out of me, wrapping around the water until I commanded them. The currents shifted, drawing the baby towards me. Lips blue, skin growing pale, eyes growing heavy.

I once had known death, all too well. And I recognised it was only moments from claiming another.

It seemed fate wished to toy with me today.

My ears twitched, not towards a sound, because the Mer could not speak. They lost that ability when the curse changed them, stealing away humanity and leaving only twisted, monstrous creatures in its wake.

That was the thing about gods. They made heroes and they made monsters. The Mer were the worst of them.

A disturbance like an echo washed over my conscience. The water warned me of the arrival of the Mer, their slick and silent forms slicing from their hidden coves and dwellings. I looked between the trident in my hand and the dying baby in the other and made a choice.

It was a simple decision to make, but that didn't stop me from hesitating.

I had to save this innocent life.

Clutching the baby to my chest, I focused on the Above. A halo of light lingered around the moon, casting a circular formation over the surface. I swam, pushing with the force of my eight tentacles until water rushed past my ears, leaving the tree and the dead beneath me.

As I broke the surface of the ocean, the gills around my neck flattened, allowing for the fresh kiss of nightly wind to bless my lungs. A chill raced over my skin, tickling over my shoulders. I could barely see through the thick, tacky strands of hair plastered over my face.

With the child raised above the water, I waited for it to make noise, to prove it still lived. It was so small it rested within my hand, curled into a foetal position, so incredibly motionless. I focused on the faint beat of a heart beneath the press of my fingertips.

My magic called out to the water lingering in the baby's lungs. Holding my fingers above its mouth, I latched onto the unwanted liquid and guided it free. A ball, minute as a pearl, raised beyond its paled mouth before dissipating into mist at my will.

Time drew out.

'Live, small one,' I urged, brushing the dark hairs from its forehead. My gaze fixed on its chest, waiting for it to move.

As though it heard me, it unleashed a bellow so great it had the power to wake the sleeping world. Small lungs now freed of water, I watched the colour slowly seep back into the child's cheeks, flushing them a dawn pink.

The sound was a glorious thing.

'Hush,' I said, unsure what to do with such a little life. 'You are safe now.'

Far off, firelight glinted across the shoreline of Ire. The island was distant, and the weather was calm. Still, even now, I could not fathom how this child, and so many others, had gotten this far out into the ocean. It was a mystery, and one I did not have time to ponder.

Far beneath me, the Mer would be tearing into the bodies, devouring humanity, spreading their poison, creating more monsters for me to face. It was instinctual, the draw to dive down deep and slay each and every one of them. But I then looked back to the baby, all rosy cheeked with its banshee-like cry, and I knew where my responsibility lay.

I did not know how to console a child. It was not one of my skills, not one of my powers bestowed to me the night I faced Karakos and came back with a second chance at life. But there was something I could offer it, some

form of comfort which time could not have made me forget, no matter if I wished to or not.

The song broke out of me as I swam towards the coastline. It was a light melody, one my own mother had once sung to me. From my soul, I pulled out the words which I had not thought about for a very long time. It came to me quickly, as though my mother leaned into my ear now, whispering each note, each lyric.

'Hush, little baby, no matter where you stray, across the sea and far away, my love for you persists as strong, a tide which draws you to and from, I will find you anon. Anon.'

The song calmed the child, enough for its screams to simmer to a small whimper. Then it closed its all-seeing blue eyes and slept.

I did not know how long I swam for. Not until I heard water slapping against wood, followed by the humming of a deep baritone voice in the distance. I looked up from the sleeping child, scared the moment I took my eyes off it, it would die.

Gorgana would have had her hunger quenched tonight. I would not allow another life to be handed over to death.

A small boat bobbed upon the ocean's surface, the fisherman throwing his netting out into the shallow water. I could not see his face, nor could I tell if he was a good enough man to be worthy of a child. Whatever fate awaited this baby with him would be realms better than what I could have offered. In the unforgiving ocean, there were only monsters and mayhem. The Below was not a place for a child, not a place for a human.

You were but a child when you first came to me, a far-off voice sounded deep in my core. *Did I not save you?* 

I ignored it, refusing to acknowledge the god this time. His allure was commanding, but so was the need to get this child out of the cold water. Doing so was answer enough to the taunting god of the ocean, Karakos, who always lingered close to my conscience.

I encased the child's small, sleeping body in my power and guided it towards the boat. I waited, with only my eyes lifted above the surface of the water, as the fisherman felt the knock of flesh against the side of his vessel.

There was a feral part of me which twisted into knots as he leaned over the edge, peering at what it could have possibly been. That feeling only built as the fisherman reached in, lifted the baby from the water and cradled it to his chest.

It didn't take long for the fisherman to leave. I supposed his bounty did not matter, not when he found an infant in the water instead of fish.

Not able to relinquish responsibility, I stalked his boat for a while until he reached the stone jetty, moored his vessel, and raced towards the Kingdom of Ire with the child clutched in his arms.

I could have followed, if I so wished. I didn't. There was something I had to finish, even if my mind was stuck on the mysterious child and the future I had just handed him into.

Water sloshed around me as I turned towards the Below. I couldn't see the drowned city from here, but if I reached out into the water, it told me the Mer still ravaged their meals.

Pushing the child to the back of my mind, I focused on my task at hand. I had to focus, to complete the deal I had agreed to all those years ago. The one etched across my torso in swirling ink in the face of a monster. The face of a god.

The *face* of Karakos.

My tentacles contracted beneath me, serpentine limbs spinning into a vortex of rubbery flesh. Trident in one hand, the power tracing over my skin, I unleashed a warning cry. It sang of both the promise of vengeance and the hope of my freedom.

# PART I DAY NOUGHT



## Chapter One - Ernest



'Do I please you, my Prince?' Hadeon's question echoed around us, bouncing off the rock walls of the cave.

I withdrew his length from my mouth with a pop, gazing up the mounds of a muscular stomach to his face. *Was it my groan which gave me away?* 

'You certainly do.' My tongue traced my lower lip as I flashed him the wickedest of smiles. 'Although, I think the question is, do I please *you*?'

Hadeon glared down at me as though I was a plate of his favourite food, and he was a starved man. It was an expression I had grown accustomed to. He had been my personal servant for almost a year, so he was rather familiar with taking commands from me. All six-feet of muscle, sun-kissed skin, brunette hair and a smile which had the power to undo me. But when we found time alone, it was me who got on my knees, bowing to every one of his whims and wishes. Literally.

'Yes, Ernest,' Hadeon replied, eyes narrowing to intensify his sultry desires, 'you do. However, you would please me more if you put my cock back in your mouth and did that thing I like with your tongue.'

I rocked backwards, clearing the spit away from the corners of my mouth with the swipe of a thumb. 'As it is my birthday, I'd like to propose a request.'

'But the tongue-thing you do—'

'Can wait,' I interrupted with a smile. That was the thing about me. I could make Hadeon think I did everything and anything to please him, but in reality it was me who still held the control.

Deep down, Hadeon knew that too. That was why he liked me.

'Ernest of Ire.' He snatched my face with his large hands, kissed me greedily, and then let go of me. 'You know I am powerless to refuse you. Ask it, anything, and it will be yours.'

When I was with Hadeon, I spoke plainly. There wasn't a need to overthink my words, or carefully put together what I wished to say in a way that would not upset or offend. No, with him I spoke from the core. And right now, my core wanted something with a passion.

'I'd prefer if both our mouths were occupied,' I said.

His brow peaked. 'I'm all open to requests.'

I slithered up his torso, the sand indenting beneath my knees. Sand was fucking everywhere. In my hair, between my toes, and in places it really shouldn't be. Whoever it was that glorified sex on the beach was *incredibly* misinformed.

'Hmm, let me think.' I crawled my fingers over his chest like a fiddler crab. Of course I knew my answer, but drawing it out only added to the excitement.

'I have a few suggestions.'

'Patience.' I placed a finger over his lips, silencing him. Hadeon took it in his mouth, biting down until my skin ached. I recoiled back, noticing the pinched red skin.

Before the moment was ruined, Hadeon spoke. 'Answer my question, *my* love.'

Gods, the way he said *my* really put an emphasis on the word. Not that I minded. It was nice to be desired, naturally. With Hadeon, this was all real. He wanted me for me, not what I could offer him.

As he waited for my answer, I continued my up and down rhythm with my fist around his cock. It was thick, but my fingers still met all the way around it. The length was perfect, smaller than mine—but when I sat on it, the size didn't matter. Pleasure was an entirely unique language, and one I wished to master entirely.

'If this is the one birthday gift you give me, I want to make sure I ask for the right thing. Otherwise, I may spend the next year regretting my answers.'

Hadeon threw his head back, the veins in his neck bulging as lines of pleasure etched themselves into his forehead. 'Fuck, Ernest. I don't know

what's better, your hand or that pretty little mouth of yours. Keep going like that and I'll finish before you tell me what you want from me...'

I smiled, a winning grin which only highlighted my internal pride. 'Eat my ass,' I said so matter-of-factly it even caught Hadeon by surprise.

'Now now, Ernest.' He balanced himself on his elbows, his mouth watering at my request. 'Where *are* your manners?'

'Please,' I drawled, pouting with an extended lower lip. 'Hadeon, my humble and most adoring servant, please do me the honours and eat my ass.'

'Much, much better.'

Hadeon and I had grown comfortable within our little cove. It was hidden by a rock formation, shadowed by my Kingdom which stretched far above us. From here the castle built upon the cliff looked endless. It stretched far into the blue skies, piercing the heavens beyond it. One tower was so tall that if you walked up to its top it made you lightheaded, which was exactly the feeling I had now as Hadeon tugged me up to him.

I paused long enough to trace my tongue around his nipple whilst his fingers dug into my scalp. Hadeon's anticipation was palpable I could practically taste it—his pre-cum was lathered across my tongue already. Hadeon extended his tongue to me, beckoning me to suck on it next. I knew that look he gave me, all wide-eyed and expectant. It was the type of look someone gave a cool drink on a warm day, all panting and desperate.

Hadeon's guttural moans and my light purrs echoed across the towering wall of rock at our backs. His touch was firm, but he was always careful not to leave marks. I wasn't so careful. My nails tore into his flesh, scoring him with my touch. No one would ask a servant why their skin was marred by some feral cat. Whereas for me, the prince, if anyone found anything untoward, it would be their damnation.

And with Hadeon, I couldn't afford to lose him. He was the only real thing in my life. Something I held close to my chest and coveted greatly. Which was exactly why I'd stolen him away to this very cave, because nowhere else was safe for us both to exist.

Outside the cave's mouth, the ocean's surface was so still it could've been made of glass. Occasionally, winged fish would jump out of it, disturbing the surface in endless ripples. Then it would settle once again. Far off in the distance, the shapes of small fishing vessels bobbed, nets cast out and lines waiting patiently for something to snap on bait. They were far enough away that they wouldn't recognise me—most importantly they couldn't see me position myself on Hadeon's face.

Our only witness was Karakos—the God of the Oceans. Maybe the first time we stole away down here, escaping from the castle along the narrow, naturally carved steps into the rock face, I might have worried that he judged me. Now, all those months later, I was sure my bare ass hardly made the god blink.

If gods blinked, that was.

Hadeon shifted my body, his body barely straining to move me. He spun me around, moving me into the position he wanted. Whereas I face his cock, I can feel his cool breath between my spread ass. Gods know I loved this position. It kept both our mouths occupied. It was fair and balanced, no one was left without pleasure.

Hadeon ate my ass like it was a piece of fruit. A peach dripping with juice, so delicious he couldn't help but devour his fill. And to stop myself from moaning on an endless loop, I bent over and returned his cock into my mouth. I took it all in. Every inch until his head pressed into the back of my throat, making me gag.

He growled in response, his tongue lapping my centre, his teeth nipping and grazing skin. Every now and then, he would slip a finger or two in, stretching me, preparing me. The last time we'd visited our little haven, it had been my turn to bend Hadeon over the table of rock and fuck him. Although it was a rare occasion, there was something thrilling about him submitting to my control. But today of all days, I longed for him to have that power.

If there was one thing that could rid the tension lingering in every muscle of my body, it was the press of his length against the soft spot deep within me.

Just as I readied myself for the initial burn of his entrance, Hadeon pushed me off of him. I landed carelessly into the sand, the wind knocked out of my lungs and the lust out of my groin.

'What in Karakos's name was that for.'

'Get up,' Hadeon hissed, gathering my clothes and throwing them at me. 'Quickly.'

I caught my belongings, blinded half by sand and half by my disappointment. 'What's gotten into you, Had?'

Hadeon rushed to dress himself, his eyes fixed on something outside of the cave's entrance. Whatever he saw panicked him enough to become rough with me. I followed his line of sight and saw what had caused his urgency.

A ship. It was an impressively large vessel made from red-polished wood and golden painted trim. The gargantuan sails where retracted, helping the large vessel slow its movement to a steady crawl. Across the cream material was the symbol of our Kingdom—the golden conch shell.

My fingers lifted and pressed to the base of my throat, covering the very same marking. Scarred, pale skin had marred my throat for as long as I'd remembered. The strange mark was the muse for my father's emblem, because when I sang it glowed the same hue of gold stitched into the ship's sail.

'I thought everyone was accounted for,' I said, lifting a hand over my brow.

'They must just be late arrivals,' Hadeon replied, tugging a leg of his trousers on before the other. It was almost comical, watching him hop around with my spittle all down his chin and chest.

Sunlight reflected off a spyglass from the top of the bird's nest. I slunk back into the shadowed mouth of the cave, feeling the press of Hadeon's half-dressed body from behind. His arms wrapped around me, his chin resting on my shoulder, his grip vice-like.

'It isn't late, Had. Look.' I narrowed my eyes on the back of the boat, pointing out something troublesome.

Hadeon must have noticed it too. I felt his heart skip through his chest. 'Is that...'

My heart hammered in my throat, a chill of dread coursing down my neck. 'Yes. The Mer.'

Spears impaled the vessel's stern. They coated the wooden frame like the spikes protruding from the back of a porcupine. I held my tongue, watching as the ship crept closer into view. Although I couldn't see the port, I could imagine the sudden explosion of action across the long stone jetty.

'This isn't good,' Hadeon said. 'It's lucky the ship has even made it back. The Mer grow more brazen with every passing year.'

I couldn't take my eyes off the ship as it passed. 'When I asked Father last night if all the ships were accounted for, he said they were.'

'Because if he accepted that one ship hadn't returned, he'd be accepting responsibility.' Hadeon hated my father, and always had. I often thought it was because of the way my father treated me, or the power he held over me. But something told me Hadeon's hatred was deeper. 'One of the stable hands said their uncle went out fishing and never came home. His boat was found offshore, torn to shreds. Your father blamed it on the sharks, but no sharks have nails which gouge through wood—'

'Please.' I turned my back on the ocean, on the ship. Staring at it wouldn't change anything. 'I don't want to think about it, not today.'

I'd heard the same story Hadeon was sharing. Mer attacks were growing more frequent. It was true, but putting the blame on my father was the same as resting that burden on my shoulders. We were one and the same, after all.

Hadeon swallowed hard, eyeing me with some trepidation. It wasn't often he looked at me with anything but desire. Now, a flash of something far more feral passed behind his eyes.

'Terian *must* do something,' he added as he finished dressing, 'or these attacks will persist. It's a disease, a disaster waiting to happen. Unless your father submits to the old ways, the Mer will continue their pursuit to spread their curse.'

*The old ways.* A term to describe a time when blood was spilled into the ocean to appear the god who ruled it and keep his Mer at bay.

'I didn't know you were so in-tune with old customs,' I snapped, feeling as though I was seeing Hadeon in a new light. The acolytes of Gorgana were a small group, but that didn't take away from their formidability. There was a temple on one of Ire's neighbouring islands, although it seemed their sway had begun to spread like poison across other islands over the years. 'Next thing I know it will be you who'll be walking around dressed in red robes, demanding blood for the sea.'

He stepped in close to me, gaze cold. 'Someone has to make the change.'

Where I had hoped he'd tell me I was being ridiculous for even suggesting such a thing, he didn't. I didn't know what worried me more, the look he continued to scrutinise me with, or the lack of rebuke to my suggestion.

'Hadeon, this is ridiculous. There hasn't been a blood debt to Karakos in hundreds of years. Why would he be displeased now? I hardly think a lack of spilling blood in the water has anything to do with the Mer's attacks.'

'Then what does?' Hadeon's shout echoed around us, burning my skin with its scorching heat. 'It is alright for you, Ernest. You can stay away from the water, hide in your little tower and watch the world get washed away. But for the rest of us? We stop venturing out and the food supply stops. My mother is out on her boat before dawn every day. She goes out and *every fucking time*, I expect her never to return. Not all of us have the luxury of staying away from the sea.'

I reached out for him, only to be smacked away. 'Hadeon, I'm sorry—'

'You don't understand.' He gazed to the castle above us, frown deepening to a scowl. 'None of you do.'

My head ached at the mention of my father, and at the mention of such a disgusting tradition. 'It isn't as simple as that.'

'Oh, I am sure. Choosing a sacrifice for Karakos is not exactly as simple as picking out what colour jacket to wear for tonight's festivities. Let's not kid one another, Ernest. We both know your father hasn't got the slightest issue with choosing who is to be thrown into Karakos's domain.'

'Then trust that what must be done will be.'

'When?' Hadeon snapped, eyes flaring wider. 'You know the old stories, you understand what Karakos is capable of. He swallows cities. Kingdoms.' The atmosphere shifted so suddenly it was as if the world rocked. 'Which begs the question, is that what your father desires?'

I was far too stunned to speak. 'That's treason, Hadeon. Careful.'

'There's a price we must pay for all of us not to be turned into monsters.' He snatched my wrist, tugging me in close. His grip hurt, grinding the bones of my wrist together. I'd never seen him so panicked, so furious. 'What is a little blood if it means saving thousands? One sacrifice and it may stop us from being swept into the ocean, only to be bitten and changed by the waiting Mer.'

Bitten and changed.

I tried to pull away, but his grip only tightened. 'Who are we to determine whose life is worthy or not?'

'Not we. You. You and your father.'

Part of me longed to reach out and hold Hadeon, to beg for him to see reason. But there was another part of me, the long-suppressed feral part, that wanted to lash out with claws for even insinuating such a thing.

'My father would never doom us,' I replied, snatching my wrist from Hadeon and balling my hands into fists at my side. 'He loves his subjects.'

'He loves what his subjects *provide* him...' Hadeon replied, lips turning into a sneer of disgust. His gaze lingered over my shoulder, out across the oceans to the specks of islands our naked eye could not see. 'But what about them? There's talk, you know. People are whispering about your father's desire to use Karakos's wrath to wash away everything in this world, until he's the only one left to rule.'

'No one has the power to manipulate a god,' I said, laughing at the ridiculous notion even though there was nothing funny about this. That was how I coped, laughing when others cried, giggling in moments when I should be sombre.

'No one,' Hadeon said, leaning in, 'but you.'

The slap came out of nowhere. One moment I was still, the next my hand was raised, my palm stinging with the force of my blow. Hadeon's head snapped to the side, his hand coming up to cover his cheek.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—' I began, but it was too late. What was done was done. I waited for Hadeon to move, breath lodged in my throat. He straightened slowly, lowering his hand back to his side so I could see the perfectly etched mark of my handprint on his face. Tears welled in his eyes, as they did in mine.

'I should get back to the castle.' His voice was rigid, every word poised and careful. 'There's still plenty to do before your big night.'

He made a move to walk past me. My fingers barely grazed his arm before he jerked away.

'Don't,' he growled.

My heart stammered, shuddered and a single fissure cracked over it. 'Hadeon, don't leave me. Not like this.'

'No,' he snapped, finally letting his tears loose, 'I shouldn't have said anything.'

What I longed to say was, *yes*, *you shouldn't have*. But saying that wouldn't have helped in the moment. Hadeon walked away from me, leaving me in the belly of shadows in nothing but the skin I was born in, my clothes fallen at my feet.

I scrambled for something to say, something to do which would make him stop walking away. Desperation was a sin—that was one of my father's many lessons. I supposed this was simply another sin to add to my evergrowing list.

Alongside lying.

'I'll tell him,' I shouted, voice echoing against the stone walls. 'I'll tell my father about you.'

Hadeon stopped dead in his tracks, but still kept his back to me.

'After tonight,' I panted, breathless although I hadn't moved an inch from where I stood. 'I'll tell him everything. No more lies and secrets, no more hiding away here and stealing moments. We'll be open about us, for the whole court to see.'

He glanced over his shoulder, face void of any emotion. 'And what if he doesn't approve?'

It was a test, one I'd been waiting for.

I gathered my courage, taking in a deep breath as Hadeon settled his allseeing eyes upon me once again. His cheek still bore the print of my hand, but he couldn't see the mark he had left upon me.

No one but you.

Hadeon was right, though. Perhaps I *did* have the power to manipulate a god. I could open my mouth now and unleash my voice, not the one I spoke to Hadeon with but the inner one, the beast lurking in the pit of my throat, which held the power to make anyone do anything I desired.

He waited patiently for my answer, although he likely saw it gleam in my eyes before I spoke it aloud.

'Then I will *make* him,' I said.

Hadeon smiled slowly, his chin tipping forward until he looked at me through his lashes. It was a smile I had seen before on another's face. My father, when he first discovered what I could do, what I could offer him.

'I love you, Ernest,' Hadeon said, grin only widening by the second.

I opened my mouth to reply, but the words got lodged in my throat. Shame, because Hadeon didn't stick around long enough for me to force them out.

## Chapter Two - Ernest

the state

Cool winds billowed in through the balcony, snatching at the sheer curtains until they danced like twin ghosts beside the open doors. The view beyond looked out across the oceans. The summer heat was suffocating, working under my skin and settled there like a parasite.

There was nothing to see but sea and sky—both elements blending seamlessly together far off in the distance. I knew the Below was a dangerous place, yet it looked so beautiful. Sunlight skipped over the calm surface of the water, causing the ocean to glisten as though it was made entirely from diamonds. Was that what lured people in? Drawing them from the safety of land into the clutches of the monsters who lurked beneath?

The salt tang of air tickled my nose, and the soft ocean spray kissed my cheeks.

'Are you pleased with the colours, my son?' My father's booming voice drew my attention back to the mirror before me. 'I picked them out myself. You shall stand out tonight, my very own star amongst a sea of unimportance.'

'Yes, Father,' I replied, because it was easier to keep conversation short than encourage him. 'I do.'

I hated my reflection. It was the painful reminder of my mother, the woman I had killed. For as long as I could remember, my father had reminded me of how painful I was to look at. From my thick black hair, now speckled with strands of silver at my temple, to the blue of my eyes, I was my mother's son. Although I didn't remember her, not even in a faint memory, my father did—and by the *gods*, he reminded me every chance he could get.

Sometimes he would take my face in his hands with eyes full of tears. Those times were rare. Mostly he refused to look at me, keeping his dark eyes everywhere but me for days on end.

Unlike Hadeon. Hadeon never turned his gaze away. To him, I was the least painful thing in the world. He made me feel seen, more so than I ever had before. Which was why Hadeon never left my thoughts. His words haunted me, replaying in my skull, his winning smile etched into the dark behind my eyes. If I contemplated the way he looked at me for too long, I feared I would forget myself.

The needle pricked through my trousers, stabbing into my thigh with ease. The pain was the perfect distraction, but I didn't dare cry out. I dug my teeth harder into my lower lip, swallowing back the gasp. Because pain was weakness and my father watched on from behind, waiting for an excuse to berate me.

'I'm sorry, my Prince,' the seamstress spluttered, her hands shaking violently. It was no wonder she had pricked me. Between the proximity of the King, my father's all-seeing gaze, and the fact her colleague had been killed only yesterday for less than pricking me, she was scared for her life.

Why? Because when my father's men had asked her colleague to make me an outfit for my birthday, she refused on the basis of being too busy. It was a valid response, what with the city overspilling with visitors from neighbouring islands. But it wasn't good enough for my father.

No one refused the King, not even me.

So he'd had the seamstress killed, leaving this poor woman to come in her place to do the job, knowing what would happen to her if she so much as spoke at the wrong moment.

'Careful,' I said, gently brushing my hand over the seamstress's knuckles. She flinched away from me. Not wanting to make her uncomfortable, I focused back on my reflection. 'We wouldn't want to ruin such a beautiful outfit with blood, would we?'

I hated how the seamstress regarded me, her green eyes wide with fear which concealed another emotion. Love. Not *real* love. Fake and forced, conjured once a year in a spell of my own making.

A wave of sickness roiled in my stomach. I clutched it, massaging the cramping. Hours separated this moment from tonight's festivities. And every year my guilt grew harsher than the year before.

'It won't happen again, Your Highness' she said, quickly regaining her composure as the needle threaded back into the seam, weaving gold thread against the crisp white material.

'It's no bother. Those fingers of yours are practically magic. And my name is Ernest, please use it. Makes sense since we are spending the next few hours together. May I ask what I can call you?'

Father huffed, just out of view.

'Aleanna.' She swallowed hard, gulping down a sob as she pulled at the golden ribbon and continued stitching it down the outer leg of my trousers.

'Well, Aleanna,' I said, practically feeling my father cut daggers into the back of my head with his eyes. 'You're doing a fantastic job. As the King said, it looks handsome. You're extremely talented—'

'Aleanna has work to finish.' The deep voice resounded at our backs. Aleanna stiffened, fingers shaking violently as she attempted to regain her hold on the needle. Head bowed, she got back to work.

My attention flickered to where my father sat. He was barely in the reflection, but I saw enough.

My father, Terian—the King—sat up straight in his chair, lips glistening with the pulp of the grape he had just finished dismembering with his teeth. His handmaiden was waiting, silver tray held aloft, overspilling with freshly picked vines, sliced oranges and thinly sliced meats.

He was a meticulous man in every aspect of the word, from his straight-backed posture, sculptured beard and perfectly laid auburn hair. He was handsome and kind-faced, with eyes as dark as shadow. But it was a mask, and he hid the truth behind it.

He was a serpent in sheep's skin.

'Are you ready to tell me where it was you scuttled off to this morning?' His question sliced through me, deep to the bone. He slowly lifted his gaze from the skinless grape, to me.

'Swimming, Father,' I lied.

He studied me, scrutinising everything about me. I practically felt the pop of the grape as he put it between his teeth and bit down. 'Is that so? Next time inform me of your movements. I don't like when you are out of my sight.'

'I know, Father. I'm sorry.' I spoke with the same trepidation Aleanna had with me. 'It won't happen again.'

Even I hated the way I sounded as I spoke to him. He reduced me to a child, meek-voiced and pathetic. I wondered if this was why I turned into such a demanding monster out of his earshot. Twenty-seven years old, and my father still made me feel like an infant.

'Of course it won't happen again,' Terian said, dismissing the conversation with a hand. 'Now, I forbid any more speaking. Rest your voice. Save it for this evening.'

My lips practically sealed shut, melding together and refusing to part. I nodded, lifting a finger to my throat, to the magic lingering within it.

'Good boy,' he cooed, focusing on the next grape he would devour. 'Good, *good* boy.'

A shiver passed over my skin at his praise. It was not something he gave out often and Karakos knew I thirsted for it. Starved for it. Would do anything for it. Even if that meant using my gods-given gift to give him everything he ever wanted.



My body ached after hours of standing before the mirror. I did what was asked of me, lifting my arms up whilst cream material was draped over my shoulders, cut, pinned, threaded together until some semblance of an outfit began to form.

'I wish for Ernest's throat to be uncovered,' my father said, walking around me as a wolf would stalk its prey. 'Many people have journeyed around the land to hear my son tonight, but part of the miracle is seeing him too.'

I could hear them now. The sound of a bustling crowd being herded like cattle through the gates of our city. Dread coiled in my chest, squeezing my lungs until I couldn't breathe.

'Yes, my King,' the seamstress replied, eyes trained to the floor.

My father's cold fingers brushed over my neck, tugging at the high collar of the newly crafted jacket. He folded back each flap of material until my skin was on display. More importantly, the smudge of the pale birthmark nestled just above my clavicle.

It was the hearty knock at the door which drew his attention from me. As his finger dropped and he looked away, I found that I could breathe

again.

'Come in.'

Hadeon entered, his eyes fixed to his boots. It took everything in my power not to look at Hadeon. But I couldn't help but risk a glance in the mirror's reflection. When I did, I found his eyes were on me.

'Apologies for the intrusion, sire—'

'Spit it out.'

'It is regarding the ship which arrived late to harbour,' Hadeon spoke to my father with the authority of nobility, not a servant. 'The captain would like to discuss the... issue which occurred during their voyage this morning.'

I carefully studied my father's reaction. After Hadeon's accusations, I could not help but contemplate if what he said was true. Did my father wish to use Karakos's wrath against the neighbouring islands? Surely not. The god had become all but a myth, as all the gods had. Nothing more than names written on parchment, stories told to children to keep them behaving.

'Call it for what it is, boy. A Mer attack. There's no point in pretending otherwise.'

Aleanna stilled as though she was listening in, her mind locked on the conversation and not the threading she was midway through.

'Reports have come in that there have been sightings close to the shore.' Hadeon bowed his head, not out of respect, but to hide the pure hatred that creased over his brow. Maybe I should have said something, but it seemed words failed me.

'When?' Terian snapped.

'All but an hour ago, my King.'

A few more words were exchanged, mainly my father berating Hadeon who continued to hold onto respectable silence. Then they left, the man who had my heart and the man who gave it to me. The silence which followed was thick with tension. That was the thing about my father's presence—you felt it when you entered the room, but it was in the aftershock when he vacated it that truly left its mark.

Aleanna returned to her task. Scissors snipped near my throat, cutting through the collar of my jacket just as my father had requested. There was no more conversation to be had. Her movements slowed at the light pulsing just beneath the skin of my clavicle. Of course, her awe couldn't be helped.

Magic was rare, gifted by a god—although which god gave me mine was still up for debate.

Most of all, magic was dangerous. Something to be desired by those who beheld it, and feared by those who faced it.

In Aleanna's moment of transfixion she caught her palm on the scissor's edge, splitting her skin. Metal clattered against the stone-slabbed floor as she dropped the scissor and stumbled back, pain twisting the beauty of her features into an unrecognisable mask.

'Fuck,' she gasped. It was refreshing to hear her swear, as though I finally saw the truth of her, the one my father's presence buried.

'Here. Let me help you,' I said, stepping down from the podium.

'I'm fine, my Prince,' she said, but the single tear which escaped her eye suggested otherwise. It was not one of sadness, but frustration. 'It is best I don't get any blood on your outfit or—'

'Please.' I kept my voice calm as I spoke. A pulse of light reflected off her features, shining from the conch of power imbued beneath my skin. 'I don't wish to hurt you. Only help.'

Her features relaxed, her hand dropping to her side as though she forgot about her wound—which wasn't how my power worked. Well, unless that was my desired goal, my explicit intent. This time I simply needed her to calm down. So I wove that intention into my voice, persuading Aleanna's subconscious to heed it.

Anyway, if my father heard her and returned to see this, I highly doubted a cut palm would've been what she was worried about.

Aleanna relaxed. She did it because she had no choice.

'May I?' I asked, no longer poisoning my words with my persuasion. 'I'm no healer, but I can at least tidy you up before you find one. If we're quick, I can have you on your way before... he returns.'

'But your outfit isn't finished.' Her sea-glass green eyes widened as though I had said something funny. 'Nor do I have enough coin for a healer.'

I didn't need to ask if my father was paying her for tonight's outfit. It was an honour to be chosen for such a task, one which she couldn't refuse. No one refused us, as her colleague had discovered.

'Then I'll have to see what I can do about the outfit,' I said, eyes scanning the room. 'Now please, you have done much for me. Allow me to repay the favour.'

There was a reading chair situated beside the balcony. Beside it was a table covered in books. I gestured for her to sit, which she did with little hesitation. From the awkward posture of her back, I could tell she was not used to sitting on something so plush. Comfort was a luxury, and one not everyone could afford.

Blood smudged over her apron, staining the light blue into a rusty brown. 'If I get any on you—'

'Never mind that,' I said, searching the room for something useful. The silver tray waited where my father had sat. His chalice of spirits was untouched and mostly full. I picked up the goblet and a cushion.

'Here, bite down on this. It might sting, but at least the cut will be clean.'

She did as I asked, taking the cushion I offered and stuffing it between her teeth. I doused her wound with the alcohol and she hissed, eyes flaring wide as the blood was washed away. If reading minds was my power, I may have heard her screech a string of profanities.

The cut was superficial, nothing that wouldn't heal in time. But it might put her out of commission and affect her livelihood. 'Once we bandage this up, I'll fetch you some coin to cover any missed work.'

'But your outfit...' Poppy-red hair fell over her face, shielding her eyes, which widened with disbelief.

'Looks fantastic. Between me and you, I'm rather familiar with a needle and thread myself. I can finish off the collar before my father returns. I'll tell him I dismissed you.'

She paused, looking at me properly for the first time. When she next spoke, I did not expect those five words to come out of her mouth. 'You *are* different than him.'

Her compliment should have made my insides warm, when in truth it only inspired dread.

'I'm told I took after my mother.' Even though I had no memory of her, talking about her was still a painful ordeal. 'I'll let you in on a little secret. When my mother grew up, she used to mend fishing nets for a living. When I was old enough, I took up a needle and thread just to feel like I was respecting her memory. It brought me closer to her.'

'Fishing nets and collars are very different, Ernest.' Aleanna offered me a smile as she pressed a clump of fabric cuttings against her wound. I continued to wrap more off-cuts around it like a bandage. Perhaps in another time, another life, I would've been friends with this woman. She was around my age, late twenties give or take. If I didn't have my magic, maybe we would have been in the same school together, learned the same skills... maybe even kissed the same boys.

But alas, we were worlds apart, all because of what lingered within my throat.

'What's your greatest wish?' I asked, wanting nothing more than to stop the way she was staring at me like I was some great oddity.

It was such a peculiar question that it did exactly what I required. Aleanna looked up at me, fair brows raised in confusion. 'Pardon me... I don't understand.'

I finished wrapping the material around her hand, staunching the bleeding. 'It's a simple question. If you could have one wish, what would it be? Money, power, beauty, knowledge?'

Aleanna pondered it for a moment, mulling over my question.

'My mother is unwell,' she answered finally with confidence.

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said as ideas formed in my mind.

'You didn't spread the illness, did you?' Aleanna bit out suddenly. 'There's no need to apologise.'

I bowed my head, aware of how the rays of light from the balcony reflected off the woman's hair. It was the same colour as the blood staining the makeshift bandage around her hand.

'Can I ask what happened to her?'

Aleanna paused. For a moment I thought she was going to refuse me. Unlike my father, I wouldn't make her do anything. But when she finally replied, I believed it was because of the small relationship we were slowly building. 'It's a rot in her lungs. It fills them with blood until one day, it will drown her. And if I had a wish, it would be that she gets better.'

Aleanna would never have known it, but her answer struck a chord. It was a wish I too once had, before I understood my power to make it happen. My throat tightened as her eyes settled on mine. The familiar tug of an unseen collar pulled at my flesh, a reminder of the rules that bound me.

I gazed to the closed door. The thing about my father was that his deep voice carried. If he was close, I would've heard him. It was a risk, to do this. I couldn't buy Aleanna's trust with coin, but I could with power.

'Thank you,' I exhaled, squeezing her hand tight.

Before she could respond with her confusion to my thanks, my voice silenced the world. Magic unfurled in my throat, a rosebud beneath a ray of golden sun. It opened wide, yawning as though it was some creature kept in a deep slumber. As always, it glowed beneath my skin, reflecting light off Aleanna's sharp features.

And so, I sang.

The melody was light. Soft. I kept it to a whisper, knowing only Aleanna and these four walls could hear. It didn't need to be sung in words, but forming my intention into the lyrics only made my magic stronger. Like the knotting of rope, I twisted my intent with my magic, filling every note with what I desired.

And what I desired was for Aleanna's mother to be well. For the rot to vanish, her lungs to clear.

We both didn't hear the door open.

My focus was on Aleanna and her greatest wish. It wasn't until my name rang out across it all, louder and more demanding than any power I could possess.

'Ernest Ire.' King Terian stood beneath the arched frame as the remnants of my voice faded into the air. This was not my father, but the King. All vicious power, fury, and horror. A storm brewed in his eyes.

I drew back from Aleanna, ready to shield her. But Father reached us in a few strides, snatching Aleanna's wrist and pulling her from the chair. She dangled from his hand, like a puppet on a string.

Fear captured her, as it did me. She was far too scared to cry out. And I was far too scared of him to beg him to let her go.

'Do you ever learn?' Terian bellowed, the walls quaking from the fury in his voice. 'What will it take for you to understand my rules?'

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I couldn't move a muscle. Even if Father asked me a question, I knew the best thing now was to not speak. It was my voice that got me into this mess. It would *not* be my voice that got me out of it.

I was a man, but beneath Father's glare I felt like I was nothing more than a boy.

With his spare hand, my father tangled his fingers in Aleanna's red hair, snatching her face until his mouth was inches from her ear.

I couldn't hear the words he shared, but I didn't need to. Her eyes flew wide, her mouth parting in a sharp scream which was stifled by another

hard yank of her hair.

'I can make her forget,' I spat, but he didn't hear me. 'You know I can... let me try... please...'

Father moved with the confidence of someone who had made their mind up. I chased him out onto the balcony, grappling at Aleanna's apron as though it would stop what was to come.

'No.'

'I can do it, Father. Please, let me do it.'

Cool winds screamed out across the void, snatching my voice away as though it longed to steal it. The once calm water were now a boiling mass of waves which clashed against one another. Someone had angered Karakos —or perhaps the god was simply hungry, ready for my father to feed him.

Magic filled my throat like a stone. I took a breath in, prepared to stop him. Because I could.

The sky howled. The ocean bellowed.

'If you do this,' I screamed, unable to stop myself. He had broken me down, allowing that feral part of me to slip free, 'I will never utter another sound for you.'

Terian stopped, my threat sinking in. I was his greatest strength, but also his greatest weakness.

I watched his emotions played out in the colour draining from his skin, like ash turning to snow. His grip on Aleanna lessened. She released a gasp riddled with relief. And for the first time, when she stared at me, it wasn't with fear.

It was with hope.

But that lasted a mere second before Father flung her body over the stone balcony.

A scream tore from me. Not from my chest, or my gut, but from my soul. It was filled with magic, my throat flashing with light as I bellowed out across the ocean. There was no room for thought or contemplation as my magic spilled out of me.

It was a creature in its own right.

'You did this,' my father said, so calmly I was surprised to hear him above my screams and the thrashing ocean.

I shot forwards, the balcony wall slamming into my hips. If it was not for Father's sudden grip on my neck, I might have joined Aleanna, throwing myself into the abyss of ocean below.

I watched the water as it swallowed Aleanna whole. It chewed her body up, devouring her. And I witnessed the moment she had crashed beneath, waiting for the ocean to spit her back up.

It didn't.

'Take it,' I screamed until my throat felt like it was bleeding. 'I don't want this. I don't deserve it. Take it from me.'

'If I could, I would,' Terian replied as his fingers clamped tighter around the back of my neck. But I wasn't speaking to him. I spoke to the ocean, to Karakos. Hell, I spoke to Aleanna's broken and ocean-battered corpse. What good was a voice that I couldn't use? A voice kept under lock and key?

'You killed her for nothing!'

'A lesson. Ernest, you forget yourself,' my father hissed into my ear, nails pinching my skin. 'My forgetful son, you killed my wife. My heart. Your mother. You took her from me, selfishly. *That* was for nothing. Or have you forgotten?'

No, I hadn't. Because at every given moment, my father had reminded me of what I had taken from him. Guilt was a familiar friend. I had known the emotion long before I could name it.

Tears fell from my eyes, snatched by the winds as my father held me down. There was nothing else to do but look below. Every passing second, I longed to see red hair amongst the dark blue, or a flash of flesh being churned by the water.

'I'm sorry,' I cried, unsure who my apology was for. Aleanna, or the man I had just failed. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

Terian drew me back, hoisting me from the balcony's edge until I skidded across the stone slabs of the floor. Clouds brewed at my father's back like wings. He was ominous as a God as he glowered down at me.

'One rule,' he said, voice barely audible over the beginning of the storm. 'That's all I have. *One rule* for you to follow in exchange for such a lavish life. *One rule* for you to abide by to spend every day surrounded with luxury and comfort.' He leaned in so close that I could almost feel the nip of teeth against my ear. '*One rule* to repent for your sins.'

'She could've lived,' I hissed, refusing to blink as my father released me,

'Your mother *should have* lived,' he snapped, treading careful footsteps until he was beside me. 'But alas, she did not. You killed her the moment

you entered this world. You took her from me. And everything I have done since is for you. One day you'll understand. Now pick yourself up. We have guests to greet.'

Hate burned at the back of my throat. 'I won't—'

'Yes!' he shouted as the sky was slashed with forks of lightning, thunder echoing a moment later. 'Yes, you will. Because you are mine. Because you and that fucking voice belongs to *me*.'

There it was again, the collar around my neck tightening. I gazed past my father, losing myself to my thoughts. When I looked across the balcony wall to the boiling view of sea and sky, it wasn't to look for Aleanna—it was to search for my way out of this... this curse.

'And if I refuse?'

Father knelt before me, his expression smoothing into one I had not seen for years. It was the face of a man who once sat me on his lap and read me stories. The face of a man who kissed my torn knee when I fell off a donkey. The face of a man who loved me, not for my voice, but for me.

My father—the one I had been searching for. The one who died when he no longer saw me as his son, but the key to his future.

'Then the first neck I break in honour of Karakos will be your little lover's. Hadeon, is it?'

The world fell away from me as I stared deep into his knowing eyes.

'Did you think I wouldn't find out?' Terian said, glowering down at me, the mask of a caring father gone once more. 'Did you think you could sneak around fucking servants and I would be blind to it? You greedy, pathetic little child. You're playing with toys. And toys can break.'

I swallowed hard, tasting the sharp bile which crept up my throat.

'I take your silence as your understanding, Ernest. People are begging for their King to turn back to the old ways. And I shall. But mark my words, one step outside of my boundaries again and I will take Hadeon from you and feed the ocean with his blood. Am I clear?'

It was hard to speak with my broken heart filling my throat. I could only force out one word. 'Yes.'

He stopped and took in a hulking breath, shoulders relaxing. Then he spoke the two words that had the power to ruin me. '*Good boy*.'

## Chapter Three - Killian



I remembered the day my mother killed me as though it was yesterday, not hundreds of years before.

Her nails had gouged across my scalp as she held me in place, my head over the cliff's edge with nothing but the roiling black waves beneath me. Wind had torn at my skin, snatching my desperate tears and stealing them into the ocean beneath.

'My baby,' she had cooed, red robes flapping around her narrow frame like a flag. 'Killian, my baby boy,.'

As the crowd of her fellow acolytes stood and watched, my mother took the cold blade—metal splattered with the sea-salt spray of the ocean—and drew it across my neck as a musician would an instrument.

The serrated edge bit its teeth through flesh. She plucked my veins like strings.

I was conscious long enough to watch as my blood fell like rain, staining the white cliffs crimson with my life whilst the ocean's tongues lapped at the rock, drinking my blood. It was a painful endeavour, bleeding out, one which scarred more than my flesh.

This was the *ultimate* betrayal.

There were no tears from my mother, no broken-hearted screams as I died, no rush of regret. She knew what she was doing, and she did so with confidence.

'I will save you from them,' mother had cried, 'just as you will save us from damnation.'

Blood turned against blood as the tide turned against the shore.

That night was no different to this one. A storm raged across the ocean, churning the waves into a mass of vicious mountains which crashed against one another. Lighting forked through the ominous sky, splitting the dark clouds apart with moments of beautiful light.

Instead of being held over the precipice of a cliff's edge, I was nestled in the home I'd built on the very spot where my mother had killed me. It was a humble dwelling, with its lit hearth and incense-heavy air. The glass rattled as the winds battered them from outside, the storm longing for entry into my home.

Hundreds of years had passed and yet her voice was still clear as the day I last heard her.

All the old myths portrayed Karakos as an angry god. Even when he was calm, there was danger lurking beneath the depths of his domain. The ocean had the power to offer sustenance to those who needed it, or the power to swallow Kingdoms whole.

I often wondered what Karakos saw in me, but I knew an answer would always be out of reach. Did the god weigh up my innocence, or lack thereof? Did he regret saving me?

In the years since my mother had killed me, the world around me had more than changed—it was barely recognisable. Life had blossomed and waned, spreading like weeds which withered and grew in an endless cycle. And I'd watched it all happen through this very window. The only thing which never changed was the ocean. Even the stars shifted in their seats, some dying whilst others were born anew.

The ocean was eternal, but I... I was ancient.

But what displeased Karakos today was not sacrifices or blood. I was the last life given to the ocean—my story had changed the course of Ire's future. No one wished to anger a god who could rise over the world and draw life into his domain.

But in the years since Karakos saved me, it seemed the god forgot his promise. Forgot me for another—someone else of more importance.

I watched from my perch as the first figure emerged from the rough water. A Mer. Other sinuous heads popped out of thrashing waves. They all watched as one of their own dragged itself onto the shore.

Impossible. This was... wrong. I clutched the damp wall for support, unsure what I had just witnessed, unable to move as the Mer pulled itself out of the depths. Its unnatural body clawed across sand as scales melted to

flesh. Its tail dissipated like smoke caught on the wind, revealing two legs beneath.

Legs. *Human* legs.

I followed its sights, which I could tell were set on the Kingdom of Ire, my ears pricking to catch the sounds of the city which rose over the roar of the waves.

'How?' I asked, breath fogging on the window, obscuring the view.

Karakos didn't reply.

No Mer had ever walked on land. They were monsters of the deep, creatures made in their creator's image but twisted in Gorgana's wicked game. What I witnessed should have been impossible. A miracle, some might say.

Or a nightmare come true.

I turned my back on the ocean, on Karakos, on my hopes of freedom. Then, as the storm broke, I heard it. As I had all those years ago as my body tumbled into the raging water, as Karakos embraced me in its many limbs.

'Killian, my Killian. My. Killian.'

There was a time I lived to please my saviour. But just as my mother drew that blade over my throat—the woman who bore me into this horrifying world and believed she had the right to take me out of it—Karakos would do the same, in time.

In the years I had been alive, I had learned many things. The most important was

patience.

My trident leaned against the wall. I took it, fingers grasping the cool metal. The power stored within it thrashed against my skin until it bled inside of me. Lightning flashed outside my shack, illuminating the cracks in the door and wooden slats. I kicked the door open, viewing the dark night beyond.

'Lead the way,' I spoke to the dark, watching the smudge of a figure moving towards the castle in the distance, 'and I shall follow.'



THE MER WALKED AWKWARDLY on legs which didn't belong to it. The creature glowed like a beacon, a shimmer of magic oozing from its skin.

Whatever power gifted such an ability to the Mer was strong enough to defy natural laws.

Each step looked as though it pained the Mer, like it was walking on shards of broken glass. If it wasn't for the spell woven around its legs, I had no doubt the Mer would still be floundering in the water, full of hate and watching the humans from a distance, waiting for some drunk fool to fall in and be devoured, bitten... changed.

I might have even killed it if it stayed water-bound. Perhaps I still would. But not before I discovered what brought it here. And, more importantly, *how*.

It was barefoot, its skin a mottled mess of blue, purple and white, its red hair sodden with ocean water. But no one seemed to notice as it passed, even though its clothes were sodden and its arms hanging limp beside it. Even though it was dead, a corpse infested by the creatures of the deep.

Mer did not walk. Mer did not leave the ocean. No one in Ire would be looking for such a thing, and yet I had watched it crawl out the Below.

I made my mind up on one thing as I followed it through the streets of Ire. The Mer had found a way into the body of a deceased, something I had never seen before. The corpse was fresh, the smell of death buried by the salt and brine coating its skin. With my sharpened senses, I could smell the rottenness of disintegrating flesh even at a distance, the vile smell making me gag.

The only detail which sang of life was the poppy-red hair. Violently bright, it swung around her shoulders in salt-crusted strands.

I had my sights set firmly on the creature, but in the time it took me to blink, it had vanished. I'd lost it amongst the bustling streets. My eyes scanned frantically for the shock of red hair, hoping to find it, but there were too many people around. A sea of flesh—nobles, commoners and lowborn alike—all hoping for a seat to watch the evening's show.

I was familiar with their desire to hear the prince sing, but the Mer was what brought me here. I knew where it was heading, but that didn't stop the urgency from propelling me forwards.

I didn't want to miss it, this phenomenon of a Mer walking among the living. Whilst it stalked towards its prey, I did the same.

Frustrated, I longed to knock elbows into bodies, shifting people out of my way as I cut my way through Ire's streets. But I couldn't risk my skin touching that of another's. I drew my elbows in, wishing for the shawl I wore to engulf me. To protect me.

My trident was no longer a trident, but a walking stick. It was a simple spell, something which cost me little. Like water casting a mirage on a hot day, it took barely any effort for me to warp what those around me saw. With the King's guards loitering around the streets, carrying a weapon in plain sight was not a wise choice. Not tonight of all nights, when they'd parade their little prince out before an enormous crowd.

That was the thing about humans. They coveted wealth and power, but above all it was magic that drew them like moths to a flame and completely drew their attention. Whereas they would each be wishing for a glimpse of the prince, no one paid mind to the elderly. I discovered in my years of walking among them that the old were a forgotten group, a long-lost relic which were better ignored than recognised. For hiding in plain sight, this illusion was perfect.

No one would mind an old man, but a monster—this city would crumble on its own accord if they *truly* saw me.

They all had a name for me. I just wondered if I would hear it tonight.

Ire was alive with sounds and smells, assaulting every one of my senses. Vendors sold grilled fish seasoned with dried salt and herbs. I could barely watch as the humans feasted greedily on the white meat, sucking the juices from spindly bones before discarding scraps for stray cats to finish.

That was one detail about Ire that hadn't changed. This city belonged to strays more than it belonged to those born of royal blood.

I almost tripped over a swarm of cats. One stopped short of my boots, arching its back whilst expelling a ferocious hiss. Cats never liked me, not even before Mother killed me and Karakos saved me.

Musicians fiddled with strings, plucking awful tunes from their wooden instruments. People danced, whooping and crying with joy, clapping their hands whilst others spun vigorously around.

They wouldn't dance if they knew what this city was built on. The blood, the sacrifice. Or maybe they would.

It had been hundreds of years since I had last visited Ire. I had hoped to avoid it for another hundred. But tonight—tonight was different. Part of me admired what humanity had achieved. But another part of me, the louder and more dominant part, almost longed for Karakos to return and swallow

this place entirely. All the greed, all the joy and laughter—it grated on me like a knife to my flesh.

I moved swiftly, passing through the winding streets, my fingers drumming on the walking stick. The closer I got to the castle, the more people surrounded me. Suddenly, I no longer cared about the Mer as arms bumped into me, elbows and hands brushing me.

All that touch, all that proximity... it would ruin me.

My breathing grew laboured and my head started spinning. Panic seized me until I was no longer moving of my own accord. It was all of them around me, pushing and heaving. The beast within cracked a single eye open. I felt it stir, awakened by all the touch. But before it broke free, I pushed my way through the stream of bodies until I stood alone in one of the many side streets.

White-painted buildings arched overhead, guarded by olive trees leaning out of clay pots. I fell down upon a step, sitting as the world steadied. Even away from the crowd, I still felt their touch slithering over me like leeches. I threw my hood back, my pale hair tumbling over my shoulders as my mirage slipped away. The air was heavy, thick and warm. My stick was no longer a stick, the prongs of the trident gouging three scars into the stone beneath it. I couldn't hold up the magic, couldn't focus on anything but the insistent, vile touch of hands upon me.

Breathe, my baby. My Killian.

I heard my mother singing to me as she always did. Taunting me even in death. Her dulcet tones hadn't faded in the years since she'd died. I still could hear her as clear as day, as though she stood beside me and spoke.

It was in that moment that I knew this was a mistake. Coming to Ire was a mistake. Following that damned Mer was a fucking mistake. I should have killed it the moment it stepped free of the ocean. But instead I followed it, knowing the jeopardy I put myself in by doing so.

Then why are you here, my son?

I buried my face in my hands, squeezing my eyes closed to surrender myself to the dark.

'Answers,' I growled out, wondering if my mother's spirit could hear me. She always seemed to speak to me, but she never answered.

As expected, my mother didn't respond, but I was glad for the silence. It gave me a chance to catch my breath and focus on the rolling ocean, far away from the city, to distract me. All the while, I felt the slithering tingle

left in the wake of so many people touching me. It would take a fire to scour myself clean.

## Chapter Four - Ernest



My heart thundered in my throat so loudly that it drowned out the sound of the swelling crowd. Every year more and more faces looked up at me, more ears tingled with anticipation to hear me, more mouths salivated over the chance to see the King's god-blessed son—his caged songbird.

Father had me locked inside the cage hours before the crowd were even allowed through the gates into the amphitheatre. I was left inside a cage with nothing but a seat. Every year, by the time I was let free, the skin around my nails was bleeding from where I picked nervously at them.

The tangled bars of iron and silver were elegantly designed, every detail determined by my father. It was beautiful, my cage, crafted by Ire's finest artists and metalworkers and adorned with vines of silver, thorns of iron, and flowers made of brass. Petrified birds of iron with jewels for eyes stood out gracefully among the foliage.

But beauty didn't negate the truth—it was a prison. A cage to keep me locked within, a place I could leave only when my father permitted.

I was thankful for the lashing rain, since it hid my tears well. There was no need to conceal my emotions when no one would notice, not that they ever did. People travelled across lands, across the ocean, from far off islands all to see me. No. To *hear* me.

They came for my voice.

All I could do was watch on, forcing a smile as more tears cut down my cheeks. Father's threat against Hadeon echoed in my mind. Even if I wanted to break away to find him and warn him, I couldn't. Father had made sure that my guard didn't leave my side after Aleanna was thrown into the roiling water.

Would that be Hadeon's fate? One wrong move, one wrong act and he would die too? Aleanna may have been a stranger, but I grieved for her like she was my sister. Responsibility clung to my conscience, guilt sunk its talons deep and refused to budge.

Her death was proof that blood didn't satisfy the God of the Oceans. Since she had been thrown into his domain, a violent storm had brewed.

Karakos was furious.

As was I.

The amphitheatre had been constructed by my tenth birthday. The stone stadium seated hundreds if not thousands of bodies, accommodating the audience who visited me every year. And every year it grew more and more full. Even when the seats were all taken, crowds gathered around the steps and walkways. I knew it would have overspilled out onto the streets beyond.

Dusk had claimed the sky of Ire, casting it in deep maroon and shocking navy. In the distance, I could see the ocean boiling, waves crashing over one another. The only beauty of this cage was that I could usually see out across the ocean and lose myself to the view. Except tonight, the view was smothered by sheets of rain and ominous dark clouds, echoing with the thunderous boom of the brewing tempest.

Danger electrified the air. It tasted acrid on my tongue, spoiling me from the inside out.

I could've stopped the storm. One note filled with enough intention and the clouds would part and the rain would dry up. But Father had not asked that of me. It had not been requested.

Aleanna hadn't died for me to rebel now.

Terian sat watching me from his throne of stone and shells, placed on a balcony raised out atop the amphitheatre, giving him the perfect view of the crowds flooding in to take their seats. There was not often a time I saw my father smile, but as he regarded his subjects, he couldn't stop beaming.

Behind him, Hadeon lingered like a wraith. Panic clawed up my throat, scratching deep scores into me as I inhaled sharply. He shouldn't be here. And yet there he stood, expression stoic, his eyes resting upon me. All the while, my father smiled down over me, looking at me like his prized possession without knowing mine stood behind him.

Father knew what he was doing by dangling his threat over me, reminding me to behave. Loyalty—even if it was brought by my magic,

even if it was all just an illusion which would last the turn of a year—was what made him happiest in life.

It was a lesson we'd learned years ago when Father gathered me in his arms and brought me to the Kingdom's door. He stood me before the then King and Queen, presenting them a gift. Me. My song, my voice.

And I sang—oh, I sang. I did just as Father asked and I sang his wishes into reality. By the time my final note ceased, Father was King and I was his heir. The crown was handed over to him without resistance. We were publicly declared the rightful rulers and then the King and his wife walked straight into the ocean and never came out.

It was part of my song, their death. Father wanted it of me, so I did it. I always did what he asked.

Since then, my voice had never been mine. It belonged to him. Once a year, on my birthday, I unleashed my power over Ire's subjects, making each and every one believe in King Terian's rule. The hazy spell would last the turn of a year before their minds became theirs again and doubt was replanted.

So, I would sing, again and again, until my throat bled and my lungs burned. I may have been the one caged, but they too were shackled, even if they didn't know it.

The rows upon rows of stone benches were filled, bodies pressed so close together it was impossible to know where one person ended and the other began. My skin itched with their stares, each overspilling with wonder and anticipation.

They knew what was to come, but they didn't know why. To them, my voice was merely a beautiful thing to listen to, something to please the senses that blessed them with luck and kept the gods at bay.

In reality, it was a way of using them, making them all mine.

I glanced up to the podium, catching my father's stare. He offered me a quick nod, a flash of a handsome smile and then he leaned back, goblet of wine lifted in a toast.

My jaw tensed, knowing that was my signal to begin. But before I did, I had to convey a message to Hadeon. He shouldn't have been here, not because I didn't long for his proximity, but because he couldn't hear my voice. If he did, he would fall under the same spell as the rest of them.

What was between us would not be real, if he listened and fell beneath my persuasion. He would be like the rest of them. Although Hadeon couldn't hear me from this distance, he *could* see me raise one hand and place it over my ear. It was a subtle movement, unnoticed by my father who studied the bottom of his goblet as he drank, red wine spilling down his chin.

Hadeon saw and the slight bow of his head settled my nerves.

I turned back to the crowd, watching them as they too watched me. Sweeping my gaze over the stadium, the storm continued to billow overhead, the crash of the waves smashing rocks.

The sooner this was over, the sooner I was free.

There was no great speech to introduce me. No words of wisdom for the King to share before I began my song. At this point, after so many years of this dance, the routine was drummed into my bones.

I knew my marker. I knew how to move. And most importantly, I knew the exact intention to weave amongst the words to have every single person in Ire indebted to us.

As I opened my mouth, allowing the magic to wake from its slumber, the mark at my throat glowed. Golden light spilled out of my skin as my song broke free, casting over the crowd until every single one of them were captured in my spell.

When I was a child, I asked Father where my magic came from. He said that when I was born and first called out to the world, my scream was so great it swallowed a star from the sky. It had made sense to my childish mind, for the glow was as bright as a star—and as enthralling as one.

But even I knew as a child that magic came from the gods. Stories told of the gods bestowing gifts to humans, granting them abilities and the title of hero. But no god had come to me with such an offering. Unless my father was keeping the answer from me, he'd told me the truth died when I murdered my mother in childbirth.

Who I was indebted to for my magic was just as unclear as the boundaries of my gift.

*Ernest*, *stop*. I refused to think about all of the unanswered questions I had about myself. So, I did the one thing I knew would distract me, and I sang.

The song was one I had been singing for as long as I remembered. It was the last thing my dying mother had sung as she cradled me in her arms. How I remembered it I didn't know. It just seemed to be a part of me, a seed planted deep down in my core where its roots had settled like iron.

The melody started slow, soon building into a crescendo of powerful notes.

It was the story of Karakos and his first love. The God of the Oceans had fallen in love with the moon goddess, Luna. Karakos and Luna used their love affair to create their children, the Mer—children who then turned against their mother and slaughtered her.

There was something beautiful about the song's story, something which tugged at my gut. It spoke of love, the need to overcome boundaries of space and time just to be with the one being who had your heart. But above all that, it spoke of the pain love could cause. How children could turn against their parents, whereas for me it was the other way around.

I fought the urge to look to Hadeon, knowing that if he hadn't covered his ears, he would have fallen victim to my curse. But in a sadistic way, I wished he could hear the lyrics. I wondered if it too would register with him as it did with me. Instead, I swept my gaze over the crowd, watching the glow of my light spill over their faces.

But my song came to an unnatural end, the words dying in my throat. Not because I wanted to stop, but because of an impossibility I saw standing amongst the crowd.

A ghost stood across from me, wind snatching at damp strands of red hair until it whipped before her face. Her sodden clothes were torn and shredded, her skin tinged with the grey pallor of death.

'Aleanna,' I spluttered, a flash of forked lightning smashing down into the ocean at her back.

She didn't respond, but it was her.

Rain lashed between us, obscuring the view, but I could see enough of her blue-pale lips and bloodshot eyes.

None of the Kings Guards stopped her as she continued to move towards me. They still clung to the bliss of my song, floating in whatever dreamscape my magic had forced them into. Her footsteps were awkward and misplaced. On bare feet, her ankle rolled. She put the weight of one leg on the side of her foot. Bone protruded from her skin, blood racing down from the wound lashed across her body.

With every flash of lightning, I prayed that the vision would dissipate. It didn't. Aleanna continued to stalk towards me, wet feet leaving prints in the sandy ground, blood mingling with rain in her wake. The closer she came, the more I saw the truth.

This was not Aleanna, not as I'd last seen her. This was her corpse.

She stopped only when the bars of the cage separated us. My heart thundered in my chest, beating in synchronicity with the thunder booming across the darkened skies. I couldn't swallow, couldn't move a muscle, as though the power of her gaze had frozen me.

Fear ruled my body, taking it as its own.

I couldn't fathom what I was witnessing. This woman should've been dead. Yet here she stood before me, with glassy green eyes and a body marked by death.

'What do you want?' It was a stupid question, but I asked it anyway.

Slowly, Aleanna raised a trembling finger and pointed at me. Her lips parted but the only sound that came out was the gargled rush of lungs filled with water. It sprayed past her lips, splashing my face and neck.

I stumbled back, slipping over the metal plate of the cage's floor. Aleanna continued to point, her nail blackened and hooked. It was then I realised that she wasn't only pointing at me. She was pointing to my throat. To what lingered within it.

'Ernest. What is the meaning of this?' My father's voice boomed over the stadium. It was a shock to hear him, the anger in his tone. He had no doubt taken the beeswax buds out of his ears, for he was the only one who did not wish to fall under my spell. However, one look beyond Aleanna and I could see from the shifting crowd that my trance was fading, passing away for reality. 'Someone get that woman away from my son—'

I regretted looking away from Aleanna, but I did. I found the Kings Guards moving into action, swords drawn as they surrounded us. The crowd erupted in grasps, all watching on with hands raised over brows to shield their gaze from the torrential downpour.

My spell had lifted, and chaos ensued.

This was the danger the winds had warned me of. The Kings Guards closed in. Aleanna whipped around until I could no longer see her face. Swords dropped onto the sodden ground, the Kings Guards all stepping back as they unleashed feral screams.

I didn't wonder for long as to what they saw, because when she turned back around, I witnessed it.

Serrated rows of pointed teeth filled Aleanna's mouth, snapping at me.

It was teeth I had previously seen displayed in cases through our castle. The three-lined jaw of a Mer—tips oozing with venom. Impossible. It was

all impossible. Not only Aleanna being here, reanimated, but being Mer. Mer did not walk on land, yet here one stood...

There was no time to contemplate what was before me. Aleanna reached for the cage, her hands grasping the bars. They barely had a chance to creak before she pulled them apart with unnatural might. I fell backwards, landing hard on my ass. Pain jolted up my spine, spearing all the way into my skull.

Aleanna stepped into the cage through the gap she had made in the bars. Slowly, predatorily, she closed in on me.

I curled myself up into a ball, legs drawn to my chest. My magic simmered in my throat, dormant and exhausted from the overuse. Even if I longed to use it against this creature, I couldn't.

My father continued screaming, shouting my name over the crowd as though he too held my power. His desperate pleas were ignored. No one came to help.

I turned my head away from Aleanna as she knelt before me. It gave me a clear view to the podium where my father bellowed his demands. I saw him, face stricken in panic, his eyes wide as he watched the most important thing in his life in a position of jeopardy. Then there was Hadeon, gripping onto the balcony, knuckles paled with his other hand clasped over his mouth.

Gentle fingers tickled over my cheek. They guided my face back around until they grasped my chin and held me in place. A violent wave of sickness crashed over me as a deathly cold finger slipped into my mouth and parted it.

'I never wanted him to kill you...' I sobbed, my heart hammering.

Aleanna's corpse, the Mer, whatever she was, longed to hear me sing. I saw the desperation, the need, in her glassy eyes. It was the same expression set on my father's face, on every face within the watching crowd.

Expectation.

I clamped my mouth shut, keeping her finger out. There was no escaping this, not with Aleanna blocking my only way out of the cage. So, in a moment of fervent desire to survive, I pushed hard at her chest.

I was quick, but this version of Aleanna was quicker.

She grasped my arm and yanked it towards her. My joint pulled awkwardly in its socket, inches from popping free. Within a single blink,

her face dove towards my arm, jaw splitting apart, lips parting at the seams.

I didn't feel her teeth pierce my flesh at first. The pain was delayed, but when it came, I felt as though a cliff had fallen upon me. As though stars had exploded in my veins.

Fire filled my blood.

The agony was so sudden, so scorching and violent, that the scream I expelled had the power to shatter the world. Aleanna took her chance, withdrawing her teeth from my skin and bringing her blood-slicked mouth to mine.

She... kissed me.

As her lips forced themselves onto mine, I felt the magic dislodge deep inside of me. There was no stopping my muffled scream, not as Aleanna drew it out with some unknown force. My arm burned, flesh twisting and tearing, whilst my magic seeped out of me like the receding tide.

And I was *utterly* helpless to stop it.

## Chapter Five - Killian

the state

Slowly, with each breath, the anxiety subsided. It released me, one claw at a time, until I was free. Somewhat, at least. I tapped my nails against the trident, five times because it was always five. It was a safe number, a way of grounding and focusing. Five taps, five scratches, five focused breaths. Once I had completed those tasks, rooting myself back in reality, did I feel a sense of being able to move forwards.

It was on my fifth breath when the beautiful voice lifted above all the chaos. The world and its noise stopped as the singing began. It covered the kingdom in a blanket of divinity. It was welcoming and careful, smooth as river-polished stone and as light as winter's first snow.

I stood, captured by the power, as though it commanded my limbs like a puppet on a string. I was unsure how much time had passed before I followed it. My feet moved, not because I desired to, but because I *had* to.

The street was no longer full of sound or movement. Everything was still. I walked back out, noticing the small groups of people left were simply standing around. They all were turned towards the noise, eyes glazed, mouths open.

The magic tied everything in the city together. Threads flowed from person to person, knotting around them and lingering far off in the distance. It was the same magic I saw around the Mer, an imprint of gold, so vivid I knew it was linked in some way.

Suddenly, the singing stopped. It was as though the universe let out a collective breath. But the silence lasted all but a second before the screaming began.

A wall of flesh and fear careened towards me.

I stood, rooted to the spot like the most ancient of trees, as the crowd tore out of the amphitheatre the voice had drawn me towards. There was no care for who was hurt. I imagined the list of casualties would be endless by the time the sun rose.

This time, I was quick to move. I side-stepped out of the way, just out of the tidal wave of fleeing people. Nails gouged skin. Hands grasped uselessly as people tried to get ahead. Screams rent the night, burying the memory of the ethereal song. Feet trod over skulls, boots crushing bone, as the humans fought to get as far from the scene of the crime as possible.

And yet, all I could do was watch it unfurl. Even as hundreds of bodies passed me, attempting to force one another out the way, I kept frozen to the spot. No one cared for me, not in the face of fear. I had no doubt that the Mer I had been following was at the heart of it.

Instinct had me searching for another way into the amphitheatre. I passed beneath the shadow of stone benches, glimpsing the rush of feet and legs as more of the crowd fled.

With my trident gripped tightly in my fist, the magic embedded within the metal practically begging for me to harness it, I walked out of the shadows onto the sandy stage, wandering into the centre. My eyes caught a group of guards holding weapons towards a cage.

But it was not the cage, but who was in it, that I could not look away from.

In the heart of the stadium, with no one to help him, no one to heed his pleas, a man faced a monster.

Never, not in all my years, had a single person debilitated me. He *did*. This nameless man with a voice of magic. A voice which reached into my chest, tangled in my soul and knotted it into his own will.

I had sensed the message lingering beneath the song he had sung. It was as though he stood beside me, pink lips tickling my ear as he whispered commands.

King. Ruler. Believe. Love. Respect.

The feeling was so powerful, so overwhelming, that it almost snatched me entirely. But I could resist, enough to ignore the will he had attempted to force upon me. The rest of them, every person in the crowd, every person who filled the city, were not so fortunate.

Above it all, it was not his voice which entranced me. It was him.

Hair as black as the deepest ocean, eyes a piercing azure, so blue the waves themselves would recede in jealousy. From my vantage point I watched him, no longer caring for the Mer who too watched on ahead of me. My eyes traced his face like fingers, memorising the straight point of his nose, the high bow of his brow and the protruding press of his cheekbones.

The creature within me pressed outwards, intensifying its presence until I felt my skin shudder with the force.

I sensed its hunger. I sensed its desire.

The magic which had burned around the man waned like the moon behind clouds. But it wasn't fading, it was being stolen. Drawn into the form of the Mer, a form which should have been impossible.

I had heard the man call it by a name. Aleanna. The soft gasp of his voice had

been filled with familiarity. He had known her—or had known the corpse the Mer now embodied?

Chaos ruled the world around me. It was impossible to discern who was an armed guard and who was a simple, scared human. I supposed it did not matter in the face of pure evil. There was nothing a sword could do in the face of a Mer bite.

My hesitation lasted longer than it should have. The Mer straddled the man's waist, her mouth coated with blood. Her lips were pressed to his, stifling his desperate cry. I threw the cloak from my shoulders, allowing it to puddle around my feet like water.

The ground shuddered beneath the force of my tap. One hard knock of the trident against the sand-covered cobbles, and that was all it took. It was a sign, one the curse knew all too well.

Far off, over the cliff where land touched sea, I knew the Mer in the Below also heard it.

It was the warning call of their damnation.

The Mer—Aleanna, he'd called her—snatched her mouth from the man. He fell to the ground, screaming soundlessly, whilst her glassy eyes found me. Shivers coursed over my skin, even though the Mer never caused me to react in such a way before. Aleanna raised her nose, nostrils flaring as she caught the scent of something on the air. Then she smiled, a proud and wide grin which stretched her spittle and blood-slicked mouth.

I levelled the trident, winds ripping my strands of long white hair and whipping them across my face. The Mer did not speak with a language, nor could they make a sound. They were voiceless creatures. But then again, in all my years, nor could they walk on land.

Aleanna bent her body over the man, arching her back like a cat, until bones jutted out through flesh. Her tongue lapped over the rows of pointed teeth. She inhaled a lungful of air and unleashed another impossibility.

'Mine,' Aleanna hissed.

The word was powerful. It scratched up her throat, light and human and yet monstrous.

Thunder cracked overhead. Lightning flashed through the darkened skies, responding to my spike in anxiety. I stepped forwards, trident dragging a line through the sandy ground. 'You can walk, and now you can speak. Curious.'

It had to be a noise from the crowd, something said by the final dregs of people who fled the scene. If I was not so focused on the Mer, I may have looked around to see if anyone else had heard the word.

Any disbelief faded in the next moment as the Mer drew herself up onto two impossible legs and repeated that impossible word again. 'Mine.'

## Chapter Six - Ernest



I grasped my throat, squeezing my skin as though that would force out sound. But no matter how I tried to scream, no matter how I tried to shout, there was no noise to be made. I was... empty. My fingers dug into my clavicle, as though I could reach within and pull out my magic. But, even if I dug through skin, muscle and bone, there was nothing to find.

My magic... it was...

'Mine.'

I lifted my neck to find Aleanna. She stood with her back to me, speaking a word riddled with possession. But I could not see who she spoke to. It was an out of body experience, to hear your magic used by another.

She had taken it.

Boiling, furious agony tore my gaze to my arm. I couldn't look away from the crescent moon of teeth marks, broken skin and... venom. Black lines spread beneath my skin, slithering like serpents into every vein, spoiling me from the inside out.

The feeling was unlike anything I had experienced. It was blinding, so hot it was as though the lightning in the sky had reached down and touched me, scorching my insides.

I had seen this once before. It had been on the neck of a fisherwoman who had washed up on the shores of our Kingdom. From my perch on the balcony, I had watched as my father's guards raced over the sands. If I thought they would help her, I was wrong. The nameless woman gasped like a fish out of water, holding onto her shredded neck as the lines of black venom spread through her body. Then it was over. Metal cut through skin, severing her head from her shoulders.

She was killed because it was the only option. There was no saving her, and killing her was the only way to protect the Kingdom. By the time they brought her body to the crypt for burning, her legs had already melded together. Scales had spread over her stomach and arms. Any longer and the curse would have overcome her completely, and potentially damning anyone else around her to the same fate.

I distinctly remembered the smell she emitted as she burned. It was like grilled fish, unseasoned and spoiled. From that day on, I hadn't touched fish again. I could barely look at the cooked meat, let alone smell it.

Would I smell like that when they burned me? The thought was as bitter as the pain which spread through me. It was becoming so overwhelming that it was forcing me into a box in the back of my mind. I watched on, a witness to my own demise, no longer feeling anything.

Aleanna moved. If I could have held my head up and watched, I would have. But a wave of weakness broke over me. My skull dropped back until I was looking up at the dark sky. Forks of silver light lit up the world. Rain fell upon my face, cooling my cheeks, dribbling over my lips and into my throat. It seemed the moon wished to witness my death, for the clouds parted enough to reveal an orb of silver, so bright it almost blinded me, so large it was as though it moved closer to Ire. As if it did not want to miss a moment, miss a single detail, of my death.

I waited to die, for Gorgana to come and take my hand and guide me to my end.

The name of the God of Pain and Suffering was out of reach, but in the moments that followed, it was that nameless god who greeted me.

Death would have been kinder than this.

Unseen talons scratched nails down the sides of my throat. I felt the flesh part and separate into slits. Where the venom moved, my skin responded. I tried to move my legs, but I couldn't find them. With the final scraps of energy, I lifted my hand before my face.

The tips of my nails had formed into white points, a fine film of skin spread between each finger. The goddess of the moon, Luna, glittered her light over the small, incandescent scales which grew out of my skin like feathers. Blood seeped out of small cuts, only to dry up as the cuts clogged with scales.

I took one final inhale, lungs feeling as dry as fallen leaves in autumn, and knew that it was over.

## Chapter Seven - Killian



There were three ways to kill a Mer. The severing of the head, the burning of flesh or suffocation by taking the creatures away from their source of life —water.

Except, I had begun to believe the third no longer mattered, not as this Mer walked on land, on stolen legs, with a voice.

Power crackled around my trident, the tips glowing with light. It was a conduit, not only gathering the magic within but the magic which tied the world together. Without it, I was powerless. With it, I was a god.

Far beneath my feet, the lines which wrapped around the world responded to me. I gathered them up in my mental fist, pulling them towards me and gathering them into a wrathful force.

*Mine*. That one word continued to ring in my head.

'He does not belong to you,' I said, eyes flickering towards the man who has been left to wither.

The Mer stepped free of the cage. She had not stopped repeating the word, almost singing it in the same tone the man had last sung. 'Mine. Mine.'

I narrowed my eyes, trying not to focus on anything but the task at hand. This creature had to die. I could not allow it to leave this place... but something was stopping me, holding me back.

I thirsted for answers.

'Who gave you this power?' I asked, imbuing as much command into my tone as I could muster. The stone walls of the amphitheatre reverberated with the question, each echo growing louder and louder until I knew every soul in the Kingdom would have heard. 'You walk on land, you speak. You defy the laws of the curse. How?'

Aleanna lifted a finger and pointed back. I did not need to follow her gesture to know she pointed to the same man who she had attacked.

'You have a voice,' I said, fingers tightening around the cool, steady metal of my trident. It was not only my power, but it was also my support. An age-long ache lingered in my left leg, reminding me of what would happen if I did not finish this. 'Use it, demon.'

The invitation was all the Mer required. She straightened her spine, each bone clicking as though it was re-forming into the right place. Her mouth of teeth gleamed in the moonlight. Her tacky red hair wrapped around her thin throat like vines.

'Ernest,' she said the name, finger still pointing to the man left to perish on the bottom of the cage. 'He commanded... me to... take. Mine. Mine!'

The human guards had reconverged, not only around the Mer and the cage, but around me. Aleanna did not seem to care. She smiled like a victor, blue-pale fingers brushing over her neck as though she caressed something dear to her.

Hearts thundered within my chest, both mine and the one which belonged to the waking beast. I knew I should have attacked, should have killed this creature, but I was still lost in how wrong this was.

When Aleanna spoke again, the words sunk deep into my being like needles. 'You. Have. Failed. *Him.*'

Failed.

Fury broke over me like a tidal wave. There was no more hesitation. I drew upon the lightning from the storm. It heard my command and followed it, smashing down from the heavens. The ground cracked with the force, the stone splitting in two. Sand burned so hot it transformed into puddles of glass. Aleanna threw herself to the side, cackling with deranged laughter.

Then she ran from me, moving on quick feet. I gave chase. Aleanna's laugh filled the night, powerful enough to bury the pounding of my feet as I followed her. I longed to bring down more lightning from the sky, but the stadium was filling with armed guards. With so much flesh and metal, one wrong strike would kill them. And the man, Ernest, lying in his metal cage... It would destroy him.

I stopped dead in my tracks. If I followed Aleanna, I would forgo the man. She knew this, her laugh joining in tandem with my lightning, my tempest. But he was the key to answers. He was to blame for giving her a voice.

Aleanna clambered up the stone steps, a creature on all fours, still laughing. Then, when she reached the top, she turned and faced me. Before I could so much as move another step, Aleanna threw herself over the edge of the stone, falling into the waiting ocean far beneath.

I would have followed, but I heard something at my back. It was a command, given by one of the guards surrounding the cage.

'He has been bitten. By the will of Karakos, kill the prince.'

I longed to scream at them. What did you know of Karakos's will?

Aleanna was forgotten. The task that had been set upon me the day my life was spared by the God of the Oceans was also forgotten. All that mattered was the man called Ernest. Looking back towards him, the beast within me swelled once again, and I knew—I knew, without a doubt, I had to save him.

Not because I cared for him. The magic he possessed could alter a monster. It could offer them humanity.

Which meant whatever power he had could save me in return.

## Chapter Eight - Ernest

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The sounds of suffering filled the world around me. And yet all I could do was look towards the sky and pray my death would be swift. I couldn't see what had happened to the King's guards, but I knew with little doubt that they were being attacked. I imagined Aleanna tearing flesh with teeth, spoiling bodies with the same venom which now spread through me.

I had been brought up to believe that those we loved would wait for us in death. A tear ran down my cheek, falling into the puddle of rain and blood under me.

Rain. Glorious rain. I opened my mouth, catching the droplets, hoping that they would sustain me. I craved the water. I needed it.

The world suddenly fell silent. Was it the world, or had I finally passed over from it?

I longed to lift my neck and look around, to survey the damage that Aleanna had wreaked across the Kingdom. But I couldn't move, I couldn't do anything but lay there as the final dregs of air left my lungs.

When my head lifted, it wasn't because I'd moved it. Cool hands slipped beneath my neck, fingers carefully tracing my skin as they settled into a firm position. I gasped out for air, but my lungs refused it.

I longed to call out for Hadeon, but no sound came out of my mouth. Not even the starved, scratchy noise of my attempts for breath. The world blurred even though my eyes were opened wide and my mind burned; I almost didn't see who it was that held me.

The ground fell away. I was lifted into the sky, ready for the end, listening to the distant crash of the storm and the thunderous beat of a heart.

In my craze, I thought it thumped twice, slightly off centre as though there were two hearts, not one.

The night sky swayed. My head lolled backwards so the castle looked as though it had been tipped upside down. I saw the podium where my father had sat. He was no longer there, nor was Hadeon.

As the castle grew smaller and the sound of the ocean louder, I couldn't help but watch. I blinked, my eyes growing heavy, the burning in my chest morphing from an ache to a destructive agony.

The bodies of slaughtered guards littered the sandy ground. Dozens were dead, some with their limbs torn off, others still whole so that it looked as though they simply slept.

A new guilt registered in my mind.

This was my fault. All of this was my doing. I couldn't explain it, but I knew it for a fact.

One of the King's Guards still lived. She crawled over the ground, her face sheet-white and her mouth black with blood. A river of blood flowed behind her where her leg should have been. She reached out for her discarded sword, fingers clawing at the sodden ground until her nails came back covered in dark sand.

Suddenly, my view changed. My head lolled around, blocking the scene of what became of the King's Guard next. Winds whipped around me, the sea-salt spray of water kissing my face. My mouth opened, fuelled by my starved need for water. I couldn't understand the urge, but all I knew was I needed it.

My cheek was pressed into stone. No, not stone—flesh. Pale ivory skin with lines of black wrapping around a chiselled chest. Strands of thick white hair clung like snakes to a proud neck. My eyes followed the finer details, lifting until they rested on the profile of a face. Violet eyes peered down at me, framed by pale lashes. They belonged to a man with a face made of such precise lines he must have been one of Father's statues.

But he was warm, and he was *real*.

I longed to reach up for his cheek, to brush away the smudge of crimson there. But my energy was depleted. If this stranger with his purple-hued eyes wasn't holding my neck, it would have fallen backwards.

The man looked away from me, casting his gaze over the darkened view. Lines furrowed between his brow, creasing his face into a mask of

pure fury. His was a searching gaze, a troubled one. Even in my current state, I recognised that.

There was barely a warning before he threw us over the cliff edge. His fingers tightened into my flesh, clasping me to him. A weightless feeling lifted in my stomach. I pinched my eyes closed as the ocean raced up to greet us.

When we crashed into the cool embrace of the ocean, the force tore us apart. I spun into the dark belly of Karakos's domain, twisting and turning with no ability to steady myself. There was no fighting the Below, nor the dangers which lurked within its dark water. But that didn't matter, not as I gave in to the sensation.

Because, as I took in a lungful of water, I felt as though I could breathe again for the first time. Then, there was nothing but darkness.

# PART II DAY ONE OF INFECTION



## Chapter Nine - Ernest



I woke, my senses slowly recovering from a deep slumber one at a time.

First, I heard the ocean. The gentle sound of waves was a lullaby as they reached up across sandy shores. It was a gentle song, one I had woken up to for as long as I could remember.

For such a terrifying domain, the deep certainly made an enticing sound. Stiff sheets weighed down on my naked skin. Beneath me was the hardened press of something firm. I wasn't sure if it was the poor night's sleep, but my entire body screamed. From my legs, to my neck, to my skin, I felt as though I had been held beneath the waves and churned like cow's milk to butter.

The smell which infiltrated my nose wasn't familiar. It was heavy with smoke, so thick I opened my dry mouth and took a massive inhale. I recognised the aroma of lavender, sea-salt, lemon and other herbs which I couldn't name. It wasn't uncommon for me to wake to the smell of the kitchens, but something about this was different.

I reached out a hand, fingers expecting to grasp the luscious sheets of my four-poster bed. My knuckles smacked into something hard, my fingers bending unnaturally. I threw my eyes open to find russet wood inches from my face.

Away from the illusion of sleep, it all flooded back to me.

Everything.

Aleanna and her mouth full of serrated teeth. My cage, bent and ruined. The dead guards. A man with strands of silver-white hair and eyes as purple

as a dawn painted sky.

I didn't dare move, knowing that I hadn't woken in my chambers within the castle. All I could do was focus on my breathing, my mind whirling, grasping for a plan. Although my thoughts were full of vivid memories, I still couldn't discern what was reality and what was a terrible nightmare.

Carefully, I drew my arm up enough to inspect the damage. I knew what to expect because I still felt the lingering bite of Aleanna's teeth tearing my flesh. And there it was— a circular bite mark marked my skin, red as sin and oozing a vibrant yellow pus. The undeniable black lines of poison spread outwards, infecting me, promising death.

Panic seized at me like fingers, grasping my throat and squeezing.

It was difficult to make sense of everything that had happened. No matter how hard I tried, my mind was a churning whirlpool as I stared at the wound across my arm. Aleanna was a Mer, yet she'd walked on land. Regardless if that was an impossibility alone, it had happened. Not only that, Aleanna had *died*—my father had ensured that when he threw her over the balcony into Karakos's jaws. Had the Mer been waiting for her? Did they steal her corpse and turn it into one of them? That wasn't hard to imagine, but her walking on land? That was impossible.

And she had bitten me. I was infected.

A sticky sheen of sweat pricked over my forehead. Defiant tears burned in my eyes. I didn't need to be a seer to know what was to become of me. My doom was impending, only a handful of days away. If I wasn't killed before that...

A thump sounded at my back. My entire body stilled, as did my thoughts. I heard the shuffle of feet, the creak of old hinges as a door was opened and closed. Pushing every thought to the back of my mind, I focused on the matter at hand.

Where was 1?

I rolled over, turning my back on the wood-slatted wall to face the room. It was run down and utterly filled with an obscene number of objects. Bags hung from the wooden beams of the low ceiling, each overspilling with sprigs of different flowers and herbs. That at least explained the smell. Buckets covered the floor, catching the drips of water from the sodden ceiling. Piles of golden sand lingered in the corners of the room across the rotten panelled floor. Old fishing nets hung over the walls. Shells of all shapes and sizes were placed decoratively over tables and cabinets, and

some even hung from strings attached to the ceiling. It was as though the ocean had reached up over Ire and left parts of itself within this place.

Opposite the bed, a door had been left ajar. I could see a narrow corridor beyond, the walls leaning inwards as though the building held itself up by will alone. Daylight spilled in from the thin glass window, giving me a view of a perfectly blue sky. Not a cloud in sight, the calm after the storm.

My first thought was this house must belong to a fisherman. Between the nets, the smell of fish and the poor state of the building, it was the first answer I could come up with. But how? No matter how hard I tried to string the events together, I couldn't understand how I'd ended up here.

I knelt on the bed, careful not to shift my weight and cause it to creak. Whoever lingered outside this room would hear and come to inspect, and I wasn't yet prepared to face a stranger.

Beyond the window, the Kingdom of Ire stretched up into the cloudless sky like a blade. It was set at a distance, far off at the top of the cliff it had been built upon. Between me and my home was only the lush green landscape, the colours vibrant after a violent stormy night.

I turned away the view, knowing I could reach the castle in an hour or so by foot. Unless there was a horse or donkey outside this shack, in which case it would be a much faster journey home.

I pulled the sheet with me as I dragged my naked body from the bed. I tied it around my body carefully, knotting the material at my shoulder to keep it from falling. All the while, my arm sent sparks of pain fanning across my back. By the time I was done, blood and pus had smudged itself on the bedsheet. But that was the least of my problems.

Focus.

I tiptoed across the room, stopping on one of the rotten panels which groaned beneath my weight. A breath lodged in my throat and my ears rang with the rush of blood. I waited to hear if the person beyond the room had been alerted to my movement. But after a few tense moments of silence, I decided they hadn't and carried on moving.

Beside the open door was a cabinet. Dust and sand warred for what ruled the top shelf. My eyes fixated on the plate left in the middle of the battle, on which fish bones rested beside a pile of mouldy vegetables. But it was the silver fork that demanded my attention. Light glinted off the metal, inviting me to take it.

I snatched up the fork, knuckles growing pale as my grasp tightened around the handle. Four sharp prongs winked as I moved into the corridor. It was no sword, but Karakos knew it would have to do. A stab to an eye, the soft flesh of a neck, or directly into the bulging vein hidden beneath the thigh could cause some *serious* damage.

Out in the corridor, a sudden spike of fear uncoiled within me. I had no idea what I was about to face, and even though the room I had left was unknown to me, it was like leaving some familiar safety to venture into danger. To my left was the front door and to my right was another room. I could hear the faint huff of breathing from within, the swell of air in lungs. I could've run and hoped to make it far enough to the Kingdom that guards sweeping the outskirts would help me. But then what if my abductor followed? It was a risk, relying on my sore body to get me to freedom. Adrenaline would help me get far enough, but it would wane. If I wanted to truly escape, I'd have to deal with this stranger first.

I had spent long enough tiptoeing around my own castle to know how to move on soft feet. I was a wraith, in more ways than one. Whoever waited in the room I moved towards wouldn't know I was there until I wanted them to.

An old chair waited in the centre of the next room. If I thought the bedroom was overspilling with objects, this one was a shrine to the ocean. There wasn't a surface left empty. Fishing crates, statues, trinkets, broken pottery and so many more items were strewn across the room. It gave the illusion of the small space as a grand cavern filled with a multitude of items from forgotten worlds.

And in the middle sat a man. The same one who had lingered in my memory.

His white hair no longer whipped around in the vicious winds. Instead, it had been gathered into a braid which hung down his spine. He was topless, his broad back naked for the world to see. My graze traced the sheer size of him. Built from an array of muscles, his arms bulged and his back rippled with each breath. Suddenly, the fork in my grasp felt pathetic. What good would cutlery be against someone of his stature?

The harsh, dark lines of a tattoo painted his pale skin like art. It was the face of an octopus, its eight inky limbs wrapping around the man's torso as though it hugged him, hanging on for dear life. Its beady eyes glared at me, sending a shiver of chills across my arms. But it was just a tattoo, nothing

real. And yet I still felt like I was being watched, even though the man had his back to me, staring down at something in his lap.

I edged closer, grip tightening around my weapon of choice. The tension pinched at my wounded arm, drawing apart the teeth marks to allow for more blood to seep free. I was surprised the man didn't smell the copper tang which poisoned the air—the rot.

Stepping behind him, I carefully lifted the fork up until the prongs were an inch from his neck. Still, I couldn't take my eyes off the tattoo of the octopus. Its dark eyes seemed to follow me. In a strange sense, I felt as though it judged me, finding the moment almost humorous. Perhaps it was my panic, exhaustion, or discomfort, but I was almost confident it blinked at me.

Before it gave away my presence, I hoisted the fork backwards, putting as much force behind my attack as I could muster. One of the wounds across my forearm split apart. The pain was blinding, so I gathered it up and kept it close, ready to turn my pain into another's suffering.

I *almost* felt bad for stabbing him. The thud of the fork echoed in tandem with the sound of it tearing into the man's flesh. The point buried into his skin, the force sending a shockwave up my arm.

He jolted sideways, shouting out. 'What in the gods?'

I stumbled backwards, narrowly missing the chair which fell backwards at me. I hit the floor anyway, blinded by the pain as I tried to catch myself on my bitten arm.

By the time I looked up, it was to find the man standing before me, the fork protruding from his neck. Blood oozed down the lines of his shoulders, coursing over flesh like a river. And it was blue... his blood was blue.

Pale brows furrowed over his furious purple eyes, which crashed like they held a tempest. He plucked the fork from his neck as though it was merely a thorn. It clattered to the ground, forgotten and out of my reach. The four marks in his neck shivered, the holes closing until his skin was perfect once again.

'Is this how you thank the person who saved your life?' His question came out in a growl, the air itself seeming to shiver in fear around his broad frame. The ground ached and groaned beneath his feet. But my own fear seemed to be delayed, because there was something about the baritone rumbling of his voice that unfurled heat in my stomach. 'Is it?'

I snarled, determination expanding in me like a flower in bloom. I took in a deep breath, preparing for my second attack. I reached inside of myself, ready to release my magic.

But instead of chaos, I found nothing but emptiness.

I was vaguely aware of the stranger's brow lifting as he surveyed me. I grasped at my throat, trying to force out a sound, a noise, anything. All I managed was one plain and powerless word. 'No.'

It wasn't in response to his question, but in response to the hollow feeling in my throat. The lack of magic. My voice was a small and rasped cry, like that of a dying bird. A voice that wasn't edged with power. There was nothing I could utilise against the man.

Because my magic... my magic was missing.

### Chapter Ten - Killian

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Ernest's skin paled, his eyes widening as the realisation sunk into him. He grasped at his throat, his slender fingers wrapping around the flesh, his nails pinching into the skin. His face was a perfect mask of grief. I couldn't help but glance to the angry wound across his arm. It looked as bad as it had last night, perhaps even worse.

I hadn't heard him wake. I should have been more focused—perhaps then he wouldn't have surprised me. The fork laying discarded by my foot, tipped with my already-drying blood, was proof I was growing lazy.

There weren't many people who'd ever made me bleed. But this stranger was one of them. He was formidable, that was clear, despite his injuries. Pushing down the fury of being stabbed in the neck with a fork—the same fucking fork I ate my meals with—I attempted to steady my anger. I couldn't go making enemies when I needed this man... or at least his magic.

'What... what have you done?' Ernest rasped. It was as though he spoke through a throat full of stones. He spoke as though he had spent the evening screaming until he bled internally, when in actuality, Ernest had spent the evening held in my arms, unconscious beneath the ocean's waves,.

My hands raised beside me, as though I was surrendering to his accusation, even though my only crime was being a bystander, watching as he was attacked by the Mer.

'Perhaps you were too busy delighting in stabbing me in the neck to hear me?' I said. 'I saved you. No harm has come to you by my hand.'

Ernest's shock melted back into the same determined snarl he had worn moments before. His gaze darted back to the fork. I sensed his desire before he acted on it. We sprang for his weapon of choice at the same time. I slammed my boot down on the handle just before he reached it.

'I would *not* try that again if I was you.' Did he hear the grumbling beast buried beneath my tone? 'I prefer my utensils to be used for their correct purpose.'

If Ernest recognised my ire, he hardly cared. Instead, he pushed at my chest, small but mighty. I was forced back a step and noticed the fresh blood spilling from his bitten arm.

'Who are you?' he shouted, his voice quickly clearing.

Perhaps if his eyes weren't so beautiful, I may have actually taken him seriously.

'That's an age-old question,' I replied. 'Perhaps I'll answer it if you promise to stop attacking me.'

Teeth flashed as Ernest drew his lips back. Although he drew away from the fork, I knew his wish to cause me pain wasn't gone. Through his bright eyes, as blue as spring rain and the frothing crests of waves, I could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. He was forming a plan, one I'd have to survive.

'Answer me,' he commanded haughtily, like he'd spent years getting exactly what he wanted.

Humans had forgotten many things in the years since I'd been human too. And this human was the worst of them. Short-tempered, entitled, and brash—all qualities I had determined in the three minutes we'd been speaking.

'My name is Killian,' I said, speaking the word from the back of my throat just as my mother used to. It was an old name, but over the years I had reformed it and mutated the sounds into something new tongues could handle. 'Does knowing it help, or do you still want to stab me?'

I knew the answer was no, from the deepening scowl lines across his face.

'Helps to know the name of the man who has... who has...'

I crossed my arms, muscles tensing as I waited patiently for what Ernest was going to say. 'Saved you.'

'Abducted me,' Ernest snapped.

'Saved,' I repeated, drawing the word out.

Ernest's chest rose and fell rapidly, his lips thinning. All the while the wound on his arm oozed with infection.

'We could spend the rest of the day going back and forth, or you can let me see your wounds.' I gestured towards his arm, startled to find that my own hands shook. 'I have a salve which will help settle the infection.'

He flinched away from me. 'Why do you want to help me?'

It was a good question. Why did I? I told myself it was because this young man had the power to make Mer walk on land. He was a maker of miracles. And I could do with a miracle.

'Can one not just do a good deed without another motive?'

Ernest found it easier to ignore me, clearly.

'Ernest of Ire, Prince of the Kingdom. Would you have preferred me to leave you on the floor of the amphitheatre whilst your father's guards gave the command to kill you?' I tilted my head, fighting the urge to smile. 'Take a seat, before I change my stance on hospitality.'

'You're acting as if I asked for your help,' Ernest snapped. His gaze shot to the door at his side and I knew this was going to be a difficult day. 'My father would never give the order to have me executed. He needs...'

Ernest didn't need to finish his sentence for me to know what he spoke of.

*Oh, I'm sure he does.* 

'You were attacked by a Mer. Your father's men were given the command to kill you— which, may I add, I'm beginning to wish I'd let them do. It would have saved me this argument and the desecration of my favourite fork.'

Ernest responded by pushing his entire body weight at me again, forcing me back another two steps. For such a small little creature, he held power in his arms. I staggered, which gave Ernest the chance to run. Clutching his bleeding arm, dressed in nothing but the bedsheet he woke in, he bolted for the front door.

To him, this looked more ominous than it was in truth. He had woken, naked as the day he was born, in a stranger's bed. I could see how that would make anyone afraid. But between his incessant shouting and the stabbing me part, I'd not exactly had the chance to speak. To tell him that by the time I got him back here, he was still in his *new* form.

'Running is pointless,' I called after him, frustration boiling in my gut. If I'd ever thought I missed human interaction, I was sorely mistaken.

Ernest didn't respond with words. He just continued running, his body awkwardly slamming against the corridor wall before he scurried back to the front door.

It was humorous, almost. Like a fox with a rabbit, I allowed the little prince to think he was getting away. Beneath my skin, the creature shivered with excitement. What Ernest didn't account for was that both me and the creature enjoyed the hunt, the chase. And in the hundreds of years since we'd started our task, we'd had plenty of practice.

'Step one foot outside this cottage and you will forfeit your life,' I shouted at his back.

I realised quickly that Ernest would have taken that as a threat from me, when in fact I'd meant it in relation to the many people in Ire who would just as soon cut his head off as help him. Of course, it didn't have its desired effect because Ernest continued running. Only when the front door slammed open, smacking harshly into the outer wall, did I move.

It didn't take long for me to reach him, although I admired his effort.

Ernest stumbled up the narrow path, his bare feet slipping on stones still wet from the storm last night. Reaching him in a few strides, I wrapped my arms around him, hoisting him from the ground. His skin was so smooth. It oozed with the sea-salt scent left from his evening unconscious in the Below. Even his hair was tacky with dried salt.

'Get the fuck off me!' he cried, wriggling like a worm on a hook, undoubtedly spreading pus and blood over my skin... skin which was currently pressed against him. *Interesting*. For a second, I held my breath, expecting anxiety to rear its head. This time, it stayed dormant.

'Such a foul mouth for a Prince,' I responded as his bare feet kicked at my shins. It likely hurt him more than it did me.

Ernest screamed—at least that's what I believed it was intended to be. The sound came out more as a desperate choking, as though my hands were around his throat instead of his chest.

I was far taller and admittedly far stronger. But force was force. Harsh bone slammed back into my nose and I was blinded by the sudden pain. It was as breathtaking and beautiful as it was distracting and debilitating. My nose crunched beneath the force of his skull. The pop echoed in my head before a gushing river of blue blood burst outwards.

I dropped him, the thud of his body against the ground hardly registering. Grasping my shattered nose, I quickly reshaped the line as it began to heal. It was only a moment of distraction, but the little prince took it. His feet slammed into my shins and his nails gouged the flesh of my

navel. Then he was up and running again, this time making it past the gate of my cottage.

The sky cracked with power as dark clouds passed overhead. My emotion was tied to my magic, as was the storm which filled the sky. Even if I longed to rein it in, I couldn't. Deep inside my chest, two hearts beat in tandem. The beast was close. I plucked the trident from my belt, where I'd stored it in the form of a charm. As it grew in my hands, the magic responded to my desires and emotions.

'Stop!' I bellowed as a fork of lightning split the sky. In moments, it had gone from dawn to dusk, the bright sun covered by a blanket of my power.

My voice was nowhere and everywhere at once.

I reached outwards, tying my magic with the water inside of Ernest's body. He stopped, immobilised as my power commanded him. That was the thing about humans—they were not only made up of blood, muscle and bone, but another key component, something that had come in handy in my many years. Water. The very element I commanded while holding the trident.

'Now, are you going to continue trying to get away from me, or are you going to hear me out?'

My footsteps were steady as I closed the space between us. I couldn't see his face, only his shivering back and the rivers of blood dripping from his arm which splashed against the stone steps at his feet.

As I rounded him, I found tears sliding down his cheeks. His blue eyes bulged wide and his mouth quivered. Seeing him overcome by his fury was almost commendable. He should have feared me, but that wasn't the emotion I found in his eyes.

This time, when Ernest spoke, it was to ask the question he should have right at the beginning of this terrible interaction.

'What are you?'

I laughed, the sound echoing in the gathering clouds above. 'Now that, Ernest Ire, is an interesting question. Because I have the very same one for you.'

### Chapter Eleven - Ernest



I'm going to fucking kill him.

I focused on that sentiment as Killian lathered the warm paste across my arm. Otherwise, I might just have fixated on the soft brush of his knuckles, how he smelled of citrus and olives, and the way his eyes looked like ripe grapes ready for bursting.

I should've gone for his eye, not his neck. Given the chance, I would gouge them out with my own nails. But I couldn't move. Whatever magic he held over me kept me frozen in place. After I had tried to run, and he infiltrated my bloodstream with his essence and stopped me, he had carried me back into his cottage and sat me upon the reading chair he had been sleeping on.

Since then, he had put a loose linen shirt on, covering the mocking face of Karakos inked onto his skin. The weapon he had suddenly been holding as he froze me was now resting against the cold hearth, the metal glinting at me mockingly.

'This will numb the pain,' Killian said, deep voice brushing over my skin. If he noticed the gooseflesh across my arms, he didn't mention it. 'It should also heal the open wounds by nightfall. But as I'm sure you're aware, it will do little to cure you of your... other sickness.'

I kept silent.

He didn't lie—my arm was already numbing, the pain subsiding to a far-off ache. I couldn't see the bite mark beneath the thick, white paste, but my skin itched as though the skin was scabbing over.

'Not even a thank you?' Killian growled, drawing back from his task.

The tension from my jaw clamping together made the lower part of my face ache. I might not have spoken, but I refused to take my eyes off him. Everyone had a weakness. I just needed to locate his and then use it against him.

'Silence, then. Fine by me,' he exhaled, sounding almost bored. 'You can continue sitting there until you answer my questions. Believe me... I've had so much practice at patience, I'm practically the saint of it.'

His questions weren't easy to answer. First: what are you? Second: which god blessed you with your gift? And thirdly: how did I give the Mer the ability to walk on land and speak? I wasn't confident in my answers to any of the three questions. So instead, I sat there, body hard as stone, watching Killian with his arms crossed and his unwavering gaze pinned on me.

We stayed like that for hours. Hours of staring at one another, all the while my desire to cause him pain was overwhelming. I lost myself to time by contemplating all the things I would do to him, if given the chance. I could bite him, sink my teeth into his flesh just like Aleanna did to me. From the way he was built, not a speck of his body left without muscles, I knew he would overpower me. But I would give it a good fucking go.

Killian broke first. I knew it was coming because his foot began to tap, then he paced. I watched as nervous energy practically overcame him. So much for being the saint of patience. 'You do realise your silence is incriminating? And give it a few hours, you'll be begging me to free you from this spell. I would strongly recommend you get talking before Luna graces the night sky and you're called to your *new* home.'

'I have nothing for you...' I insisted, heart thumping as surprise crossed over his face.

'That couldn't be further from the truth.' Killian knelt before me, levelling his eyes with mine. 'I understand that your magic is powerful. It can entrance an entire city and give Mer impossible gifts. In fact, I'd say that you have *much* that I would want.'

The urge to lean into him and snap his smug little smile off with my teeth was overwhelming. But he tightened his fist and his hold on me stiffened.

'Wishes,' I spat, my full bladder giving me a sharp stab as I shifted away from his grasp, reminding me of just how long I'd been sitting here. 'I grant wishes.'

It was strange to watch relief unfurl over his features. It softened the lines across his forehead and smoothed the skin around his mouth and eyes. 'Interesting. From my understanding, there's no patron god of wishes.'

'Then your guess is as good as mine.'

I might not be able to physically harm him, but I could at least ruin his relief, which would at least give me some sense of victory. But I held back telling him my magic was taken from me. From the look he gave me, the way his magic eased away from me and my body became mine again, he revealed to me exactly what he wanted.

That was his weakness. A desire, like all men had.

As I leaned forwards in his chair, my bones clicking from the hours of being locked in a spell, I softened my expression to match his. There was something eerie about his quiet. This time, it was as though he was lost to thought.

'If you let me leave, I'll give you what you want.'

He slowly raised his eyes back to mine. The muscles in his jaw feathered, his hands wringing together as my question settled over him.

Gods, it really was this easy.

Of course Killian wanted something from me. My father had warned me about this reaction. It was exactly why I had to keep my powers a secret, and also the very reason my father loved me. Hadeon was the only one who wanted me for *me*, not what I could offer him.

'Cat got your tongue?' I asked when the seconds of silence had stretched to minutes. 'Or do you have so many wishes you simply can't just pick one—'

'I know what I want.' His words were finite, interrupting me.

I nodded. 'Then ask it of me.'

If my father saw me now, he'd be proud. The way this stranger looked at me, the way he was entirely and completely engrossed, was exactly how my father wanted all of his subjects to behave.

Killian lifted his strong fingers to his collar and pulled down his shirt. He didn't stop until my eyes graced the thick, black lines of his tattoo. 'Free me of this.'

'Your tattoo?' I asked, one brow raised. 'Make a mistake getting it?'

'My curse,' he corrected as tears began to line his lower lashes. Then he smiled— the type of smile a sailor gave as he looked out across the ocean to

the uncharted land they had found, full of peace and hope. It almost made him look... magnificent.

*I didn't think it would be this easy*, I admitted to myself.

'I can do that,' I said, trying my hardest not to make him notice how my eyes scanned the room for something to use against him. Elation exploded in my chest as I caught a flash of silver inches beneath the chair. The fork.

'Thank you,' Killian said, closing his eyes as his posture sagged forwards.

Don't thank me yet.

I eased from the chair, lowering myself down until I was kneeling before him. The fork was just out of reach. If I could get him on his back and then lean over, maybe I could reach it.

'For... granting wishes, I'll need you to be as relaxed as possible.' Should I have asked him what his curse was? I'd granted wishes like health, an abundance of money and even one which made a farmer's olive grove sprout olives the size of my palm. But I'd never dealt with breaking curses.

He nodded, speechless and almost desperate in the way he looked at me. I almost felt bad for him when a single tear fell from his left eye. All he could say as he leaned back slowly was *thank you*, *thank you*... *thank you*.

Hadeon came to mind as I crawled over Killian and sat myself on his lap. The proximity was not important for my magic—if I even had it—but it was important for reaching the fork and stabbing somewhere more delicate than his neck this time.

My aim was to kill him. But his magic was vast as the ocean, so if that didn't work, I'd settle for getting as far away as possible, as quickly as possible. Maybe I couldn't protect myself, but my father could protect me. He would, because I was his everything.

He needed me, infected or not.

*No*, the voice inside corrected me. *He needs your* power, *not you*.

Burying that thought deep, deep down, I focused on my victim. Killian had his eyes closed, but his fingers trailed over my thighs as I sat on him. It was... distracting, so much so that I lost focus on the fork. The pads of his fingers were firm yet gentle as they painted circles over my skin.

'Are you ready?' I asked as I leaned down over him, hands placed on either side of his shoulders. It was there... so close I could reach it.

'Yes.' For such a large, powerful man, the way he spoke the word was similar to the broken chirp of a bird. 'I am ready. I am...'

Before he could answer, I snatched the fork, lifted it above my head and drove it down straight into his eye.

Thud.

# Chapter Twelve - Ernest

to the

The Great Betrayal was a myth everyone in Ire and the surrounding lands had grown up on. It was the tale of how Karakos and Gorgana turned against Nyssa, Goddess of Life, and drove her out of the realm a plan made for weaker gods to rule the world. Nyssa was the forgotten goddess.

That was what I'd done. I had found Killian's weakness and used it against him. It may not have been as great a betrayal as what the gods had done to Nyssa, but it was enough of one to get me far, far away.

And I didn't stop running. Not when my lungs burned, nor when my cheeks stung with tears. The soles of my feet were ruined, torn apart by shells and loose stone. I knew I was bleeding, likely leaving a trail of footprints for Killian to follow—if he'd survived, that was. I hoped he didn't because after stabbing him for a second time, with his *prized* fork, I hardly imagined he would be so accommodating the next time we saw each other.

At least next time it would be with the full wrath of my father and his guards between us.

I might not be able to kill him, but I was confident a sword would.

The Kingdom of Ire towered above me. My knees almost gave out with relief as my eyes settled on the sandstone walls which surrounded the lower quarters. Part of me expected the lands beyond the city to be crawling with King's Guards searching for me. I could only imagine my father's panic knowing I was missing. His prized possession, gone. Then there was the issue of my magic, the very thing he coveted.

A crowd lingered beyond the gates to the city. I had never seen the street so full, nor the gates closed. There was a swell of demanding people

around me, screaming to be let in. I lifted onto my tiptoes, searching for a King's Guard I could alert to assist me, but all I saw was red. I was surrounded by bodies dressed in familiar, yet strange crimson robes.

My heart hammered in my throat as my mind gave these people a name. The acolytes of Gorgana were here, stationed outside the gates of *my* city.

I slipped my wounded arm into the sheet I had made into a shawl. If anyone saw the mark, they would know I was doomed. Followed by the promise of death. I was delirious, but I also knew what would happen if they saw the bite marks which were now puckered sliver scars instead of open wounds.

'You,' I snapped, my voice crackling and weak. The person beside me, a woman with a hunched back and a nest of silver hair, had wide milky eyes that didn't quite look at me, but almost through me. 'What's happening here?'

'Bloody heathens.' She grasped my face, using her fingers to read my features. I knew then that she was blind. There was a flash of pity in her expression, creasing the lines across her forehead into deep crevasses. 'You, boy, must get far away from this place. Do not bother with the gates, it is not safe. No one is allowed in, no one is allowed out.'

'Why?' I asked, sucking in a harsh breath.

She opened her mouth to reply, flashing rows of rotten teeth. But her response was swallowed by the swell of the crowd. Screams lit the sky as people moved as one in a wave, pushing and shoving. Panic clawed at my throat. I raised my arms to push back at those who overwhelmed me, but it was of no use. Bodies pressed in, smothering me.

Then I smelled it. Death. Something sticky trickled over my toes, and I knew what it was before I looked down to find blood pooling around my feet. It dribbled down the cracks between the streets in little rivers of crimson.

No longer fighting against the crowd, I allowed them to move me. There was no need to hide my scream, not as the rest of those around me were already crying out for their lives. Panic was as infectious as the poison spreading in my veins.

'I need to get inside,' I shouted, grasping shoulders as I tried to force my way out of the chaos. 'My father... I need to see the—'

The crowd parted enough for me to finally see the gates. What I saw silenced me. Men and women in red robes stood in a line, spears in hands, their tips covered in flesh and blood. Before them laid a line of dead bodies with glassy eyes and pallid skin, their chests torn open wide.

'Come, child!' the same old woman I had dismissed snapped at me. Her spindly fingers grasped my wrist and pulled me away from the acolytes. 'No good will come from dying now. The threads deem that will not be today...'

'I have to get into the city,' I pleaded, shoulders smashing into me from either side. 'My father is inside... I have to reach him.'

'Pray to Karakos his soul has already fulfilled him,' she said, widening her milky white eyes. 'The city is now in the embrace of Gorgana.'

'What did you say... about the King?'

I stumbled, almost falling. The sudden force tore my wrist from her grip, then the crowd swallowed her whole, but not before I heard her haunting words.

'Doomed. He will not leave this city alive.'

'No.' I stopped dead, a stone in a river. 'No.'

I had to reach him. There was one other way into the city, a place I knew the acolytes wouldn't be aware of. I couldn't worry about why they were here, not yet. I had to focus.

I broke free of the crowd and moved towards the left of the wall. Following it would take me to a place no one else would know of.

Well, anyone else but Hadeon.



WITH EVERY SECOND THAT passed I found myself looking over my shoulder, half expecting to find Killian chasing my heel. I'd been so focused on running that I hadn't allowed myself to truly contemplate what I'd done. Now, I was suffering the consequences. As the cool water crashed against the lip of stone, wetting my thighs, my mind was gripped by thoughts of the stranger.

I had stabbed him in the neck with a fork—a fucking *fork*. Then again in his eye as he had lain beneath me, vulnerable.

The thing about my mind in panic was that too many thoughts ambushed it at once. As soon as my father came to mind, I felt a burning desire to see him in the flesh. *Doomed*. The old crone's final words hadn't left me. In fact, they grew louder and more demanding, making me clamber across the rock face with haste.

He will not leave this city alive.

My hands were shaking violently enough that it was hard to get a hold on the crumbling stone. At one point my foot slipped out of the divot, nearly sending me into the abyss of thrashing water. My left palm was torn to shreds just from grasping fleetingly at the wall of stone to keep myself from falling.

The wet rocks steadied me as I pressed my forehead into them. I allowed myself a moment, my heart threatening to break ribs with its heavy beat, my head aching from the storm of anxiety which ruled it.

I was a crab, side-stepping the narrow ravine. Above me was the sheer stretch of cliff. Below me was the ocean and all its dangers. It was easier for me to look skyward. Simply seeing the water and how close it was sickened me. Would Aleanna be waiting? In my mind's eye I could see her face beneath the film of water, watching and waiting for me to fall in and be claimed.

But would the Mer care for me now I was becoming one of them? Their purpose was to spread their infection. Since their venom already lingered inside my arm, if I fell into the ocean would they leave me alone?

The sun beat down on me, sweat prickling across the back of my neck. I was sticky and uncomfortably warm, as though the sun itself longed to torture me and force me into the Mer's domain. But what the sun couldn't account for was that my fear of the water was not solely because of the monsters lurking within it.

I couldn't even answer where my fear had truly come from. It was innate, as though I was born with it. For as long as I could remember, the fear had haunted me. I'd hardly put a toe into the ocean. Shallow water was not as bad as the deep blue—if I could see the bottom, I was able to hold onto some bravery. But here, beneath me, the water was as black as night. A thick place where light didn't penetrate as if it, too, feared the ocean's potential.

My neck ached as I turned the way I had come. The shoreline looked so far away, the stretch of stone and ocean no different to the teeth and jaws of a great demon. I could scuttle back, but then I would be faced with the acolytes and the wall of dead they had made before the gate to my city.

Or worse... I would face *Killian*.

I couldn't turn back now. I refused to give into the weakness. What other options were offered to me if I didn't fight? Survive, perhaps.

Focusing on my destination, I didn't notice the black-pointed urchin until I stepped upon it. Pain should've been familiar, but the shock of it made me lose my grip. I fell, arms pinwheeling as if that would stop me from plummeting.

Water crashed into my back, the force knocking the air from my lungs. All of a sudden, I was completely submerged, sinking beneath the Below, my body immobile. I sank like a stone. Salt stung at my skin. Stabbing pain shot up my arm from the Mer bite.

A school of bright fish dispersed around me, more frightened of me than I was of them. Sounds were muffled in the Below, and it was disorienting. I spun around, legs kicking out, arms swirling, but I couldn't swim. I swallowed a mouthful of water, bubbles racing before my face, blinding me. And still I fought to try and reach the surface again.

After what felt like a millennium, my fingers grasped something slick but hard. I was heaved upwards. Strong arms wrapped around my chest, dragging me to the surface. I had no care as to who had saved me, not as I sucked in lungfuls of air, expelling vomit which tasted of bile and salt.

'Pull him out,' a voice called, muffled by the water clogging my ears. Suddenly, millions of grains of sand scratched my back as I was tugged out of the lapping waves. Then I was dropped, discarded like a sack of shit, as the tide rushed up around my gasping body, willing to pull me back in.

A shadow passed above me. I lifted a shaking hand over my brow to block the sun as I coughed the salt water from my lungs.

'Is it him?' another voice asked, louder this time.

'Yes.' My blood ran cold at the familiar tone. 'It's the prince.'

The figure above me shifted, blocking the glare of light with their head. As they did, my eyes focused on the man.

'Hadeon?' I groaned, gazing up the shawl of red material which covered his body, up to his face which was pinched in a mix of disbelief and horror. I thought the sun cast a shadow of red at his back, but I quickly saw that it was a crowd of acolytes. It was such an unbelievable sight that I was certain I had drowned in the ocean and this was some punishing vision to test where my soul would spend the rest of its days.

Only when Hadeon spoke did I know this was not a dream, not an illusion born from death. It was as real as the bite on my arm, as real as the threat I suddenly faced.

'Ernest, you've condemned Ire,' Hadeon said, stepping back from me, looking down at me as if I was the most disgusting being in the world to him. 'I wanted you. I truly did. But this is all your fault.'

### Chapter Thirteen - Killian

to the

I should have killed him last night when I had the chance. Instead, I'd held his unconscious body beneath the water, holding him to my chest, hoping he would survive the first night of the infection. The thought of it now only spoiled my insides with rage. I'd brought him into my home, blindingly believing Ernest had the power to save me.

And he'd lied, used my desires and tried to kill me instead. He had stabbed me—not once, but twice. Unlike me, Ernest would not be so lucky as to survive when I got my hands on him. There wouldn't be a third chance.

The anger was so overwhelming, so entirely demanding, that it drove me out of the cottage to follow him. Except it all faded away when my eyes settled on the very people who had ruined my life, the very people who'd infected my mother with their beliefs. The *very fucking people* who'd cheered as she had held me over the cliff and split my neck wide open.

I forgot all about the prince as my eyes settled on the acolytes of Gorgana.

No one could see me hidden behind the rock protruding out of the ocean's surface. It gave me the perfect view of what was happening upon the shore, whilst still keeping me hidden. My tentacles tightened around the boulder, suckers grasping onto the rough surface, as I watched them carelessly snatch Ernest up from the ground. He'd just been pulled out of the water, and unlike me, he hadn't noticed the army of acolytes racing down the narrow steps carved into the face of the cliff.

Not until it was too late.

They overwhelmed him, numerous hands grasping, pulling, and pushing until Ernest was bound in chains and forced towards the castle. I should have helped, should have unleashed my power and reclaimed him. But I was frozen, unable to do anything as the zealots dragged him from me.

The acolytes of Gorgana had lost their grasp on Ire in the years since they had sacrificed me in Karakos's name. Because the first thing I did after he saved me from death was use his power to swallow them all whole. I rose the ocean over their land, their temples, and didn't stop until I thought each and every one of them were dead—returned to the hands of the very god they worshipped.

No one since had faced Karakos's wrath, only the Mer.

The acolytes were a small group, forced to an island miles from Ire. Yet here they were, and in great numbers.

*I really had grown lazy.* 

Like moths to a flame, leeches to blood, what the acolytes were drawn to was death. They thirsted for it, thrived off of it, bound themselves in it like the chains which now held Ernest captive.

'He's mine,' I said, the stone groaning as my grip tightened. '*Mine*.' Mine to have. Mine to kill.

My tentacles released the stone, suckers popping off. The gills on either side of my neck opened as I slipped back beneath the water, a clear film passing over my eyes until they were protected. I sunk deep into the dark water until I was certain no spyglass or watching eye would see me.

Far above, the sun had long passed its apex in the sky. Already the light of day was slipping over the horizon. Time was running out. For me—and more importantly, for Ernest.

That was, if the acolytes kept him alive long enough to allow him to change. Even if they did, I hardly imagined they would permit him into the Below. Ernest would soon dry out on land, no longer human but not completely Mer. It shouldn't have been my responsibility to help him, but something drove me towards the shore.

Revenge.

I drew in the beast, allowing for my human form to overwhelm me. It was a strange feeling, the metamorphosis. I shed the tentacles, the form bleeding from me like seafoam. The rubbery limbs melted away, leaving behind re-formed legs as bones solidified and veins and muscles knitted together. The first steps on my legs always felt as though I walked on a bed

of broken glass. I gritted my teeth, lips drawing into a snarl, as I climbed out onto the shore. From the waist down, I was entirely naked.

The clothes I had brought with me in the netted bag were wet through. I changed into them in the shadows of the small cave, wondering what these stones had witnessed over the years. The sound of my breathing echoed around me, building in volume. Once I was clothed, I paced towards the stone steps and looked up towards the castle which loomed overhead.

After the Mer's attack the night prior, I knew the city would be on high alert. But it wasn't the promise of Kings Guards that worried me—it was the very presence of Gorgana's followers which sparked an ancient dread in my chest.

The last time I'd faced them, I'd come away cursed. But the last time they faced me, they had not come away at all.

# Chapter Fourteen - Ernest

the state

'You're hurting me,' I whispered, tears streaking down my face. 'Hadeon, please. Stop it.'

I didn't know what was worse, Hadeon's fingers pinching into the soft flesh of my upper arm, or the cracks which had begun to spread through my heart.

'I suggest you keep that little mouth shut,' Hadeon hissed as his hold tightened, his nails breaking skin. 'For your sake.'

'Should we not gag him?' one of the acolytes asked, his spear inches from my face.

'Ernest will behave,' Hadeon answered. 'Won't you?'

I nodded, unable to refuse him. I hoped that the more his nails dug into me, the quicker it would wake me from this nightmare.

Hadeon half dragged, half guided me through the castle. It was a disorientating experience, passing familiar corridors and rooms which looked different than the last time I had seen them. Gilded paintings had been removed from walls. The stone podiums displaying an array of pottery painted in golds and blues no longer stood vigil where they last had. Windows had been smashed. Glass littered the floor which Hadeon carefully navigated me around. But it was red smudges on the walls and the dark russet brown of dried blood puddled over the sandstone floor which caught my attention.

I was bleeding and broken, sodden to the bone and entirely exhausted, but even in my state I could read the details around me and piece together what had happened. The castle was empty, devoid of life. The only people were the acolytes with their red cloaks and pious glares.

As we passed beneath the stone walkway connecting the western wing of the castle to the eastern wing, I finally saw where everyone had disappeared to. A pile of bodies had been erected in the middle of the courtyard. Blood covered the white-painted stones. Limp limbs draped over one another in a mass of flesh and death.

I choked on my cry, recognising so many faces of people I had grown up beside.

'You fucking monsters!' I screamed, trying to pull back from Hadeon with all my might. 'You've murdered them!'

I searched the glassy-eyed faces for my father. It was a natural response to finally understanding what the acolytes had achieved since last night. There was no relief when I couldn't find him, not as the old crone's voice still rung in my head.

Doomed. Doomed.

'It is you who's become the monster, Ernest. Now stop resisting,' Hadeon growled, speaking out the corner of his mouth. 'It won't help your cause.'

I gathered all the fury and panic, balled it into the muscles of my neck and thrust my head backwards. I didn't know what I hoped to achieve, but hearing the smash of my skull against Hadeon's nose was pleasing.

'I trusted you!'

Hadeon sneered with lips coated in blood. 'That was your first misjudgement.'

More hands grasped me. My scalp burned as fingers wove in my hair and pulled me back. In the chaos something was forced between my mouth. A wooden pole was wedged between my teeth, making my jaw ache. It was tied with leather around my head, the knot ripping hair out of my scalp. As if that wasn't enough, a fist cracked down into my jaw. Because of the gag, I couldn't make any sound except a muffled gasp.

'That's better,' the acolyte with the broken knuckles hissed down at me. 'Try singing your way out of this one, *siren*.'

His words stopped me dead. There was a knowing glint in his eyes, one that scared me more than the mountain of dead behind him or the blood running across the courtyard's flagstones.

Hadeon righted himself, pushing the acolyte to the side. Blood ran down his chin and smudged across his mouth. The colour matched perfectly with his robes. Even with the gag, I had so many questions. Suddenly the passion I had witnessed in him only yesterday made sense. I glanced down to my arm. I practically felt his gaze pull apart my wounds, searching for the Mer's venom spreading through my bloodstream. Those eyes—eyes which had looked at me with such love and desire—now flayed me open, nape to navel, overspilling with pure, concentrated hate.

Hadeon didn't utter another word, not as he grasped my arm again and pulled me forwards. His touch disgusted me. I longed to fight back, to tear all these people apart. But I was powerless, exhausted and drowning in my new reality.

If I thought the presence of acolytes was intense inside the castle, it seemed they congregated in the throne room like bees to honey. A sea of red stretched out on either side of the grand room, not a single set of eyes anywhere else but me as I was forced through the door.

I couldn't focus on them, not without losing myself to my panic. Instead, I took in the details, gathering as much information as I could. Knowledge was power, and since I was without my own, I had to look for it elsewhere.

The throne room was bathed in darkness. Many of the enormous windows had been covered by thick cloth, blocking out the natural light. Only half the room was covered in shadow, while the rest burned in the golden light of lit sconces.

Hadeon pushed me forwards. I crashed into the ground, knees cracking, Killian's bedsheet barely hanging on. The stone beneath my hands and knees was cold to the touch.

Where there were once two thrones woven from driftwood, shell and velvet, there was now only an empty space. The remnants of our broken thrones were left scattered across the dais. In their place a single banner was held by a stoic acolyte whose face was mutilated by a needle and thread. Their eyes were sewn shut, their lips sealed by black thread, their ears nothing but mounds of scarred flesh.

A door slammed shut at my back. I whipped my head around, finding a wall of red-robed men and women standing in the way of my only exit. There were so many of them, expressionless and armed. And they all looked at me, fingers gripped tightly around spears and short swords.

Hadeon lingered within the crowd. I found him easily, as though a compass lingered inside of my chest, constantly pointing in his direction no matter where I was.

And to think I had come back here for him and my father. What had changed? Or had I simply been too distracted to see Hadeon for who he truly was?

Even though the room was full of countless people, it was quiet enough for me to hear the shuffle of footsteps. It was faint, the patter of feet over stone, the gentle hush of breath, the swish of material. It wasn't easy to turn my back on Hadeon, but when I did it was to find a woman towering above me.

'Hello, Ernest of Ire,' she said, kneeling down in front of me. 'I admit, I have been practically *dying* to meet you. Despite the circumstances, it's a pleasure to finally get the chance. I've heard nothing but... interesting things about you.'

I drank her in, every detail. Piercing red eyes were set into her ivory-skinned face. Her cheeks were hollow, the bones almost pressing out of her flesh as though attempting to escape. I had never seen anything like it. It was as though the colour of her robes both gave her life and drew it out of her. Beneath the hood of her cloak, I thought I saw a flash of silver hair. I couldn't be sure though, as her eyes had some strange power over me. There was no looking away from them for long, not without being drawn back to her gaze like a moth to flame.

My lack of response wasn't due to rudeness, but the gag still wedged between my teeth.

'Ah, I do apologise.' I flinched away as her ice-cold fingers grazed my jaw. 'Don't be frightened, Ernest. I only want to take this out. How else can we converse if you're gagged?'

I kept as still as the dead as she undid the knot behind my head, gently pulled the wood from my mouth and folded the straps neatly before placing it on the floor beside me.

'That's better, isn't it?'

The muscles in my jaw ached. I longed to raise a hand to my cheek, but that would show weakness. I couldn't be weak, not beneath the glare of this predator.

'Where's my father?' I asked, voice hoarse.

Honest and raw sympathy softened her face. 'Terian is alive and well, if that's what you're asking. Of course, his well-being all depends on how cooperative you're going to be.'

I shifted back, hating our proximity. As I did so, her crimson eyes shot down to my arm. I was certain her nostrils flared, as though she was smelling me. There was certainly something distracted about her gaze, as though I suddenly didn't matter.

She leaned in, the scent of rot invading my nose. When she spoke, it was in a muted whisper, as though she wished for only me to hear. 'I see your wounds have healed. How peculiar.'

I couldn't help but look down at my skin, noticing how smudges of the salve Killian had slathered on me had washed away, revealing the silver scars of Aleanna's teeth marks.

'Where is *he*?'

Her question shocked me as much as the spike of fury across her face. My blood froze. It was as though my entire body had been petrified by her words, keeping me immobilised, turning me to stone. 'Who?'

She leaned back and her bones clicked. 'I think you know exactly who I'm referring to. Many of us saw him last night when he swept you from the ground and threw himself over the cliff's edge. Do you require me to spell it out for you?'

Killian. It had to be.

'Show me my father and I'll answer you.'

The woman rocked backwards, joints creaking, then stood above me. 'Look around you, Ernest. You are in no position to be making deals with me. Be thankful you're still alive long enough to even have this conversation.'

I straightened my back, forcing as much authority into my voice as I could muster. Without the crutch that was my magic, I felt pathetic. Fake. Weak. But I was still the prince. I had years of playing this part to know how to speak, how to act and how to move to command a room.

'All this speculation,' I said, 'and I still don't even know your name.'

I could tell this amused the woman. The skin around her mouth stretched as she smiled with all her teeth. 'We don't have names, not beneath the rule of our god. Names are power, and we are unworthy of them. Only Gorgana has power here...' she leaned in again, lips so close to my ear a shiver passed over my skin. 'Except that's not entirely true, is it?'

'I'm sorry, but you'll need to be clearer with your assumptions,' I said, attempting to hide the trembling of my body. Every muscle ached as I tensed, trying to keep up the illusion that I wasn't scared.

'Do I?' The nameless priestess leaned back. 'I suppose Hadeon must be a liar, then.'

Hadeon. The gag. The acolytes fear of me. It all made sense. He'd told her about my magic. My secret had been spilled out before me like the blood from a slit throat.

I lifted a hand to the pale mark at my clavicle, knowing her smile was confirmation.

'It's because of Hadeon that you are still alive. Don't blame him for betraying you. Thank him for saving you.'

Saving me? Except what Hadeon didn't know was that my magic was gone—which meant this woman didn't know either. Suddenly, the balance of power over the situation was shifted back to me.

'Ah, so you've heard about my gift.' I straightened as much as I could. 'I'm sorry to disappoint, but you would be the second person to ask me for it today, and will be the second person to be disappointed by my answer.'

She smiled again, this time flashing only a slip of pearly white teeth.

'I don't ask, Ernest.' There was something dangerous about the way she said it. 'We all have secrets, but some are more interesting than others. Like yours, for example. I can only begin to imagine how a little human like you has access to such power. I suppose, once we grow accustomed to one another, you will let me know which god offered it to you. But before that, we have an issue to deal with,' she said, lips barely moving as she spoke. 'The infection spreads through you, spoiling your blood.'

I longed to scramble away from her. But there was something predatory about her stare, keeping me pinned in place.

'Do you know what becomes of those who are bitten by the Mer?' Her question hung between us, thickening the air, spoiling it.

'They're killed before the infection takes root,' I answered quietly.

'This is true. The abominations must be dealt with. Except you, Ernest Ire. You are far too important to simply *deal with*.'

'Then tell me what it is you wish for,' I said, although I felt as though I already knew the answer. 'Hadeon has told you what I can do, so tell me, and I will see it done.'

It was as if I was back in Killian's cottage, straddling his waist as I lured him into the belief I was prepared to use my magic, only to stab him in the eye with a fork. This time, there was no fork. This time, there was an army

of acolytes behind me, each who were accustomed to death more so than me.

'I wish to restore balance. What has happened to you, the Mer's attack, is a sign that Karakos is displeased. He will continue to threaten this world until he is removed from it. Gods have been banished before, so it can happen again. There are rules, rules far older than you can begin to comprehend. And they were put in place to keep Karakos pleased, and to keep us safe from his wrath. And by his will, Ernest, Karakos is furious with us.'

Good. Let him be. Let him swallow you all—

'The years of our exile have led to this moment,' the priestess continued. 'It is important we deal with the issue at hand, otherwise it won't be the Mer he sends onto land. It will be a wave large enough to sweep us all into death.'

My chest tightened. We all knew the stories of Karakos's wrath, how he rose the ocean over cities and dragged them into his domain. Stories told of a world connected by land, with the islands linked together as one mass, before Karakos grew hungry.

'And if I help you, you will release my father?' I straightened my spine, lifting myself up onto my knees. Chin raised, I feigned confidence, when in reality my insides were churning in a tempest of turmoil.

'Yes,' she said plainly. 'Give me your magic, and I will save this world. I will use it, not to cast illusions and manipulate minds for my gain, but to save innocent lives from Karakos's wrath for good.'

I laughed. Even if I wanted to stop the reaction, I couldn't. It was a harsh, barking noise that filled the room and ruined the stillness of the crowd. They all reacted, stomping their feet and chanting the god's name whilst I broke into my fit of laughter.

'Gorgana. Gorgana.'

'Is your obvious humour sign of a refusal?' the priestess asked over the shouts, one brow raised.

I had to steady my breathing enough to answer her. 'No.'

Hope spread over her face, giving her an almost youthful glow. 'Then you'll give it to me?'

I smiled, showing every single tooth. 'No.'

No, because I didn't have my magic. It had been taken from me. If I had it, I could have given it away. One song, one intention-filled lyric and I

could have freed myself of it by giving it away. That was how Aleanna had taken it, after all.

The priestess clicked her tongue, displeased. Her head shook from side to side, eyes pinned to me, gaze singing me with her displeasure. 'In a matter of hours you will face pain unlike anything you have experienced before. You can either do as I ask, or I will ensure you suffer through every moment until you are begging for me to save you from your curse.'

'There's no cure,' I spat, already knowing the answer.

'Yes,' she said, eyes brightening as though a beacon had been lit within her. 'Yes, there is.'

My smile faltered. 'You're lying.'

'And what would I gain from lying when I need something from you, Ernest?'

I refused to answer. There was nothing for me to say. It mattered little if she lied or told the truth. It didn't matter what she wanted. My magic was gone, already given to another. It wasn't me who she should plead to. But if I revealed that, my father would face punishment.

'Do you know how long it takes for the infection to overcome you entirely?' she asked.

My teeth gritted together as I continued to refuse to speak. Of course I knew the answer. Everyone did. Six days was the longest a person had ever resisted the infection.

But when the priestess realised I wasn't prepared to answer, she looked across the crowd of acolytes. When she spoke, it wasn't for me. It was a command for them, and I was simply the bystander who heard. 'Until Ernest decides to cooperate with us, every evening I wish for you to round up one of Ire's civilians. Children, preferably, as the God of the Oceans prefers their innocence. We will show Ernest just how Karakos must be dealt with. Take them to the ocean and spill their blood. Let us hope that appeases Karakos long enough. Do this every evening, when the moon rises over the water.'

'No!' I screamed, grabbing for her only to miss as she stepped back. 'You can't do this.'

She turned back to me, gazing down the point of her nose. 'Up to six nights. My calculations tell me that is six innocent lives.'

'You wouldn't,' I gasped.

'Gorgana will enjoy the death too.' She smiled down at me. 'That's six innocent lives, killed because you refused to give me what I asked for. One sacrifice from you is all that is required to spare them. Tell me, Prince Ernest, will you save them, or will you choose instead to save yourself?'

My admission raced out of me, spilling beyond my numb lips. 'I can't give it to you. I don't have it. It's gone. Don't do this. Don't hurt anyone.'

'That,' she snapped, 'does not answer my question.'

She turned, but not quick enough to avoid me reaching out and grasping her robes. I pulled on them, forcing my body weight down, trying to keep her in place.

'I swear to you,' I pleaded, mouth as dry as sun-bleached sand. 'If I had my magic, trust you would be dead. One note, one word and I could have turned you all against each other. Do you really think we would be in this position if I still had my gift? It. Is. *Gone*!'

It felt strange, admitting both the gift of and loss of my magic before a crowd. If my father were here, he would have flayed me for spilling my secrets.

It was clear, though, that she didn't believe me.

'Then I suggest you find it,' the priestess said, 'otherwise it will be far more than six souls lost because of your inability to give me what I need.'

The priestess swept from the room before I could plead my case again. She navigated through the shadows of the dais, passing into the door behind it which led to my father's council rooms.

I didn't take my eyes off her back, not until that choice was taken from me. Hands grasped under my arms and hoisted me from the floor. Acolytes drew me out of the throne room, the bedsheet I had taken from Killian's home barely hanging onto my frame.

They took me back to my personal rooms. Hadeon was there, standing before the doors, both arms stretched out as he readied to close me in.

'You told her,' I said. 'You used me and betrayed me.'

'I did what had to be done. Because last night was proof alone that you have used your magic for selfish gain. Again.'

He wasn't wrong.

'Says the man who was willing to let me use it against my father, just to carve out a life together. What happened to that man? What happened to his selfish desires?'

'He...' Hadeon laughed, chuckling like a manic child with dried blood staining his face. 'He never existed, and you were fool to think he did.'

My heart was shattering.

Never existed. Crack. Fool. Crack.

'Did you truly believe I loved you?' Hadeon stepped closer, a snarl creasing his once handsome face. 'Did you really think for a second I would want *you*?'

I bit down hard on my tongue, refusing to cry. 'Yes, it did seem that way when you fucked me, Hadeon.'

'And that's all you were. A fuck. A place to empty my balls. Until I carved you out, found your secret, and realised how important you were to our cause.'

Bile raced up my throat, filling my cheeks. Instead of swallowing it down, with his hateful words, I gathered it and spat at his feet.

He looked down at the glob then back up, gazing out across the horizon. 'Oh dear, Ernest. Not long until the moon rises and the monster inside of you is called. If I could give you any suggestions, it would be to do what has been asked of you.'

'I swear to you, Hadeon, I don't have my magic.'

I almost reached up and wrapped my fingers around my throat out of pure desperation. If only I could choke the air out of myself, selfishly removing myself from this situation, I would do it.

Hadeon paused, allowing my words to sink in. 'Then you better find it, and quickly.'

'Why?' I jolted forwards before he closed the doors on me. 'Why did you do this?'

'Because I...' Hadeon inhaled deeply, staring directly into my soul, 'I know what is right and what is wrong. What happened last night was only the beginning of Karakos's punishments. If you do not do what is required of you, more will suffer.'

'And if I can't do it?'

His calm face broke out into a snarl of pure disgust. 'Then I hope you're the one who suffers.'

The doors slammed. A key turned in a lock. Behind my back, where the doors opened out into my balcony, the sky had already begun to darken with the arrival of late afternoon. I had lost more of the day than I had realised.

Everything crumbled over me. My missing power, the infection coursing through my blood, the priestess and her promise of death. It was overwhelming, suffocating. A day had passed since I had last stepped foot in this room and my world had turned upside down. I stared out across the calm water, the sun slowly slipping beyond the horizon, making room for the moon to take its place.

And there, deep in my bones, an ache began to form. It was the infection, the curse, as it prepared to claim me.

### Chapter Fifteen - Killian

the state

Time was a fragile thing. It was not linear but formed from knotted and twisted lines. This was a concept I had come to understand throughout my years of being cursed. Immortality did that to one's perspective. Which was why I found it disorientating that tonight, of all nights, my heart raced in my chest with every passing second.

Seconds which felt more like a centuries.

I left the acolyte I'd just killed to rot behind the row of olive groves in the gardens of the castle. Until the flesh would spoil, and the scent of death overwhelmed the tart smell emanating off the hundreds of olive trees, no one would find him.

The red robes scratched against my skin. I felt the weight of the hood press down on the crown of my head like a burden I could not rid myself of. In all the years since I had last worn these robes, the feeling of discomfort hadn't faded. If only my mother could have seen me now, walking through a castle using the false cover of her belief, she would have rolled over in her grave, disgusted. At least the feeling was mutual. I'd vowed never to dress myself in their clothing again, except here I was doing it for a little prince who I had suddenly fixated on.

I knew nothing of this man except he held the power to free me. That alone was enough for me to keep stepping one foot in front of the other.

Above me, the sky darkened with the arrival of dusk. The sun barely held onto its reign over the sky, but in just short of an hour, it would sink behind the horizon. Once the moon crested over Ire, Ernest would lose himself to his infection.

I had to get to him before that happened.

But with a castle riddled with acolytes, it would require a distraction to get Ernest out without being noticed. Before I could begin to plan one, a distraction came at the perfect time, almost as if Karakos heard my desires.

Shouts rose out from beyond the stone courtyard. I slipped around the outskirts, hiding in the thick shadows left by the sentinel lines of carved pillars. Vivid green vines hugged the stone, grapes fat with juices hanging amongst russet roots. Lemon trees grew in burgundy pots decorated with swirls like the ocean's waves. The fresh perfume of the citrus fruit pricked at the insides of my nose as I slowed to a stop and watched chaos unfold.

A map of Ire and its neighbouring islands had been painted in blues, whites and greys across the slabbed floor. Years of being trodden on by feet and sandals had ruined parts of the map, but it was still eerily familiar. I couldn't focus on the finer details as acolytes raced from unseen doorways, flooding the map with the red hems of their cloaks.

It almost seemed lyrical as I watched the map be smothered by Gorgana's followers.

I picked up words from their muffled conversations. *Mer. Ship. Attack*.

Just as the monsters of the ocean were drawn by the moon, I was drawn by their title. One mention of them almost had me forgetting my purpose here. The tidal pull was so intoxicating that I almost jumped from my hiding place and joined the rush of acolytes.

I didn't. Not yet, at least.

I focused, turning my head in the direction they had all come from. Finding Ernest within such a large palace would have been like searching for a diamond in the ocean. But the acolyte who these robes had belonged to had kindly shared the prince's location, thinking divulging information would save his life.

He'd been misled in that belief. I had no guilt for killing him. He worshiped the Goddess of Death—surely he'd be thankful I'd sent him straight into her domain. But in the face of death, he had pleaded for me to let him go, his trembling fists clutching me as frantic begging slipped beyond his mouth.

No one wanted to welcome death when it was staring them in the face.

My hate for the acolytes of Gorgana far outweighed my disdain for the Mer. In fact, they were two separate things. I did what I did to the Mer because it was part of the bargain I'd made, a visceral call within my gut which began the morning I was reborn. But my feeling towards the very

people who'd made my mother slit my throat in the name of belief... that was my own desire. It had nothing to do with what Karakos had given me, what the god still desired from me.

I continued my pursuit, forcing my feet one before the other, just to keep me going in the right direction. There was no time to contemplate what was occurring out across the ocean with the Mer and a ship. Nor could I dwell on why the acolytes were here, and what this meant not only to me but the impressionable people of Ire.

Ernest. I filled my mind with the prince, his deep blue eyes, midnight hair, and pearlescent skin. Last night, he hadn't been aware of what had become of him. Nor had I had the time to inform him. But tonight, when the moon finally rose and called for the creature inside of him to claim its freedom, Ernest would be *fully* aware.

My thighs ached as I climbed the winding steps up the western tower of the castle. It was a tall spire, so gargantuan that if the gods still reigned over the world, they would have found their domain pierced by this tower's tip. When I reached the top, I was practically vibrating with urgency. Deep voices sounded ahead of me. I knew I was close. So I stepped into the line of sight of the two acolytes guarding the grand double doors. They stiffened, fingers twitching on the spears they held. In the blink of an eye, the spears had been lowered into an X between them.

'Blessed be.' I forced the welcome out, knowing it had not graced my tongue for many years. It felt awkward in my mouth, but I hoped I sounded confident and clear.

'Brother, what is your purpose?' one of them asked.

When I didn't reply, the other barked, 'Answer.'

They couldn't help their distrust, not as I stood before them with my face shrouded by the hood. It didn't take a scholar to see that the robes were far too short for me. They skimmed my ankles, revealing bare feet. My wrists protruded from the sleeves. The neckline strained against the swell of muscle barely hiding beneath.

'Do you not hear it? There's a commotion beyond the walls,' I said, voice as clear as shallow water. 'We've all been called to assist.'

That wasn't a lie. We could all hear it, the chorus of shouts from beyond the glassless windows. It carried on the sweltering afternoon breeze. I fought the urge to lower my hood to relieve the heat. I always wondered why the acolytes dressed in such heavy sheep's wool robes which suffocated the skin and kept the warmth in and the cool out. Sweat prickled over my neck and forehead.

'Our command has been to stay here.' The acolyte's fist tightened on his spear. 'Get moving.'

I tasted fear in their response, as heavy as the humidity pressing on my skin. For a moment, I wondered who it was that gave them the command to guard the prince's door. Whoever it was still held the power of control over their followers through terror. Even in all the years since my sacrifice, that was one thing that hadn't changed.

There was no point in continuing this false narrative. Not as time slipped away, with dusk arriving and my anxiety attempting to sink talons into my gut. I was so close, the prince lingering just beyond the door. There was no time to waste pretending anymore.

I lowered my hood, revealing the truth beneath the illusion. Shifting the robes, it slipped from my shoulders and pooled to my feet, spreading around me like freshly spilled blood. Deep in my chest, two hearts beat in unison, enjoying the confusion which passed over the acolytes faces.

'It's him,' one said to the other, voice trembling. Suddenly, their bravery depleted, just as I knew it would.

'Ah, so my reputation reaches even to the dark corners where you dwell?'

The wooden spears clacked together as their bodies started to shake. I watched as their muscles tensed and fingers tightened, but still, they couldn't control themselves. I was almost disappointed when patches of piss didn't spread over their crotches.

'De—demon.'

Spit landed against the floor beside my foot.

I smiled, lips splitting my face in two. 'I understand choice is not something you are familiar with, but I'll give you one anyway. Step aside or be moved. Which will it be?'

Neither of them shifted a muscle besides their continued trembling, although I sensed they wished to. Which meant that whoever their priest or priestess was nowadays was far more frightening than me.

Then again, I did love a challenge.

'You have no dominion here,' the smaller of the two said, feigning a snarl. 'This city belongs to Gorgana now. Or have you finally returned to her...'

There was something odd about the way he spoke so candidly. Like there was a knowing behind his words, something which shouldn't have been possible.

'What do the winds whisper about me?' I asked, stepping cautiously towards them. 'Indulge me. It's been so long since I last spoke with the likes of you.'

Their eyes traced over my bare chest, lingering on the blackened lines of my tattoos. Lips curled over teeth, eyes narrowed, and brows furrowed. One of the guards used their free hand to make the symbol of Gorgana—the crossing of combined fingers from the forehead to the chest then the gut.

'Gorgana cannot protect you from me,' I said, tilting my head. 'Not here, not now. Or tomorrow, or after that. Just as I've hunted your ancestors, I will do so with your descendents in years to come.'

Out the corner of my eye I caught the rich navy of the sky, knowing the sun was close to disappearing. Time slipped through my fingers like sand.

'The winds tell us that you bleed, Sea Witch.'

'Sea Witch?' I couldn't help the thunderous laugh. It boomed across the arched ceiling and stone walls until the entirety of Ire could hear. 'I admit, of all the titles I have gained in my years, that may be my favourite—'

The spears jolted forwards, no longer crossed over the door but held out before me. The metal tips winked with the fading light of day, mere inches from my gut.

'—however, you are right,' I said, stepping into the spearheads. I expelled a breath. The feeling of metal passing through flesh was almost enjoyable. This was not the first time my skin had split today, nor the first time I bled. 'I do bleed, can you see?'

Eyes widened as my azure lifeblood spilled freely, dribbling down the shaft of the spears like the vines wrapping around the stone pillars of the courtyard.

Once I was satisfied with their silent, wide-eyed expressions, I stepped backwards, the spear tips pulling free. My words might as well have had the power to turn people to stone, because the two acolytes watched, frozen in disbelief, as my skin knitted back together.

'But even your metal, your faith, your misplaced bravery, cannot destroy me. It didn't the first time, and it will not now. Tell me, do your winds whisper of that?'

Their silence was answer enough. Although they did not utter a word as they looked to each other, I knew what their gazes spoke of.

'Don't worry,' I whispered, leaning into them as though the walls were listening. 'I won't tell anyone if you run.'

That was the only invitation they required.

Spears clattered against the floor, feet pounding on stone. Before I'd even straightened back, the two acolytes had fled. I was no fool—they would be back with reinforcements. But I would be long gone by then, as would the prince they guarded.

I lifted my hand and pressed it over the door's lock. Magic spilled out of me, drawing water out of the heavy air and forcing it into the mechanism. The metal rusted and weakened enough that the smallest of pushes would break it. A shadow passed over the stone corridor, painting the door in a sudden blanket. One glance behind my back and I understood why.

The sun was setting, and time running out.

I shoved the doors open, slamming them with force until the walls beyond cracked with the impact. Before I could open my mouth to call the name lingering on the tip of my tongue, a force barrelled into me. I was blinded by flesh and nails as a small yet mighty creature jumped onto me, knocking me to the ground.

The last sound I heard was my skull bouncing across the stone floor, before silence devoured me.

## Chapter Sixteen - Ernest

400

My plan was simple and quite frankly rushed. With my eyes trained to the locked door, my muscles strained, and my heart slamming against my ribs, I readied to escape. The poor soul who stepped through the door would not come away without a mark or two. Although it was obtained with my magic, this was my castle and the people outside the walls were my responsibility. I had to save them. But I couldn't do it locked away in my bedchamber. I would fight my way out, find my father, regain my magic, and put all the wrongs right again.

So, when the door was thrown open and I jumped, fighting tooth and nail, onto the unsuspecting guest, I almost didn't notice they didn't wear the tell-tale red robes of the acolytes.

I stared down at Killian, clothed in the simple garments of an acolyte. He had come for me.

Suddenly, I wished I was facing the priestess. Hadeon or the other acolytes. Anyone else was better than this monster, coming to reap revenge for my attempt on his life.

Breathless, I cowered over the unconscious man beneath me. I didn't know who I expected would enter my rooms, but he was certainly not it. The man I had woken to this morning, the man I had stabbed and left for dead.

I straddled his hips for the second time that day, knees tucked into his sides to keep him in place. Not that he would move. The thunderous cracking sound his skull made as it connected with the floor still echoed across the walls.

His white hair fanned out beneath him. Some strands were sodden with the blue blood that spread from beneath his shattered skull. One look beyond the door showed the corridor was empty of all but a red robe left upon the floor. Had Killian killed them to get to me?

Perhaps I should've taken the moment to push up and run. But something kept me in place, gazing down at the stranger. His eyes were closed, the vivid purple hidden behind translucent lids. His skin was smooth as pearl, the only hints of a mark the black lines of the tattoo, poking out of his unbuttoned shirt. I was so utterly transfixed by how peaceful he looked —lips pulled up into a faint smile, spider-long lashes fluttering beneath the force of my breath.

A cool breeze danced in from the balcony behind me, caressing my neck until shivers coursed through me. I turned away from Killian, unsure what exactly demanded my attention this time. But it was something, a call from beyond the balcony as the sky turned a deep navy just as the sun fell behind the curve of the world. As the final dregs of light disappeared, something sparked within me. It was a pull, a tugging of a cord which linked me to the world beyond.

'I see this is a position you enjoy.'

My head snapped back to Killian whose eyes were wide, a snarl painted across his mouth. Before I could pull away, his hands grasped my thighs and held on. It was not a painful hold, firm but tender.

'Do you just not die?' I asked, frozen in place. There was danger in the man's eyes, a promise of something deadly.

'Keep trying and you might just find out.'

No good would come from running now, so instead I brought my knees further into his sides, quickly wrapped a hand around his throat, and made sure my nails pressed into skin. 'What do you want with me?'

It was a loaded question, but I demanded an answer.

'A pointless question as you already know the answer. Except you made it clear you cannot give it to me.'

'And yet you came after me again?'

'Yes,' he said, brows furrowing until his forehead was creased with lines. 'This time to do what I should have the first time I laid eyes on you.'

Despite the dread swirling in my gut, I dared to ask, 'Which is?'

'To kill—'

My body jerked backwards. Not because Killian had pushed me off him —from the amused glint in his eyes, I gathered he was rather enjoying our position. But because that call, that violent tug from beyond the balcony, intensified. A rippling pain shuddered beneath my skin. I was confident if I looked down at my arms it would've been to see something slither within me, as though it longed to break free.

I was on my back, writhing as my body burned from the inside out. The contraction of agony lasted a few beats of time, before receding. Although the echo of it shuddered through me, I could at least catch my breath and focus back on the stranger.

Killian stood above me. In his hand he held a weapon, a pointed trident that caught the fading light of dusk from the balcony at our side. Between the pain and the fact that I faced death, I did the only thing I could think to do. I sang. It was a song I had comforted myself with over the years. A melody that had been with me for as long as I could remember.

Unbeknownst to me, it had other effects too.

"...no matter where you stray, across the sea and far away, my love for you persists as strong, a tide which draws you to and from..."

'How...' Killian choked, eyes wide as though he drank me in. The tips of his trident were level with my chest, the points brushing my flesh. 'How do you know that song?'

I couldn't answer because another wave of agony tore through my legs. Instead, I screamed the lyrics, distracting myself with the familiarity of it, praying it would give me peace as the infection took over.

'Two hearts as one, a rising wave...' I choked, arching my back off the floor. 'May... you... find—'

'Me,' Killian spoke the final lyric as though the word was painful, 'May you find *me*.'

Metal clattered against the floor. Warm hands clutched my lower back, drawing me up. Killian was so close, his scent of salt and sea intoxicating. It filled my nose, ruining me from the inside out. Not that it was unpleasant.

'Kill me then,' I begged, looking Killian dead in his violet eyes. 'Do it. Save me from this.'

He shook his head. 'I cannot.'

'Please.' When he shook his head again, I roared, 'Coward!'

I hadn't realised I was scratching my arm until Killian laid his long fingers over my hand and stopped me. Looking down, I saw the mess I had made. My skin was torn apart, my nails embedded with the flesh I had peeled back from muscle. But it was the glint of silver which snatched my breath away. Scales. They grew from beneath my skin like feathers. Slick with red blood, they winked like stars in the night sky.

Where Aleanna had buried her teeth into my arm, the veins of venom were no longer prominent. They had sunk deep into my body like the anchor of a ship, replaced by the shimmering of overlapping scales. And there was more. My nails were long and pale, sharp at the tip, the skin between my fingers joined by thin, see-through bands of flesh. My hand shook as I held it up before me, studying it in the darkening room.

'Ernest.' I heard Killian on the umpteenth time he said my name. I looked up to him, losing myself in his genuine concern. Two lines furrowed between his sharp brows, his mouth pursed until the blush pink colour drained from the tension. There was something else he longed to say, but noise beyond the corridor stopped him. Footsteps. The thunderous beat of running people. Shouts.

'Do it,' I seethed, angry that he had offered me death and then taken the possibility of peace away. 'Kill me.'

'I said *no*,' Killian growled, lifting me from the floor. A sharp pain shot up my legs as they betrayed me. He caught me before they gave out.

'He's in there,' voices shouted from the corridor. 'It's the Sea Witch. He's come.'

Killian pushed me behind his back, sweeping me out the way with a hand. I grasped onto him for leverage, knowing if I let go I would fall back to the ground in agony.

Strong winds whipped up from the balcony, ripping the sheer curtains off. They shot forwards on the current like ghosts of vengeance. We stood amongst the torrent of air. It was so strong it nearly tore me from the ground. But Killian was as unmovable as a rock in the middle of a ravine.

The doors to the bedroom slammed closed without being touched. Pieces of furniture lifted from the stone floor, slamming before the doors

until a pile of broken wood, skeletons of my bed, cabinets and a shattered mirror created a barrier.

I had no doubt that Killian was controlling the wind. It was not magic I was familiar with, but I recognised the abnormality of it. He used his trident, moving it with the grace of a conductor, and the winds seemed to follow.

Killian focused back on me as the winds died down to a simmering hiss. His hair blew before his face, but nothing could hide the gleam of his eyes. 'I asked you a question. How do you know that song?'

The irrelevant question was misplaced and ill-timed. 'I don't know...I don't fucking know!' I choked out, swallowing down another wave of pain. The agony was becoming my making, not my destruction. It fuelled my emotion. 'What do you want from me?'

'The same thing *they* want,' Killian said, glaze flickering to the barricaded door. The walls began to quake as something heavy was forced into it from the other side. 'Your magic.'

A deranged, feral laugh burst out of me. 'It's gone! I don't have it...'

I fell to my knees as more pain rocketed through me. The crack of bone against stone was so loud I should've felt it. But I didn't. There was no stopping the floor from racing up to greet me. Before my face slammed into it, Killian was there, holding me up.

'Then I'm going to help you get it back,' Killian said, so close that I could see every pore, every single strand of his lashes. I was so distracted by the way my skin felt as though it was twisting inside out that I didn't truly take in his words.

I shook, trembling, as Killian wrapped his hand around my forearm. His fingers were so long they met around it.

'I propose a deal.'

My vision doubled. I inhaled deeply, but air didn't seem to comfort my lungs. 'N—no.'

'Okay, so you wish to stay here, suffering? If the acolytes break into the room quick enough to get you into water, don't think they'll treat you kindly. They will use you. Make you watch as those you care about suffer. Or you help me and I shall help you.'

I was so used to people using me. It was so familiar that the concept was almost comforting. Speaking was difficult. I could only manage one

word at a time, broken up by breathless gasps. My head throbbed and beneath my hips I could no longer feel my legs.

'What... has... changed?' Blinded and lost, my eyes closed. I screamed out the final word, using the very last dregs of air in my pathetic lungs. 'Killian?'

He inhaled sharply at the use of his name. 'I help you get your magic back, if you promise me one wish when we succeed.'

I pinched my eyes closed as the agony rose to new, impossible heights. 'And... if you fail?'

Killian's face was set into a straight, stoic scowl. 'Then I get nothing, and you are... *free*.'

There was something more in the way Killian spoke that proved to me this outcome displeased him. It was all becoming too much. People became desperate on their deathbed. How binding was this deal if I agreed? He could break it, as could I. But Killian had just reached inside my chest and offered to save those I felt responsible for.

'Say it, say yes, and it will be done.'

I was in no right mind to know what I was saying, nor contemplate the consequences. But I opened my dried lips, and the words limped out of me like a dying animal. 'Yes.'

## Chapter Seventeen - Killian



'Then I get nothing, and you are... free.'

It wasn't entirely a lie.

What I did not tell Ernest was what his freedom would mean. He would know what would become of him once the venom truly took hold of his body and mind. Before the turn of the sixth night, he would become a Mer.

And I would kill him, the promise of a wish or not.

Even after all these years and that song still haunted me. It followed me, lingering over my shoulder like a shadow. The same song my mother sang as she held me over the cliff's edge, the same song which accompanied me as I was thrown into the ocean, barely holding onto life.

Ernest parted his ocean-blue eyes and looked me dead in the soul. The grace of the rising moon had finally slipped into the room. It skipped over the patches of silver scales which pierced his skin. When he opened his mouth and replied, it was the only sound that mattered.

'Yes.'

His answer was all the beast inside of me required. Across my chest the ink shifted, bleeding down my arm until it melted across Ernest's skin. I watched it crawl, twisting around his wrist into a band to signify the bargain made between a desperate human and a powerful beast.

It was done.

Ernest had just solidified himself as the most important being in my world, my universe. Without him retrieving his magic, I would never find peace. For the first time in a long time, I had hope. Hope to break myself away from this existence. And it rested in the hands of a human prince who so happened to enjoy stabbing me.

'What... have... you... done?' he asked, jaw trembling as he regarded the tattoo inked over his skin.

'Given you a chance,' I replied, although in truth I didn't know how Ernest would benefit from this bargain. Time would tell, I was sure.

The final scraps of light bled from the room, drawn out over the horizon as the sun finally set. Ernest opened his mouth, undoubtedly ready to scream at me, but no sound came out. His skin melted away, caught on the breeze, revealing the creature beneath. The Mer.

I unleashed my own beast, allowing it to press outwards. Ernest watched from his place on the floor as I changed. Even amidst the storm of agony he suffered as his body broke and shattered, giving room for his monster to free itself, he watched me with awe glittering on his handsome face.

My trousers tore at the seams as my tentacles broke free. I lifted higher into the air beneath their form. My neck split in parts, allowing for gills. My eyes sharpened, a thin film passing over them. My ears lengthened to points, and my teeth sharpened. All the while, Ernest watched, awe morphing into the horrifying realisation he had just made a deal with the very thing all the stories, all the myths, warned him against.

'Karakos help me.'

# Chapter Eighteen - Ernest

400

I had never watched a person turn into a Mer before. The bitten were usually killed before they ever were given the chance to change. For the Mer who had been found, tangled in fishing nets or washed up on the shore, bodies already torn by something with a larger jaw, they were quickly dealt with.

Now it was happening to me.

I often wondered if they were scared when the change happened, but I quickly understood that there was no room for fear when there was only pain.

Someone could have taken a blade to my throat or doused my body in oil and set me on fire. None of it would take away from the feeling of my body being torn apart by the monster lurking beneath.

My legs burned. I reached for them, gouging my skin away in hopes that it would starve the agony. But where skin peeled back beneath my newly forged talons, scales remained, as silver as the crown my father had worn upon his head. If I'd expected blood and flesh to pool around me, it didn't. Instead it disappeared like mist, caught on the rising breeze.

Killian towered over me, a shadow cast over the room of writhing tentacles and hard-muscled skin. He was horrifying, unearthly, frightening, but above all... beautiful. His hair caught in the winds as a storm whipped up outside. Salt-spray glistened across his skin, making him glimmer like a rare crystal.

I opened my mouth to beg, to demand that he freed me from this unending pain, but the only sound that came out was a starved gasp for air.

There was an abundance of it around me, but it was as though my body couldn't inhale it.

On either side of my neck, folds of skin flapped. I skimmed my fingers over them, feeling the strange parting. Gills. I had seen enough fish to know what they were. I could see the same markings on Killian's neck, three long open wounds as though I had reached up and raked my claws down him.

'It is time to say goodbye to your home,' Killian said, his cool shadow engulfing me.

I couldn't form a word to reply. My body spasmed, my lungs aching from the lack of air. I began tearing at my chest, praying that if I cut myself open enough I could breathe. But all I did was continue to tear my skin away, revealing armoured scales that spread around my chest in silver patches.

A sinuous form slithered beneath my arching back. I grasped for it, feeling the sticky flesh of his tentacle. It wrapped around my waist, constricting until I felt every single one of his suckers attach themselves to my skin. Then I was hoisted from the ground.

He moved us across the room. I was vaguely aware of the banging beyond the door but cared little for it. In fact, I hoped the acolytes did break in.

Which fate was better, whose hands would be kinder?

'Look at me,' Killian demanded so suddenly, it snatched my attention. 'Look at nothing else but me.'

I didn't want to listen to him, but there was a lure that overcame my senses. Losing myself to the impossibility of him was the only thing keeping me conscious. How his skin melded seamlessly with the russet flesh of his lower half. How his tentacles shifted like thick snakes. Even the black tattooed lines of Karakos seemed darker, as though they too moved.

His tentacles spread over walls and across knocked-over furniture, tugging us from the room until we were outside on the balcony. The stone barrier cracked beneath his grip. A chunk tumbled down the sheer drop beneath it. The world was painted in utter darkness. Even the stars did not come out to watch me. I could hear every crash of wave, feel the shift of sand far beneath the ocean. I longed for it, desperately.

A ship hovered out in the water. It was at a strange angle, almost tipped over like a child's toy. Where the sails would have been was now a sheet of fire which reflected across the dark surface of the water.

It was under attack, and I knew by what.

'Ernest!' a voice called out from behind us, spoiled with desperation. I drew my gaze from the sinking ship, searching for the man who called my name.

I looked over the muscled shoulder of my captor to find Hadeon. He stood in the doorway of the room as a wave of red-robed acolytes moved around him, weapons drawn. I couldn't place the emotion on his face. It was sadness, it was fury, it was disgust and regret. The one emotion that did not reveal itself was the one I searched for—love.

My jaw spasmed, my gums burning as sharpened teeth grew from them. Instead of calling for Hadeon, I opened my mouth and hissed. I felt only anger, only *rage*. In that moment, if Killian hadn't been holding me, I would have crawled across the space between us and buried my teeth into his fucking neck.

But Hadeon disappeared from view as the world seemed to tilt. Turning my attention back to the view of the ocean, I noticed it was vertical. Killian slithered down the rock face beneath the castle, moving us closer and closer to the safety of the water.

A weightless feeling lifted my stomach as he thrust us away from the castle's wall and dove the final drop, plunging into the waiting darkness. I found myself smiling, eyes closed as I willingly waited to meet the bliss of the very thing my body craved.

Water.

Freedom.

The force of our bodies colliding with the ocean tore us apart. As suddenly as I was gripped in his embrace, I was spinning in a vortex of pure darkness. I opened my mouth, lungs flooding with salt water. Instead of drowning in it, though, it was as though I was breathing for the first time.

As the currents dragged me deeper into the abyss, I watched the remaining parts of my human figure melt away. Skin slipped from my body, leaving behind a form I'd never known. At my waist, my hips widened, forming a base for a long, silver-scaled tail which had replaced my legs. Even in the dark of the ocean, it caught the faint glimmers of lights, glowing as though a star lingered beneath each scale.

I blinked, watching the darkness lift as a film shifted over my eyes. Suddenly, I saw everything in bright colour. Schools of fish dispersed around us. Eels peered out of caverns amongst the bed of coral beneath me.

The water here was shallow, the rock bed my castle was built upon just beside me. The swell of waves moved me closer to it, but my tail seemed to shift, keeping me in place.

My body had never felt so strong, so powerful.

Killian was suddenly before me, coming into focus, his dominant form parting the darkness. His hair floated languidly around his shoulders, each tentacle slithering as they caught currents and kept him in place. And he looked at me, studying me with the intent of an artist examining their subject. I practically felt his eyes shift over my new body, moving across flesh and scale as though he had taken a finger and touched me.

The moment was ruined when arrows began raining down around us. I looked up, hissing, only to watch the cloud of wooden shafts and pointed metal pierce the water. The acolytes were attacking.

My body was suddenly pushed by an invisible hand. The jolt was so great that my neck snapped backwards. It was as though the water played with me as it pleased. But it wasn't the ocean—it was Killian controlling the currents.

His hand was outstretched, the water around his fingers spinning into a vortex, the trident gripped in his other hand. It was his magic, wrapping around my body like a leash, pulling me to him. His fingers barely grazed my side before I lashed out, smacking my muscular tail into his side. The suddenness of my attack severed his magic, enough for me to put some distance between us.

'Do you *want* to die?' Killian asked, his voice muffled by the water, but still audible. Furious bubbles formed beneath his mouth, seemingly catching each word in a physical form.

I had wanted earlier. Now that the pain was no longer inflicting my body, I didn't. I had survived it, changed, and now I felt... powerful, clearheaded, and above all, *hungry*.

My head snapped, searching. I couldn't see the humans, but there was a new sense overcoming my mind, one I was not familiar with. An instinct that I could easily give myself over to.

'No,' Killian commanded, watching me with suspicion. Did he know what I desired?

Humans were close. Or what my mind now saw them as—food. Sustenance. The currents told me of their helpless bodies kicking out as they attempted not to drown. Screams were stifled as water filled their

lungs. It was as though the ocean whispered to me, warning me of the helpless beings who fell from a burning ship.

I not only wanted them, I *needed* them.

Killian became an afterthought as my attention shifted. My tail flipped, my webbed fingers pushing against the water until I faced the direction of the chaos. Killian's tentacles reached out for me, but this time I was faster, stronger. He didn't expect it. One thrash of my tail and I shot through the abyss, my lithe body like the arrows the acolytes shot down from the castle above.

I was aware he followed me, attempting to catch me with his limbs and his magic. But every attempt was thwarted by my need for food. And it didn't take long to find it. Debris from the ship sunk to the depths, almost too slowly. It was as though the Below slowed time down. Bodies sunk too, limbs reaching up to the surface as though they hoped someone would reach down and save them.

No one would.

Fire glowed far above as the remaining ship continued to burn. The water told me of those who struggled, who attempted to swim to safety. But they were not the only ones here.

Out the corner of my eye I saw other tailed figures, their thin and bony bodies made of scale. Mer. A countless number of them. An army. They swam so fast it was as though they were nothing but a blur in the darkness. I turned back to see if it was Killian who followed, but he was nowhere in sight. Where I expected him to be was only empty space, hardly penetrated by the rising moon. Until something swam at me so fast, I didn't have the chance to move.

A force slammed into my body. If I had air in my lungs, it would've knocked it out of me. Water streamed past my ears as I was dragged backwards. I gripped onto whatever had hit me, burying my talons into soft flesh. The screech that followed was so violent, so full of pain that it snapped me out of my trance of hunger.

It was a Mer, forcing me out the way of the potential feast.

The one grasping me let go and swam back into the fray. Only the ribbons of dark blood that slithered in the water around me was proof it was ever there. It was all over my claws, smudged across the thin skin that had grown between my fingers.

The Mer were all snatching drowning humans with their teeth and dragging them away. I couldn't explain it, but I understood their instinct, the reason they acted. They, like me, wanted to eat. And there was only enough... *food* to go around.

Far above, another human hit the water. I looked up, seeing little legs kick, hands clawing at the ocean, dress floating around the body like a cloud of blush pink and white. I was not the only one to notice. Every Mer around me sensed the innocent life fall into the water, sharing the same heightened awareness. Deep within, the hunger still remained, but it was manageable. Controllable. Bearable. But that wasn't the same for the Mer who raised their heads, sharp teeth flashing.

There was no room to think, only act. My tail kicked out beneath me, forcing me upwards. Planks of wood and the dead drifted into my way. I pushed it all away, clearing a path. All around me the Mer followed, giving chase to who could reach the little child first.

She turned in the water, golden hair fanning out around her face, eyes wide as she watched a swarm of Mer swim towards her. I couldn't hear her scream over the pounding in my ears, but watched as her mouth parted, bubbles exploding out as air left her lungs.

A Mer shot into level beside me, snarling, teeth snapping, starved hunger in its eyes. It were as close as I was, talons ready to pierce the child and take it for supper. I forced as much strength as possible into my tail, willingly my new body to aid me.

Karakos. Please. Spare her.

A blur of gold speared from the water. I barely blinked before it smashed into the Mer's side. I couldn't fathom what it was, until I noticed the three points of metal explode out of its torso. Following behind the trident was Killian, power crackling around his body.

Every Mer in the vicinity expelled the same screech. The song of fear—I understood it as though they spoke the same language as me. I didn't stop swimming for the child, I wouldn't. Killian had offered the distraction, heeding my prayer to the very god who was his patron. He shot me a look of distrust. I knew why. I had left him, ready to give into the song inside of me, the hunger. There was no time to tell him I was in control. I just had to hope he read the truth in my eyes, the humanity I clung so desperately to.

Humanity which would fade if I did not save myself.

The little girl kicked out, burying her little nails into me. I didn't care, not as I swam her towards the surface, only stopping when we broke the Above where the smoke-ridden air graced my wet skin.

Ocean water and sick burst out of her mouth, covering me. She was sobbing, gasping out, fearing that I would bite her, turn her, destroy her. It was chaos above the water. Smaller boats lingered across the surface, surrounded by the burning and destroyed ship that sunk at their side.

The air was hot. Suffocating. Heavy. It was as though I held my breath, except it was not air I held onto but water. It wouldn't last. I had to find safety for the little girl who was more akin to a feral cat, scratching and fighting me.

'I won't hurt you,' I said, over and over, praying she would believe me. Only when she stopped scratching and smacking her little fists into me did I realise that maybe she did.

Shouts sounded over the water. They came from a smaller boat which overspilled with people. It rocked violently as desperate people tried to climb inside. I knew they saw me when a spear was raised in my direction and the warning screams sounded.

'Mer. Mer. It has a child. Mer!'

I couldn't care for anything but getting this little girl to them. Even if they would pierce me with the spear, bury it into my body and kill me, let them. It would be a good way to go, if it meant saving her. So, I got as close as I could.

'Can you swim?' I asked, my voice drying out to a rusty groan.

The little girl looked at me, eyes searching my face. Her hair was stuck to her cheeks, wrapped around her neck like vines strangling stone. Her lips were trembling, her chin coated in vomit. I wondered if she recognised me, if that was why she calmed in the grasp of the very monster she had grown up fearing.

She nodded her head faintly, but that was enough for me.

I pushed her out towards the boat, feeling the water echo as she kicked her legs and paddled her arms out. To my relief, people reached for her, snatching her from the water just before her head went under again.

Relief was a strange thing. It unfurled within me as I watched them haul her up and smack her back, forcing her to cough up yet more ocean water. So many of them were looking at me, drinking in the view of a Mer who had helped them, not attacked them.

I had no doubt they recognised me.

A shape shot up from the water beneath me. I prepared for another Mer to attack, but it was the vision of white hair, orange tentacles and tattooed skin that came into view. Killian blocked the boat and the little girl, his proud frame swallowing anything behind him.

'What were you thinking?' he shouted, face contorted in anger and something else...

panic, perhaps?

'Saving... her.' I lifted a hand and pointed to the boat. 'They're still my people.'

He could barely form a word as he reached out and grasped my upper arm with his hand. I should have hated how he held me like he had the right to, but there was something mesmerising about his large hands and how his fingertips could meet around my arm.

'Forget them,' he spat, 'they would murder you the second they get the chance. You are their enemy, you're risking your—'

Killian didn't finish his sentence. He couldn't. The only warning was the *thwack* as something sharp shot through the air. He looked down, eyes trailing to something in his chest. It took me a moment to follow his stare, unsure what I was going to find.

A spear protruded through his sternum. Blood and water mixed together, blue as gemstones. Killian's grasp on my arm faltered. He then laughed at the absurdity of the spear piercing him—the same one which had been lifted in my direction as I saved the child.

'Three times in one day... a record...' Killian's eyes rolled into his skull. He slipped beneath the water and gave me the perfect view of the man who had thrown it. He stood on the edge of the boat, the little girl at his side, finger raised. Instead of thanks across her face, it was hatred. Vile, boiling disdain.

She spoke a single word that skipped over the ocean and slammed into my chest as though she too had thrown a spear into me. 'Monster.'

## Chapter Nineteen - Killian

the state

Ernest swam towards me, his body haloed by the firelight overwhelming the Above. His scales were so silver that they reflected the ocean's colours, naturally darkening to a storm grey the further he dove. His mouth was split apart, my name caught on his cherry red lips.

I found myself reaching for him, but it was no good. It should have been my trident I grasped, since it would heal me... but my body refused me. I could not remove my hands from the spear embedded in my chest. Blood twisted in ribbons, leaving a trail as I sank. The deeper I descended, the more I could see the Mer return to finish their feast. They sliced through the murky depths, just above Ernest, sinking teeth into flesh, spreading poison through veins.

Never had I failed. They should all be dead, I'd had the chance to kill them all. But my focus had shifted to Ernest, and now I paid the price.

My back finally hit the sandy bed. A cloud dispersed around me, spoiling the view for a few long seconds. Ernest waded through it, talons gouging a path through the cloud of debris until he reached me.

'I've got you,' he said.

I marvelled at the genuine concern he held. He was so utterly focused on me that he didn't notice the singing which began to thrum through the water. A voice spoiled with magic that did not belong to it.

Aleanna—it had to be. She was close.

The pressure of water was harsher deep in the Below. No human could survive these depths. Their body would implode, their lungs caving inwards, eyes bulging, brain matter popping like grapes between teeth. I felt it too, the water forcing me on all sides, pressing me like a million unseen hands. It was both comforting and horrifying.

That feeling ceased the moment Ernest's cool fingers brushed my arm. Suddenly, there was only him. Not the usual reaction to a touch, not the thundering heart, racing mind and internal disgust.

It was...alluring.

'Tell me what to do,' Ernest spluttered, bubbles forming before his lips as his hands wrapped around the shaft of the spear. There was panic in his voice, proved by the way his blue eyes darted over me.

'I will... will heal,' I said, snarling as a jolt of unfamiliar pain unfurled across my chest. I too wrapped my fingers around the shaft, just shy of Ernest's ivory claws. I looked him deep in his eyes, my lip curling over my teeth. My tentacles contracted beneath me, some wrapping around Ernest as though this time I could keep him from fleeing.

He showed no sign he would leave my side. His entire focus was on me, and not for a second did he look away.

'Pull it free,' I said before another spasm of pain radiated across my chest. My breath hitched in my throat, caught as Ernest wasted no time in pulling. The spear came free with little resistance. I could feel the spearhead's blade severing my insides, ripping me apart no matter the muscles or organs it passed. It nicked the bones of my ribs, leaving deep scars upon them.

A piercing scream split through the ocean. It wasn't until the spear was pulled free that I realised it was me who had screamed.

Ernest kicked his tail, forcing himself towards me and pressed a palm over the open wound. Blood twisted around his fingers, dancing as though it were eels familiarising themselves with new coral.

I couldn't focus on anything but his touch. How soft his palm was against my chest, or how I could sense his heart beating in every tip of his fingers.

'Why are you not healing?' Ernest snapped me out of my trance. He briefly lifted his hand, allowing for the pumping of blue blood to mist the water between us. I looked down at myself, half in wonder, the other half in disbelief.

I blinked as my eyes grew heavy. It took considerable effort to keep my eyes open. My muscles seemed to relax as though a wave of peace passed over my body, devouring any and all pain. My fingers flexed, unsure what

to do without my trident. I felt the thud of it landing against the sand beside me, as though the ocean's bed was my skin.

'Give it time... I need my—'

'Killian, it's not healing!' Ernest clapped his hands back over the wound, applying more pressure.

I would have said something, but when I looked to him I could hardly make out his features. My eyes blurred, darkening at the corners. The sensation was so strange I laughed, a bubble forced out of my lungs.

Had Karakos finally given up on me? After years of grave wounds, this was how I died? It was comical.

Ernest was shouting out, his panic swallowed up by the devouring water. 'What do I do, Killian? Tell me what to do!'

My eyes wouldn't open. I tried, but failed just as I had failed in saving the humans, in killing the Mer. Was this my punishment? Did Karakos know I made a deal with the very monsters I vowed to destroy?

After all these years, it took a little prince to ruin me.

'Don't leave me.' A new pleading began, a cool pressure resting on my chest. I managed to look, if only a sliver. Ernest had rested his head on my chest, his lithe body curled up over mine. He was repeating the same chant over and over, his words breaking, the gaps between them becoming breathy and frantic. 'I don't know... Killian. I'm scared. Don't... fucking... leave... me.'

A burst of energy rushed through my body. It was only a scrap, but enough to lift my arm. I draped it over Ernest's body, delighting in the warmth of him, the pressure of something solid, something real.

'Sing... for me,' I said, delighting in the real press of something against my skin.

He lifted his head, eyes finding mine. Even in my state I recognised the ridiculous notion of my request. If I expected him to refuse me, he didn't. Instead, he opened his mouth, gills flaring as water entered his bloodstream and morphed into valuable oxygen.

I closed my eyes, smiling to the dark water above, as the song began. There was no requirement for me to request which one I wished to hear. It seemed Ernest knew what I needed, the comfort it would grant me.

It was my mother's song. But it had never sounded so beautiful as it spilled from his mouth.

# PART III DAY TWO OF INFECTION



## Chapter Twenty - Ernest

the state

As daylight crested over the ocean's surface, my scales fell away like stars caught on a breeze. The change stabbed through my core as the penetrating rays of the sun broke apart the murky dark, filling the sea with its grace.

It was painless. Unlike when the creature within seemed to claw out of my human flesh, my tail simply drifted away like foam caught in a current. My silver tail kicked out, scales coming loose with ease. They fluttered to the sandy bed, catching on a coral reef where they glinted like lost jewels.

For hours I had been holding Killian's limp form as blood oozed from his wound. His eyes had not opened, nor did he move. If it wasn't for the heartbeat, no matter how faint, pattering through his chest, I would have believed him dead. But still, I didn't leave him. With one arm wrapped around his waist, the other grasping the trident I had pulled out of a dead Mer's body, I was able to keep the rest of them away. Every now and then the slick body of a lone shark, grey as stone and with watchful eyes, caught the scent of Killian's blood and came to look.

Although all those dangers of the Below mattered little when my body began to change with dawn. Panic may have sunk claws into my lungs if water hadn't begun to fill them. With the little strength I had left, I pumped hard with my fading tail, focusing on the halo of light across the water's surface.

I didn't need to look down to know my tail had turned back to legs—legs which kicked out, the muscles aching. Suddenly, Killian felt as though

he weighed a thousand tonnes. Gone was the strength of the Mer as I transformed back into the meek and pathetic prince I had been before.

Fresh, sea-kissed air flooded my lungs as I broke the Above. My head ached, my chest constricting with the need for air. Water and bile erupted out of my mouth, painting my chin. All I could do was search the horizon for some hope, something I could get to before Killian dragged me back under—or worse, the ocean's monsters came for me.

An island waited in the distance like a stain on the horizon. The sun rose behind it, casting the mass of land in a shroud of shadow. It was close, and my only hope to get onto land. So, I took it.

'Killian,' I gritted out as though his name were a curse. 'If you don't open your damned eyes and help me, I swear I'll—'

*I will what?* Kill him? He was already dying. Before, when I had stabbed him and cracked his skull open, he had healed quickly. This time was different. It had been hours and his wound hardly healed. He was unconscious more than he was not.

All Killian managed to do was moan in response, reminding me he was alive but weak. His skin had taken on an ashen shade, his lashes fluttering to give hints of the purple hue of his eyes. All the while the wound leaked azure blood into the water as though the ocean fed off him.

I focused on my goal, refusing to release Killian or his trident, both of which felt as though I was carrying sacks of stone through the depths. The muscles in my legs burned, my ankles screamed, and yet I didn't stop until the brush of shallow sands tickled my feet.

Naked, exhausted, and delirious, I fell back on the shore with Killian laid out beneath my arm. Gentle waves lapped at my feet, almost as if they were longing to lure me back in. The need to draw my legs up and put as much distance between me and the depths was a siren call.

'Ern—Ernest.'

Every muscle in my neck ached as I lifted my head. I didn't care for my appearance until I caught the flash of my exposed and very naked body covered in nothing but patches of damp sand.

'Give...give me my trident.'

No shit. 'So you can kill me the second you heal? I don't think so!'

Killian attempted to reply, but his eyes fluttered shut again.

The heat was unbearable but still I could not bring myself to move. Circling in the sky above, white-grey gulls dove among the shadows cast

down upon me. It was a miracle a fisherman or civilian hadn't stumbled upon us yet. Like me, Killian had shed his Mer form. Heat rose to my cheeks as my eyes trailed down his muscled body to the—

No. Focus.

'Lera.'

My neck practically snapped as I faced Killian. He had moaned the name of the Goddess of Fear, pleading to her as if they could save him. Or perhaps he was hoping the goddess would spare him from the feeling of fear as he faced his end. There was something in the way Killian said the name, like the begging of a small and frightened child, which finally had me sitting up.

'The gods are gone...' I was breathless, lost, and frankly on the verge of vomiting. 'They won't help you...'

'Lera...' he repeated. 'Lera.'

'What?' I leaned over him, noticing the blue tinge of his lips. But Killian's eyes closed and didn't open again, no matter how I shook at his shoulder. 'Fuck.'

I drank in my surroundings for the first time, attempting to map out exactly where we were. Part of my lessons were on the geography of Ire and its neighbouring islands. Most of them I had visited in my youth, until Father grew too panicked to let me out of his sight.

'Thalasapoli.' The name came to me instantly.

Although I hadn't stepped foot on the shores for almost ten years, I would never forget this place. The city on the sea. Nestled upon the relatively flat island, it got its name from old sailors who had passed and believed the city was built upon the ocean. Only when one got close to the land did they find the truth. Thalasapoli was known for its close-knit buildings made from white stone and terracotta roofs, but mostly for its infamous temple. The temple of Lera... that was what Killian was saying. It was what bathed us in shadow.

Tall stone pillars rose like sentinels, carrying the weight of the pitched roof above. It was built almost a thousand years ago, when our ancestors believed that there was a god for almost every possible thing. Beauty, wisdom, love, even a god of terror. The temple of Lera, the Goddess of Fear, was nothing but a relic from the old world, a place believed to be haunted by old spirits of vengeful gods long forgotten.

Suddenly it made sense as to what Killian mumbled before he lost consciousness. Even in his suffering, he knew that the best place for two naked men to hide was in the old temple of a goddess.

The next challenge was getting him there. And the answer came in the form of a long-suffering bray in the distance. Because another detail Thalasapoli was best known for was the donkeys which had overpopulated the dense forest in the heart of the island. One of whom was currently looking down and scrutinising us with its beady black eyes.



LERA WAS BELIEVED to be cursed by Karakos himself during the infamous time of The Great Betrayal. Legends became myths, myths became stories, stories became mere whispers. With every tale, it was best to take it with a pinch of salt. Karakos, furious that Lera mutated humanity's devotion to him into fear, scorned the goddess by splitting his power apart and turning her into a donkey. Because who would fear such a creature?

Turns out, I did.

As the donkey rocked up the narrow path, Killian draped over its back, there was more than one moment I believed it would simply fall sideways and down the steep rock face to the beach we had not long left.

By the time we climbed the last step my skin was sun-sore, my bare feet blistered, and my ego utterly shattered. By the fourteenth donkey that seemed to laugh as we passed, it slowly eradicated any care I had that I was naked in front of the world.

Thank the gods, the temple was cool. The white stone absorbed the sun's heat, the shadows of the countless pillars giving us a respite from the sun. With the little strength I had left I helped Killian from the donkey, but ended up half dropping him into a heap against one of the pillars. The donkey departed before I could even thank it.

My heart sank like a stone in the ocean when I saw Killian's injury in this new light. The flesh around the torn flesh was red and angry. I had thought the smell had been coming from our mount, but it oozed from his infected skin.

It should have been easy to turn my back on him. But something was stopping me.

'Killian,' I said, hoping my voice would stir him. All it did was cause his lashes to flutter, his chest to heave as though breathing was painful. Each and every one of his muscles rippled like the surface of water. Karakos, he was a marvel. But a dying one. 'Killian. I command that you open your eyes.'

I had stabbed the man in the neck. In the eye. And both times his skin had knitted together. What had changed? Soon the day would pass to night and the moon would bathe Ire in its silver light. Time was running out. It was... day two of the infection which meant I had, at most, four more moons until it overcame me. I needed to survive this, and for that I needed Killian.

Even if it pained me to admit it.

No matter how much I begged and commanded, Killian didn't open his eyes. I barely obtained a thready groan before his head lolled to the side. A lump of worry lodged in my throat before I forced it down with a hard swallow. 'Fine. I... I am—' *I am what?* I was naked, infected and frankly barely holding it together. 'I'm going to find help. A healer. Medicine. Anything. If you can hear me... do *not* leave this temple.'

What I did not add was *I need you*.

I left him in the shadows of the pillar, searching the barren temple for anything to cover my body. Far below the hillside, deep in the town of Thalasapoli, I could hear the bustle of life. The clatter of carts over of busy streets, the sound of mundane chaos. Someone there would help.

It took some time until I found stiff sheets neatly folded beneath a stone tablet. Like all temples, those who still favoured the old ways would leave supplies for people embarking on pilgrimages. It seemed, from the crumbs and overturned, emptied water canisters, that Lera didn't have enough followers left to stock up supplies. But the sheet would do, as would the brown rope tie. I draped the sheet around my body, cinching it together at the waist. I was lucky to find plain sandals at the bottom of the pile—a size too big, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

By the time I walked back to the open chamber of the temple's main atrium, Killian hadn't moved a muscle. I took the small sheet I had found, laid it over his dignity and offered him a final warning not to move. As I turned to leave a firm hand reached out and grabbed my ankle.

'Please... my trident...' Killian begged, his narrowed eyes overspilling with anxiety. His pale lips parted, shaking as though he attempted to say

something else. His fingers peeled away with ease, falling helplessly upon his powerful thigh. 'Give it to me.'

There was a flash of fury in his eyes, as though it was the last thread holding him alive.

My eyes snapped in the direction where I had hidden it, just on the off chance Killian miraculously healed, woke, and used it. I didn't trust him, not completely. Witnessing what he was capable of while wielding it frightened me. Pulling it from the Mer's corpse only made me realise what would become of me if given the chance.

'Never mind your weapon. You *will* die, Killian. I need to find you a healer, someone or something that will help.'

His eyes flared wide, and to my surprise he did not ask for it again. The corner of his lip seemed to quirk up at my comment. It was so quick I blamed the shadows cast over him for toying with my mind. Except something told me his smile was one of the most genuine emotions he had showed me thus far.

Sweat glistened across his skin. Dark shadows formed beneath his tired eyes. When he spoke again, it was as though every word took great effort. 'Death... would save you from giving me that... wish.'

'Too bad, you made a deal to help me. I'll make sure you fulfil it.' I snatched the spare bundle of cloth, forced it above his leaking wound, and re-positioned his hand over it. 'Keep holding this, it will help stifle too much blood loss.'

Killian's eyes rolled back into his skull, his breathing evened. I wasn't sure he was sleeping but this time I said the three words I had held back. There was no point in hiding the truth.

'I need you.'

## Chapter Twenty-One - Killian

to the

I was dying. Finally.

My body refused to heal, as though Karakos had finally turned his attention to another. I sensed the god slipping away, blissfully moving his affections to the little prince. The trident would help me, but then again, did I truly want its aid? Whereas others might suffer in knowledge of their own end, I delighted in knowing mine was near. This was closest it had been since my mother ran a blade over my throat.

This was what I had wanted for years... far too many to count.

Death once scared me. It had when I was a young boy, held over the cliff as my lifeblood fell like rain into the ocean. But now, I realised, how could I fear freedom? Peace?

But—

I fought to open my eyes, watched as Ernest walked away. The sun flickered around his frame, each ray brushing his figure like greedy hands. And there was something, deep in my chest, that called upon me.

Get up.

My body ached as I pushed myself from the pillar, the bundle of blood-soaked cloth falling from my numb hand. I couldn't leave him. Maybe it was the bargain we made, or perhaps my own internal desire to feel his touch, but I refused to give up.

'Er—Ernest, come back.'

He didn't hear me. I barely stood before the weight of the sky pressed down on my shoulders. The mosaic tiles of the floor raced up to greet me, knocking the little wind out of my lungs. There was no pain. I was numb to it. But as my warm blood seeped from my broken flesh, filling the old worn grooves of the floor like rivers of azure water, I closed my eyes and saw a face waiting for me in the dark.

Not the taunting glower of my mother, but the red lips, blue eyes and obsidian hair that made up Ernest. And he was saying something. Three words that played over and over again in my dreamscape.

I need you. I need you. I need you.

## Chapter Twenty-Two - Ernest

to the

Terracotta tiles baked beneath the midday heat, the scent of scorched clay and salt lingered on the breeze. There was little natural shade on the street I wandered, only what was offered by the many stalls that lined each side. Smart, I thought. The perfect way to entice those with coin weighing their pockets to stand in the shade and marvel at the offerings laid out on the tables. It no doubt sped them up, fuelling the purchasers to make rash decisions and part with more coin as a result.

If I had coin with me, I would have come away with arms full of things. Jars of olives in brine next to bunches of fresh grapes still on the vine. Pottery from plates to elaborate bowls, painted with scenes of humans and gods, decorated with intricate swirls and other shapes that clearly took the painter a while to finish. One depicted the face of Karakos—the same one inked onto Killian's skin—which reminded me why I was in the city of Thalasapoli.

Medicine, or at best, a human blessed by the Goddess of Vitality. But medicine was more likely.

The crowd was large, making moving swiftly impossible. I fought my way through bodies, mumbling apologies under my breath. All the while I looked out for flashes of red, proof that the acolytes of Gorgana had spread their reach to more than just my Kingdom. It was also gossip I listened for —news that Thalasapoli had learned of what happened to me, or my father.

All I got were snippets of normal life. What they planned to feast upon that night, which didn't help with my own hunger. One small gaggle even swapped tales so personal it made me blush.

I guessed they either had not heard about the happenings in Ire, or didn't care. It could have been the latter, as my father and I had never done much for places beyond Ire. We kept to ourselves mainly, unless Father required something from neighbouring islands. The further the island, the less my father had cared for them. Thalasapoli was the closest to Ire, which meant they benefited from our wealth and trade. There was hardly a street, hillside, or dusty track which was not a stone's throw away from a dwelling.

I was so lost to the chaos of the bustling noisy crowd that I didn't notice when a man shadowed me. Not until he was inches too close, that his breath itching over the back of my neck.

'Now you look like a man in need of lemons.' The street vendor practically yelled into my ear, causing me to turn around. But, not wanting to entertain a conversation, I smiled politely and moved on.

'Not lemons then,' he persisted. 'What about the juiciest, ripest tomatoes that I grew on my own vines?'

I kept moving forwards, focusing on getting through the Thalasapoli main street. 'No thank you.'

'Ah, indecisive. If you have coin, then there is something you desire. And I think I know what you're after.' The vendor skipped into step with me, which only proved he was not a vendor at all. No seller left their stall with the constant threat of thieves and pickpockets. Nor would a vendor think it wise to stalk a customer when hundreds more passed easily by. I tasted the scam as though I had taken a bite from that lemon he had first offered me.

'I desire nothing,' I said, tipping my head. 'Good day, sir.'

He hardly flinched at the snap behind the title. He was a leech, thirsting for coin which I certainly did not have. 'Oh, come on. What about a hearty woman? Or a lustrous man, whatever it is a beautiful soul like you desires? I could give you both if that is what whets your appetite.'

I stopped dead in my tracks, practically causing the man to walk into my back.

'I have no coin to spend, nothing to offer in return for the services you are forcing down my throat.' There was no concealing the bite in my tone. 'Again, thank you, but no.'

His expression changed like a storm on the winds. Wiry thick brows drew down at the centre, his weathered skin creased around his dull blue eyes. 'No coin? That's okay. I have means that would supply you with a pocket full.'

I didn't dare begin to contemplate what exactly those *means* were. But before I took another step, his fingers snatched my wrist, yanking me back as I attempted to put distance between us. 'You look lost, little lamb. Need a shepherd to guide you on your way?'

The Mer within stirred. Deep, *deep* within. I knew it was the infection because never had I retaliated with such a need to open my mouth, snap my teeth around a person's jugular, and feast. Perhaps the man saw the feral anger in my eyes because he released my wrist and faltered. Then his eyes flickered down to my waist. I felt the tug of something small. A hand.

I spun around to find a little dirty-faced child reaching into the folds of my sheet. So that was what the man had pestered me for. It was all a distraction. The street urchin met my eyes, clearly frightened he was caught mid act. He turned to run, fast legs kicking up dust as he bolted.

'Hey!' I shouted, unsure why. It was a natural reaction to being stolen from, even if I had nothing to take. 'Stop!'

Heads whipped around, noticing me and the urchin I shouted at. It seemed the crowd took that moment to spring into action, but not when I'd been accosted by a strange man. Strong arms reached out, grasping the child from fleeing. I looked back to search for his master, only to find the space in the street where he had stood completely empty.

'Let me go!' the child screamed, matted hair falling over his eyes whilst he kicked, scratched and pounded little fists against those holding him. 'Bastards. Pricks. Gnats.'

I couldn't stop my smile at the child's vile tongue.

'Took something from you no doubt?' The woman half asked, half assumed. She tightened her grip around the child's scruff. 'Little beggars, you can't be too careful.'

I stood, dumfounded, unsure exactly what to say. If I had something to take, I had no doubt the child would have had it hidden away on his person. But beside the material, the rope and the scraps of patience left, I was empty-handed.

'It's no bother,' I said, shrugging with my arms extended at my sides. 'I have nothing on me for the child to take.'

He was snivelling now, crying fat tears which tracked down his dirty face. I saw fear in his eyes, not from being caught but likely because of the beating his master would give him when he returned to their burrow.

Alas, the woman's hand didn't loosen. 'If not you, then somebody else. Last week one of these urchins stole my dearest Sofia's bracelet. It was sentimental, you know. Family heirloom. Worth a flock of sheep, enough to feed this city during the winter months. Gone, just like that.'

'You're hurting me!' the child wailed, forcing the woman's fingers to shift an inch. I caught a flash of red marks she had left. The wave of fury rose up once again. Regardless of his squirming and pleas, the woman didn't let go.

'Shut it, rat.'

'He said you're hurting him,' I said, finding myself jolting forwards as though I could help pry her hands off him. 'Release your hand.'

In my other life, a person would heed my command. In this one, I was a man on a strange street dressed in a sheet. Not a prince.

'Deserves it and then some. Now we caught him, I'll take him to the guards for a good old-fashioned whipping. Better price to pay than having his fingers taken off one by one. That will teach the—'

'No.' There was no hiding the bite in my tone. As the woman's eyes widened, I had to feign a smile and clear my face of the feral anger building beneath my skin. 'No need to do any of that. He tried to rob me. It will be me who decides the punishment.'

At that the woman's eyes widened, her tongue lapping over her lip with excitement. 'Be sure it leaves a mark. It helps the rest of us identify them the next time they scamper round the streets.'

With a harsh push the little boy was practically thrown at me. I caught him, his frail, thin body crashing into mine. To my surprise, he didn't try and run again. Instead, he clutched onto my robe with shaking fists, his face buried in the folds of the material.

Only when the woman had left us, disappearing into the swell of the busy market, did I dare speak. I drew the boy back, kneeling before him but keeping a strong enough hold on his shoulders. 'Regardless of what she thinks I should do, I'm not going to hurt you.'

He mumbled something under his breath, sniffing violently.

'What's your name?' When he didn't reply, I tried another question. 'Do you have any parents?'

'N—no.' His broken little voice shuddered me to the core. A thief, yes, but he was still just a child.

'What about a place you call home?'

He gestured to his feet, suggesting that the street we stood on was as much his home than a building with four walls and a roof.

'You smell funny...' he said, looking up through thick lashes. I recoiled, almost embarrassed at the notion. 'Like the sea.'

There was no stopping my laugh that followed. 'Well, it could be worse.'

'So you're not going to hurt me?' he asked, flinching away, so certain that the answer would be yes.

I shook my head, unable to fathom doing such a thing. 'I wouldn't dream of it.'

The tension eased from the child, if only by a little. He cleared the tears with the back of his hand. Old scars lined it from a cane or whip, perhaps something else. Was this what became of lost children in the streets of my Kingdom? A place my father deemed as kind seemed to hide dark streets in the corners I was never permitted to look.

'My name... is Ernie.'

That stopped me and practically slammed into me with a force that shook my knees. 'That's a handsome name.'

His smile was honest yet fleeting. 'Mama named me after the Prince of Ire. Said it was because when I was born and cried for the first time, the sound was so powerful it made her ears bleed.'

A lump rose in my throat. It took considerable effort to force it back down.

'So, you *do* have a mother?' I returned to the original question, not wanting to dwell on the fact this poor child bore my name.

'Not anymore. She died when I was four.' Which could only have been two years at most, because Ernie looked no older than six. All gangly thin limbs, hollow cheeks and eyes which had seen too much. 'Blood flu. Ate her from the inside out.'

'I am so sorry,' I said, something displeasing tugging in my gut, 'I lost my mother when I was younger too.'

'We could be brothers!' Ernie said, breaking into a smile.

Youth was strange. They found solace in things that adults would crumple beneath.

'Brothers don't steal from one another, do they?'

Ernie dropped his chin to his chest. 'Sorry 'bout that. Master has us taking all sorts of things from people. If we come back empty-handed, we don't get let back in. And...' He stopped himself, gazing off in the direction of the ocean just a few streets east.

'What is it?'

'And if we do come back to him with nothing, he fills bags with stones, ties it around our ankles and throws us into the water for the Mer to feast on.' There it was again, that wave of anger. This time I could not squander it. It made my jaw ache as though my needle-thin teeth would break through. I looked back to the street, searching for the face of the man who had accosted me. Oh how I craved to feel his warm flesh brush against my tongue and—

Stop it.

'How about I make a deal with you?' I said, distracting me from thoughts of torn flesh and blood. 'Call it a trade, if you will.'

Ernie's brow peaked, his lips quirking at the sides. 'Anything, brother.'

I wasn't usually one for encouraging crimes, but it seemed crime was how Thalasapoli ran and who was I to go against the grain? Then again, I was a walking exiled prince with Mer poison infecting my blood. There was no bigger criminal here than me.

'You see, I am in need of a healing salve. Something to help cleanse infections. If, by chance, I can get my hands on one... I have a rather large, rather gold and rather pointy object I could give you... something I am sure your master would quite like and provide you with housing for the rest of your life.'

The more I spoke, the wider the child's eyes became until they were practically two juicy coins settled onto his face.

'Gold?' he repeated, as though that was the only word that mattered. I supposed, to him, it was.

'Yes, and very heavy. Worth more than even I can imagine.'

This was one way of getting rid of a weapon that could be used to harm or kill me. I could tell Killian it was lost at sea. He couldn't blame me, not since I was doing everything to keep him alive.

Why? drifted a voice in the back of my head.

Ernie lifted his hand, cleared the grime down his trousers which only seemed to make them dirtier, then extended it out for me. 'I know where a market stall is that has lots of different medicines. It is where Master makes us steal from if he is ever suffering.'

I scrunched my nose up, screwing my face into a mischievous grin. Then I took his hand and shook it. 'We have a deal then?'

'Yes, we do. I'll need a distraction,' the child said, eyeing the street. 'Something big.'

'A distraction,' I repeated, screwing my lips up in thought. I straightened, reminding myself just how young this child was as I towered over him. Far off in the distance, I heard the braying of a donkey and a plan formed in my mind. 'I think I can do something to cause a distraction.'



IF ONLY FATHER could see me with a horde of wild donkeys at my back and a city before me. It took little effort to create my distraction. A handful of olives picked from the gnarly trees beyond the city's entrance, a few throaty grunts to gather the attention of the wild donkeys, and quick action to entice them through the city's unguarded gates. Once the first few donkeys entered, the rest followed. By the time I was done, I stood in the shadows of a side alley, watching patrons scream as though demons themselves had clawed through the earth and returned to these lands.

Stalls were knocked over. Donkeys feasted on overturned crates of produce and lapped from smashed jugs of goat's milk. Lemons rolled down the inclined street, bouncing like small balls of gold before exploding beneath the stampede of feet and hooves.

Suddenly, I understood why Karakos turned Lera, the Goddess of Fear, into these creatures. Fear was formidable even in the form of donkeys, and the city of Thalasapoli sang with terror.

'Got it, brother.' The voice came from the shadows before Ernie stepped from them. In his hand were countless clay pots and glass vials. I couldn't begin to comprehend exactly what was what.

'Thank you—'

Ernie withdrew back a step, refusing to hand over the goods. 'A deal is a deal, gold for the medicine.'

'You're a sneaky little devil, aren't you?' I said as a donkey barrelled past us, almost laughing at the man it chased.

'The sneakiest,' Ernie replied, springing into step with me as we turned from the bedlam and left it in our wake.

### Chapter Twenty-Three - Killian

the state

I knew Ernest was touching me without conjuring enough energy to open my eyes. It was as though I was not in control of my body. Where his smooth, deft fingers touched, I reacted. My skin rippled like the water of a lake, hardening mounds of muscles dancing where he stroked. He applied pressure to my wound which felt sticky and coated. Still, I could not open my eyes.

'And so the beast wakes.'

What gave it away? I could have been lying here for hours awake. Time was unimportant as it always had been before. *Before*. Was that what my time with Ernest had become? The after? After he drew me to him with his magic. After I carried him from the ocean and laid him in my bed. After he stabbed me, after I saved him and now... after he saved me.

There was a slight spike of disappointment that I still lived. It echoed in my chest, but I ignored it.

I opened my eyes, recognising the shadowed outline of Ernest who knelt at my side. Light haloed him, defining the dark hairs on his head, the curve of his jaw and the perfectly carved lines of his face. He must have given me my trident because I was healing quickly. But then again, the only thing I could feel touching me was his fingers. Nimble and soft, they smudged something warm against my chest.

If I didn't feel both my hearts thumping in tandem, perhaps I would have believed I had finally met my end.

'How much...' My voice was hoarse, my throat sore. I blinked away the crust in my eyes. Every muscle ached as though I had been chewed up by the great Karakos only to be spat back out. 'Have much time have I lost?'

'Is that really the first thing you're going to say?' There was annoyance in Ernest's voice. 'Not "thank you for saving my life" or "are *you* okay, Ernest?"'

It took a moment for my eyes to settle. Fragments of time seemed to click back into place, forming a picture of everything I had missed after the man on the boat had stabbed me. Of all the blurry images in my mind, the only contrast was him.

Ernest Ire.

'How. Long?' I asked again, attempting to sit up from my slouch only to be stopped by his fussing hands. My empty hands flexed, searching for the trident which had to be close. I couldn't completely heal without it. The salve would work its little magic, but it was the trident that kept me animated and powerful.

'Well, evening is fast approaching. I would say we have four hours of daylight left before—' Ernest swallowed what he had to say but my mind filled in the gaps. *Before I become the monster again*. 'So please, for the love of all things good, don't rush yourself. It's been mere minutes since your body decided to regenerate itself.'

His words had me looking down. I was naked of all but the sheet that had been draped over my thighs. Such things would not normally concern me, yet I felt myself flush all the way to my chest. My chest was coated in a pale salve, thick enough to hide the wound beneath. Its sour scent chose that moment to infiltrate my nose. Clay. Donkey milk. Herbs. Olive oil. Lemon. It was similar to what I had plastered on Ernest's Mer bite. By itself, the salve did not have the power to heal me, but it seemed the creature within me felt it sufficient to knit my skin back together.

'All time wasted because you kept my trident from me.'

Ernest was oddly quiet, something which was not usual for him.

'We should get moving whilst I have the energy.'

Strong hands pushed against my shoulders, followed by a stern bark. 'I said *slowly*.'

I found myself listening to his command, not wanting to disappoint.

'The infection was rife. Blood poisoning, I gathered, likely a result of being stabbed through by a rusted blade. The salve has seemed to stave off the infection enough for your body to deal with the rest.'

'You didn't need to do this,' I said, hating the tone I used. More so, hating the way the lines between Ernest's brows furrowed into deep

grooves.

'No, you are so right. I could have left you to rot at the bottom of the ocean. But alas, I have not. We made a deal, or have you already forgotten?'

Heat uncoiled in my chest, spreading out like the opening of wings. 'From trying to cause me pain, to saving me from it. Are you some saint hidden in flesh?'

'*Karakos*,' Ernest swore, throwing his hands up in defeat, the tips of his fingers coated in dried clay. 'Even on your deathbed you're impossible.'

'Coming from the man who stabbed me. Twice.'

A feral glint passed behind his eyes like a storm on the horizon. It darkened the blue, if only for a moment, showing me the Mer lurking in the depths of his body, waiting for the moon to free it. My enemy.

Ernest leaned in, pointed a clay-dried finger in my face and hissed. 'You're making me wish I could stab you a third time. Remind me next time to leave you.'

There won't be a next time.

'Thank you.' Two words had never sounded so forced before, but it caught Ernest off guard enough for him to stifle his threat.

'For?'

I rolled my eyes, which only made Ernest do the same. 'For saving my life.'

'Was that so hard?' His finger lowered, returning back to my chest.

I waited for the repulsion to roll over me, but still it didn't come. Instead of wanting him to remove his hand from me, I had the urge to lay mine atop it, to keep him in place.

'Believe it or not, princeling, but thanking a person for doing something unsolicited is not a custom I'm familiar with.'

Ernest rocked back, stood, and gave me a clearer view of what he was wearing. Perhaps I should not have laughed, but I couldn't stop myself.

'I do not know who you are laughing at,' Ernest said, moving to a jug of water where he dunked his hands inside to clean, 'when all you have to cover yourself is that little scrap of material. Not that you need anything bigger...'

My arms ached as I leaned my weight on them and sat up straighter. I was propped against one of the many pillars, each one constructing Lera's temple. It had been years since I had last visited, back during a time when

believers looked after the sacred place. But like many things, it had become forgotten in time.

Like me, I supposed.

'Are you referring to my cock, princeling?' I asked, tilting my head to the side.

Ernest choked on air, staggering forwards and in turn knocking over the water where it flooded over the mosaic flooring. 'I... I was—'

'I... I...' I mocked as I stood, allowing the scrap of material to fall to the floor like an autumn leaf. 'Unlike you humans, I hold no shame in the length of my cock, nor do I care for hiding it. Do the statues of old gods care to conceal their lengths? No, the carvers felt it important to display them as proudly as their noses or fingers. However, from the way you're averting your gaze like some cross-eyed cat, I can see it's only you who is embarrassed.'

Ernest, in his fluster, snatched the empty jug and thrust it towards me. 'Gods. Have some decency.'

I took it, a deep belly chuckle echoing around the stone temple. 'And what would you have me do with this?'

With a hand over his eyes, fingers slightly parted, he feigned not to look. 'I don't care,' he said. 'Stick it inside, or something. Flashing a prince is a crime punishable by death.'

'Ah. So back to the beginning of this debate. Death. Pray tell, Prince Ernest of Ire, would you string me up, quarter me, hang me?' I paced towards him, one careful step at a time. I enjoyed playing with him. 'Believe me when I tell you I am no stranger to death. In fact, I would go so far to say we are friends. Allies, almost.'

Death was never an ally, but I would almost rather face it than this irritating man.

Ernest stopped at that, lowered his hand and looked me dead in my eyes. I would go so far to believe he looked even further, peering through my mask to the truth beneath. I waited for him to say something, to combat my comment with another spout of sarcasm or disgust. Instead, he took a violently deep breath, relaxed the tension in his fists and then spoke.

'Sundown is soon. I barely think we have time to find Aleanna, get my magic back and save my city by then.' His next breath was riddled with tension, shallow and short. 'The acolytes promised that if I did not return and give them what they want, a child will be sacrificed to Karakos every night. I don't have the time to argue with you.'

The world could have fallen away in that moment. It was as if the hill this temple was built upon leaned too far and cracked and tumbled beneath me. And I was falling. Falling down the cliff, blood raining down with me, all in the name of an ancient goddess who never asked for such a gift.

'You didn't mention this before.'

Winds screamed around the stone temple, echoing the tempest growing within me.

'I didn't exactly have the chance to.'

He was right. Of course, he was. 'Then we know what must be done.'

There was no ignoring the way Ernest began to shake. It started in his legs, moved quickly to his hands and torso. 'We must stop them.'

'Yes, we must.'

I turned my back on him, hand reaching out for the trident as though my body knew where it was. Except, it was nowhere to be seen. But it had to be, I could not have healed without it. My conduit, my storage of power. And yet, it was gone. 'Where is it?'

Ernest knew exactly what I was referring to, but he pretended he didn't. 'Where's what?'

'My trident.'

He averted his eyes when he replied, solidifying his lie. 'The last time I saw it, it was buried in the Mer you *killed* last night—'

'Do. Not. Lie. To. Me.' I could barely hold a breath. Air fluttered in my chest, building in pressure as the anxiety returned as quick as a summer storm.

Fear passed over Ernest's face, honest and true. It drained the colour from his complexion, made his posture lean as though the weight of my anger rested on his shoulders. He attempted to right himself, to don a mask of defiance, but even I recognised the look in a person's eye that sang of their trepidation.

I scooped the salve from my chest, revealing the red wounded skin beneath. It was far better than it had been, no longer bleeding out. 'My power is stored in the trident. Which means I cannot heal without touching it...' My eyes fell to the black band of ink that had etched itself around Ernest's wrist after our deal. 'You've had contact with it, and I gather recently.'

'No I haven't.'

'Yes,' I boomed, wincing as a sharp pain shuddered across my tight chest. 'Yes, you have. Its power echoes over your skin. *That* is how I have healed.'

Ernest shook his head, skin pale as milk. 'It's the salve that is healing you.'

I took a deep breath, attempting to steady myself. 'I'll give you one more chance to tell me the truth.'

There was no denying the danger in my eyes. It amplified my words, ensuring nothing more had to be said for Ernest to finally tell the truth.

'Getting that salve came at a cost. I thought I was doing the right thing, I didn't realise your magic is tied to it.' *Not my magic*, I thought, never being able to say that out loud. 'In the city, there is a man who uses orphans to steal for him as a means of payment for his protection. He would have it by now.'

That was all I needed to hear. I turned on my heels, burying the discomfort caused by his reaction to me, and headed in the direction of the temple's exit.

'Killian,' Ernest called after me, the pitter-patter of his feet almost comical. 'You're naked, you cannot just leave like this.'

I did not have the control to speak. My body was fuelled by my anger, my panic and desperation.

No one touched what was mine.

No one took what belonged to me.

The last person that had died when I defied death and came back for vengeance.

My legs moved. My feet carried me away from him. My focus was dead set on the sprawling city of Thalasapoli. No one could stand in my way. There was no one with the power to stop me—

'Killian.'

I stopped dead in my tracks. Ernest's voice was unlaced with magic and mundane as a fallen leaf upon a trodden ground. And yet it froze me, as a siren would call sailors to their doom. Slowly, I turned to face him, expectant of what could possibly have filled Ernest's voice with such natural command if not magic.

He stood, glowering at me, with glittering cobalt eyes and an expression set in fury. He held a bundle of brown cloth, knuckles pale beneath the tension of his hands. 'If you are serious about this, then you'll need these.'

It was a miracle, but the force of his throw took the wind out of my lungs. I caught the pile of folded cloth, feeling the harsh material scratch my palms. It was a robe, not red but russet brown, made from sheep's wool from the scratchy texture.

'Thank you.'

Ernest sagged forwards, as though those two words were his undoing. Then he said, 'I'm coming too.'

There was no arguing. If my determination was a blaze, his was an entire raging star.

### Chapter Twenty-Four - Ernest

to the

It had been hours since I left the city in chaos and the atmosphere had completely altered—but not in the way someone would expect after a stampede of donkeys. There should have been noise and movements. But it was... still. The streets were barren, overturned stalls left with their produce abandoned across the ground. Even my army of donkeys had vacated, likely sensing the shift.

'Something's off,' I said, voicing my thoughts aloud.

Killian walked beside me, his posture stiff, the brown wool of his robe shifting over the cobbled street. 'How observant of you.'

Killian was pissed off at me. So furious, in fact, that even the fewest of words pained him. I'd never seen someone so focused, even more so than my father in his quest to rule the world and everything in it.

The trident was important to Killian, enough that he would walk into a city completely naked to reclaim it. As much as the thought of that made my core heat, I was glad he'd taken the brown robe I offered him. I didn't think I could afford the distraction when things felt so wrong.

I focused back on the city and how empty it felt. It was as if the entire place had been vacated in a matter of hours. 'I'd never seen so many people before, and now there's... nothing.'

'Or perhaps they simply found their attentions diverted.'

Killian lifted a finger, pointing over the terracotta tiled roofs. I squinted, trying to catch what he had noticed. A mast, with a billowing sheet of material caught in the afternoon breeze. But it was what was *on* the mast that stopped me, freezing my body to the core. The symbol of a gold conch shell, flapping vigorously in the wind.

'Those are my father's ships.'

Killian scoffed something under his breath. 'So not as observant as I first gave you credit for.'

I didn't care for his jibe, not this time. My feet picked up the pace until I ran ahead, not stopping until a narrow alleyway led from the street. The port was close, the cry of gulls confirmed how near I was.

But before I slipped into the shadows, a hand gripped me. I looked back to find Killian's inked fingers entwined with mine.

'It is not wise to go searching. You may not like what you find.'

My mind told me to snatch my hand back, but my body refused. There was something anchoring about it, especially how I felt the beat of his two hearts in his palm—although why he had two was a question for another time. 'What if it's *him*?'

Even as I asked the question aloud, deep down I already knew the answer.

Killian made a sound of dismissal, but it was the fact he didn't speak it in words which proved he was attempting, for once, not to offend me. Did he see the pain I masked, the hurt knowing my father was missing?

Heavy footsteps sounded from the end of the alleyway. As fast as Killian took my hand, he spun me around until my back was pressed to his chest. His fingers clasped over my mouth as he held me to him, slinking into the shadows as though he was born from them.

'Does that answer your question?' he whispered, lips a mere inch from my ear.

His warmth, his strong hold, and the fact I felt his exhale disturb the hairs on my head, almost undid me. It was so distracting, so alluring, that I couldn't even hate myself for reacting in such a way. Blaming the Mer within me for my heightened desires, I almost didn't see what had spooked Killian.

A parade of red passed ahead of us. The acolytes of Gorgana. They were here.

'I'm going to remove my hand, and you're going to keep quiet, am I clear?'

All I could do was nod once, then the pressure over my lips relaxed as his hand fell away. Although my mouth was free, he refused to let me go. His arm stayed wrapped around my waist, keeping me pressed to him.

'They're looking for me,' I whispered.

'No,' Killian said, entirely sure of himself. 'The acolytes will expect you to find them yourself. They're here for... other reasons.'

'Being?' I hissed through my teeth a second before the answer came in the form of a stranger.

'—the Sea Witch has been here. They said it was one of his urchins who was given the trident as a trade. No matter—now we have it.' The voices carried down the alleyway, echoing slightly. 'After the execution, we'll search the entire island until he's found. We're not permitted to return to the Priestess without him.'

'Me,' Killian added as the voices trailed away. 'Or my source of power. That's what they want.'

I turned quickly, facing him. My chest was pressed to his, but Killian's height meant I had to lift my neck to see his face. 'Why do they care about... you?'

Power brewed in his purple eyes, as did a familiar emotion: fear. 'It's a long story, one we definitely don't have time for.'

He was right. The acolytes had his trident, which meant they knew about Ernie. They also mentioned an execution, likely tied to the promise the High Priestess made about slitting the throat of an innocent every night until I gave her what she wanted.

'I have to stop them.' Urgency shivered beneath my skin. I expected Killian to look me dead in the eyes and retort with some possessive dialogue about getting his trident back.

'Yes,' he growled, the muscles in his jaws feathering with the power of the word. 'Yes, *we* do.'



IT TOOK everything in me not to scream as we reached the port. My gaze swept over the crowd, all shouting and screaming for blood. I recognised the woman who had snatched Ernie by the neck. She was amongst the crowd, shaking her fist at the darkening sky as though she had the power to crack it in two. But my gaze was pinned to another figure.

Ernie.

If I wasn't frozen in horror, I would have vomited over my sandals.

Ernie was shackled to a wooden contraption, his arms and head held in place by chains. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot, giving them the look of congealing pools of blood within his skull.

Beside him stood a tall, imposing acolyte guard. But not to protect him. No. To execute him. The acolyte's face was covered in a mask, his gloved hands wrapped around the handle of an axe so large it made the child look small enough to whisk away in a pocket.

'That was the boy,' I said, not caring for who heard me. 'He was the one I traded the trident with for his help. And now...' Now he faced death.

I longed to hear Killian tell me it was going to be alright, but no soothing words came. He was almost immobile, something lost in his eyes as he regarded the acolytes. 'I can't help him if I don't have my trident. Without it the power is lost, I'm as mundane as you. If I don't get it, I'll be useless.'

Even if I wanted to help search for the trident, there was nothing which could make me take my eyes from the child. Silently, I begged for Ernie to find me in the crowd. Perhaps then he would not feel so alone.

'Dusk is upon us,' Killian added. 'Your change will happen soon. If we are to act, we must do so now.'

As he said it, I felt the pins and needles in my feet, the ache in my legs. The sky was an ominous shade of navy which stretched out across the ocean. The change frightened me before, the act of slipping into an unknown form. But now, as I faced the acolytes—people who would hurt a child for no reason than fulfilling some rotten belief—I begged for my teeth to extend and my nails to sharpen.

'Find your trident,' I said plainly, feeling an odd sense of calm overcome me. 'I'll save the boy.'

'I shouldn't leave you, Ernest.'

Shouldn't, or can't? 'These are my people,' I said. 'From those enjoying the spectacle, to the few who beg for it to stop. They're my responsibility, he—' I pointed to Ernie, noticing the dark stain spreading across his trousers. '—he is my responsibility.'

This is my fault. I brought death to him and I refuse to just watch.

'We made a deal, which makes you mine.' I sensed Killian's urge to reach out for me and hold me in place. 'My responsibility,' he corrected.

Before he could act on the thoughts swirling behind his jewelled eyes, I took a step back and melted into the wall of bodies. 'Then find your trident

and be useful. Hurry up—as you've said, dusk is upon us.'

If I was to get to Ernie, I had to do so quickly.

Whilst the crowd's focus was on him, and the acolytes' focus on the crowd, the back of the port was unguarded. I couldn't stroll down the jetty and reach him without being seen. But I could get around the back, slip in unseen somehow behind them. My eyes fell on the rippling, dark water and a plan formed.

There was no time to contemplate its potential for success. It was my only option.

Rotten wooden steps led down to the murky water of the ocean. The shock of cold stung my skin, but I kept going until I was entirely submerged. Beneath the shadow of the port, I waded out, using old ropes and pillars to move me forwards. Ships loomed overhead, monstrous structures that cast shadows upon me. The shadows made seeing through the water impossible. My mind played tricks, reminding me of what could be lurking beneath, watching. But I swallowed my fear, pushing it down, focusing only on Ernie.

Voices carried from above, breathy prayers to Gorgana, wishes that Karakos would soon be pleased with the sustenance from the blood that would be spilled.

They didn't know it was wasted breath, because I wouldn't allow it to happen.

By the time I reached the end of the jetty, I found an old ladder that was so worn by the water it practically crumbled beneath my touch. Stone bit into my palms as I pulled myself up, the sheet I wore adding extra weight from how sodden it had become. Crates blocked me from view, giving me a moment to catch my breath. They smelled of spoiled fish, but instead of gagging my stomach grumbled. *Hunger*. It was then I noticed the speckles of silver scales across the back of my hand.

I didn't have long.

For the second time that day, I needed a distraction. And as though the God of Distractions himself heard my silent plea, a bolt of blinding white light cut down from the heavens and crashed, tip first, into the sail of my father's ship, which caught fire instantaneously. I ducked low as wood exploded across the scene, raining down upon everyone in shards of scorching splinters. The sail, decorated with the shell emblem of my

Kingdom, erupted in red-hot tongues of flame which devoured the gold stitching in seconds.

My eyes immediately found the cause. Standing atop one of the buildings, winds dancing around his frame, trident held in his hands, Killian watched me. Magic swirled around the three-forked weapon, crackling and spitting, when another bolt of lightning was cast down from the darkening sky.

This time it didn't hit the ship. It smashed into the acolyte holding the axe—the axe meant to execute Ernie. By the time the flash of light subsided and the silent shock of the crowd passed, there was left nothing but blood and what couldn't even be called flesh in its wake.

Then the screams began.

## Chapter Twenty-Five - Killian

to the

It had taken little effort to retrieve my trident. The corpses of the acolytes who had taken it from Ernest's little street urchin lay upon the street, blood running like rivers through the cobbled stone. Even out the corner of my eye I caught the flaps of flesh still stuck to the tips of my trident, crimson gore running down the shaft and over my fingers.

I would have cared before, but as my eyes fell on Ernest there was nothing else that seemed to matter. He had gotten himself to the far side of the port and was now using my distraction to run to the child the acolytes were prepared to sacrifice.

His focus was awe-inspiring. As fire rained down around him, the crowds screaming and the acolytes unable to grasp a hold on the chaos, Ernest did not stop.

Any who got near him died before they could reach him. Bodies broke apart beneath my lightning, misting the air and scattering limbs and remains across the street. Even now, after all these years, the sight of so much blood disgusted me. But I didn't stop. I swallowed down the bile in my throat and focused, clearing a path for the princeling.

It was not Karakos who would feast tonight, but Gorgana. There was so much death that I could imagine the old goddess revelling in it.

Screams filled Thalasapoli, brightening the dusk sky with its song. Fear was thick in the air, so much that I was almost surprised Lera did not show herself again, reborn from the pure, undiluted emotion which captured the city.

'Sea Witch,' I heard them scream at me, pointing up towards the roof I stood upon. 'Demon.'

The list of names I had been awarded tonight would far outdo anything that had come before it. Whether the humans recognised that my magic only touched that of the acolytes or not, they still hated me.

That was what stories had the power to do. I had no doubt tales about me had stretched across the sea, from island to island, from ear to ear. But what they focused on, no matter the preconceived notions they might have, was a man brimming with the power of a god. A god whose face was inked onto my very skin, staring down at them all.

'Release him,' Ernest's distant voice shouted. 'I command it.'

My eyes snapped back to him. A feral growl built in my chest, rupturing out of me as though a monster wished to be free from the cage of bone and flesh. Perhaps it did. Ernest was held in the arms of a large man whose red robes matched that of the blood smeared across Ernest's face. Even in the arms of a captor, he still called out for the child and not himself.

Seeing him in the arms of someone else sparked something strange within me. If I grasped onto the feeling, it would have devoured me and everyone in my radius.

Ernest's name built in my throat, erupting in a growl that only fuelled the conjured storm. I didn't dare move or look away for fear I would miss my chance to help him. But I couldn't call upon my magic, not without risking the lightning striking Ernest too.

That was something I wouldn't dare chance.

The child Ernest was pleading for was on his knees, a blade at his throat. One of the acolytes kept him immobile beneath the sharp edge of the sword. I knew how this would end.

I continued my tirade of magic, taking out my helplessness on any other acolyte I could find.

'Take me, do what you must with me, just don't hurt him.' Ernest was crying, hot tears streaming down his handsome face. Not from sadness or fear, but desperation. They were the same tears I, too, had cried all those years ago as my mother held a blade to my throat, just as this child had a blade to his. Gods, if anything had the power to elicit violence in me, it was history repeating itself.

I was trembling with fury, my storm echoing with it.

'Please,' Ernest muttered, piercing my chest with the plea. 'Please.'

I couldn't hear what the acolyte replied with as a beat of thunder rumbled across the sky. All the magic I had, all the power beneath my skin,

and I couldn't stop this.

Ernest's final plea came in the form of a keening cry. All the breath and desperation flooding out of him formed into a single word that overbrimmed with emotion. 'Please!'

The sword jolted with a harsh pull. I couldn't see the child's neck part, nor see as his blood spilled like a waterfall down his feeble chest. But I felt it. The slash echoed across my own neck, making me long to lift a finger to confirm my skin had not been split.

'What have you done?' Ernest bellowed, eyes wide, the colour drained from his skin. What he said next was a string of sounds, unintelligible words that made no sense yet sang clearly of heartbreak.

The child was released, allowing his limp—and very dead—body to fall upon the stone. The acolyte who had killed him lifted the sword up and pointed the bloodied tip towards Ernest in a clear signal, although the princeling didn't see. His eyes were screwed closed, his head bowed, his shoulders heaving with breath. I needed to reach him. I had to move, to save him from the same fate, but something stopped me. A shift in the universe, a tear in the fabric of reality.

Ernest lifted his eyes back to the acolyte, the whites entirely red from sorrow. He opened his mouth, but not to speak. It was to flash the row of sharpened teeth filling his jaw. Although the sky was entirely covered in dark grey clouds, there was no denying the pull of the rising moon. Even hidden behind the physical incarnation of my power, I felt it.

The next noise I heard was the scream of the acolyte as Ernest jolted forwards with unnatural strength and speed, widened his jaw and wrapping his mouth around the acolyte's throat. The acolyte's scream was cut short when his jugular was torn free. Blood smeared Ernest's mouth as he turned on the acolyte who had held him back from saving the child. But before the princeling took another life, I did it for him.

Lightning cast down as I willed it to, crashing into the man's head and exploding his frame into a cloud of ash. Ernest turned and found me again, his inhuman eyes glowing like oceanic pools. Silver scales glinted at the arch of his cheekbones, his ears pinched into sharp points. Blood was smeared across his face. Chunks of flesh hung from his sodden hair.

It was not the moon that drew me to him, but the monster he had become. My fingers grasped the trident and the clear call for me to act was almost impossible to ignore.

'I'm sorry,' I mouthed at him. He couldn't hear me, but the way his face softened told me he read my lips. I found myself holding my breath as he looked to the corpse of the child, whose blood joined that of the others. Ernest pinched his sorrowful eyes closed, pressed his fingers to his throat and muttered something beneath his breath.

I recognised a promise even from a distance. A bargain, one made between life and death. Then he turned to the dark water, ran down the length of the pier and lunged into the waiting abyss.

## Chapter Twenty-Six - Ernest

the state

The change was easier this time. As I crashed back into the deep, it was as though the water tore my human flesh away, leaving the monster in its wake.

There was only pain, so much pain. But nothing would compare to the utterly destructive agony left in the place where my heart once was.

Ernie had died, because of me. My actions had put him on that path, tangled him in this bloody, evil web constructed of religion and magic. His neck had split too easily beneath the acolyte's blade. At first I thought he was the one who had screamed, but it had been my mouth open, the sound gouged out of the deepest part of me. Then he had tipped forwards. His knees had cracked against stone as he fell, glassy-eyed and bleeding, before me.

I had hardly known the child, but that did not take away from the blame I put on myself.

All I had seen was red. The fury was haunting yet freeing. Between Ernie falling to the ground and me stepping back with a mouthful of flesh and gore, I remembered nothing. It was not Prince Ernest who the acolyte met, but the Mer they all feared.

Even as I swam through the ocean, blood coated my tongue, slipping down my throat and attempting to cool the raging fire within me. With my arms out before me, my silver-scaled tail slamming against the water, I speared through the darkness in search for the only thing I knew could stop this.

Aleanna. My magic.

It was the promise I made to the child's corpse before I fled Thalasapoli.

*No other will die in my name, and I'll make sure yours is remembered.* 

I needed to find her and retrieve my magic. If I could use my magic to give itself away, she could use it to give it *back*. If I didn't do this, more children would die. Others like Ernie, taken from this world until I did the very thing the Priestess demanded of me.

I was merely a grain of sand in a universe of shorelines. A star in the never-ending dark sky. A prince amongst endless tides. Aleanna could be anywhere. Close to me, or in the furthest corner of the Below where even Karakos couldn't find her. But that wouldn't stop me searching.

'Aleanna!' I screamed, muscles cramping from what felt like hours of swimming. 'Aleanna. Come to me. I know you hear me.'

Before my father had killed her, we'd had some brief kinship with one another. The potential for friendship, as loosely as the word could be used. Then she had died and came back as a monster, taking the very thing I'd handed willingly to her on a plate.

Would she see what was becoming of the world above? Would she care? If not, I would make her.

In the far recesses of my mind, I heard my father praising this darkness within me. 'Good boy.'

I kept moving, refusing to stop to allow my mind to think about anything else. If I did, it would destroy me before sunrise. I dove deeper, the water around me growing colder, heavier. Schools of strange fish passed me, translucent skin with glowing veins and bulging black eyes. Obsidian serpents slithered by, flashing poison-tipped fangs in warning. In return, I hissed with my own, my threat clear.

My focus was on finding a Mer. Surely, if I found one, it could lead me to more. I was so distracted by my desperation to fix the situation that I didn't notice the water shift until it was too late.

'Ernest.' My name rang out through the Below. 'Wait.'

The dark water seemed to swallow most noise, except the clear sound of my name being spoken. I stopped, searching the dark behind me in time to see a form dissipate from the shadows. Powerful tentacles, floating silver hair and eyes of such vivid purple that they could have been two jewels lost long ago to the sea.

Killian. He'd found me as I'd known he would.

'Don't waste your breath trying to stop me,' I said, bubbles forming beyond my lip. The ocean snatched tears from my cheeks. 'I've got to do

this.'

'For that I would need to know what exactly it is you are trying to achieve.' His head tilted slightly, worrying his lower lip between his teeth. There was genuine concern in his eyes, the type of expression servants gave me after witnessing my father berating me.

'My magic,' I said the word as though it encapsulated everything I was trying to achieve. 'I should have been searching for it, not helping you. If I'd gotten it back, Ernie would still be alive. If I had it, I might have stopped all of this before an innocent life was taken.'

'Many lives have been lost today, more so before it and countless more will be lost in the days to come,' Killian said, moving closer until I could feel the pressure of water swell around him. 'This isn't for you to burden yourself with. It's bigger than you.'

A comforting fury rose within me, like a snake heeding the song of a pipe. 'I need my magic back to stop this. To end...'

'End what, Ernest? Suffering? Pain? Death? If you do what's been asked of you, if you give the acolytes what they desire, then you won't be saving anyone.'

We were inches apart, my tail moving to keep me steady and level before him. 'They murdered a *child*, Killian. They took a blade to an innocent and *killed him*. If I don't do this, more will die, as you've just so plainly put it. Maybe it makes me weak, maybe I cannot be the heartless monster that you are. But I cannot do nothing knowing what they will do.'

He was silent, watching me, inspecting me. Sticky tentacles brushed over my tail. I looked down, but I was far too slow. Killian wrapped his tentacles around my tail, encasing me in his hold. My hands pushed down on the thickest part of one, claws digging into the pillowy flesh as though I could pry myself free.

It was useless. He had me trapped.

'You could not possibly begin to understand how wrong you are, princeling.'

The water shivered around us as though a fire burned in Killian's skin and emanated heat from his pores. I didn't dare speak. A sense of knowing overcame me as I looked upon the powerful being. I'd watched as he'd brought lightning down from the skies, breaking bodies apart with incredible ease. But there had been a moment when he'd looked at me after Ernie was killed. He'd wished to hurt me. Although that emotion did not

currently linger in his eyes, it was lurking somewhere in the shadows of him.

'I'm all too familiar with the treatment of the acolytes. Believe it or not, but my story began far, *far* before I was ever unfortunate enough to meet you.'

I winced, unable to hide the hurt his words inflicted on me. 'Then leave. Go. Leave me to find my magic, go swim back into whatever hole you enjoy the most. Forget our bargain, I refuse it.'

Killian laughed, but not out of humour. The three deep chuckles made me feel minuscule and pathetic... not that I needed help with that.

'No.' The word speared through me.

'No?'

'I'm not going anywhere, Ernest.' He lifted a slender finger to my face, brushing something from my cheek. 'You're crying.'

The emotion within me was certainly a storm that came with rain, but beneath the water it was impossible to feel tears roll down my cheeks.

'Is crying another concept that's strange to you?'

The grip of Killian's tentacles loosened enough for me to wiggle free. He looked to his finger as though my tear was still there. Which was poetic, because I still could sense his touch lingering on my cheekbone as though a phantom hand still graced it.

'They *will* pay, Ernest.' Killian didn't answer my initial question, nor did he need to explain who he spoke about. 'All of them will pay.'

'Then do what you promised me and help me get my magic back. No more jaunts to islands, no more fucking around. We finish it, tonight.'

I held my breath, which was strange because it was the gills sliced into my neck which ensured survival underwater. But it was so human of me, so jarring that it reminded me that I was far from such a thing.

There was something still... distracted about Killian. I almost asked what was on his mind, but held back my question and offered another.

'I don't even know where to start trying to find her.'

Killian rose his eyes back to mine. 'We find what you're looking for by following destruction.'

*We.* Such a powerful word to use in such a moment. 'Care to explain further?'

'Last night, during the shipwreck... did you not hear it?' His question caught me off guard. 'Hear what?'

Killian looked to the darkness of the water beside him, lost in thought. 'A song. Like the one you used to entrance a city of people, I heard it last night. It wasn't used against the Mer, but *for* them.' When he glanced up, his eyes roamed my face, searching for something. It was only when he looked away did I realise what he was looking for—tears. I'd stopped crying, even if the hollow ache within me still persisted.

'It was Aleanna. She was using your power of control to orchestrate attacks on the humans in the water.'

Why did that not sound as bad as it should?

'Are you certain?' I asked, throwing my mind back to the attack. My entire focus had been on Killian and his wound.

'I'd heard it before, when you were caged and forced to sing. I would recognise it anywhere.'

A brush of warmth spread across my body. I buried the emotion down, feeling as though I could not look into Killian's eyes in case I uncovered what he meant by that. 'Then we go back, see if we can hear it again. Follow it—'

'If we do this, promise me something.' Eyes wide, tentacles reaching out for me again, Killian looked panicked. Disturbed.

'We have already made our bargain, Sea Witch. I owe you nothing more, just as you don't owe me.'

It was as though my words mattered little to him. He continued staring at me, fighting his own urge to grasp me again. 'Consider it an addendum.'

I could have waved him off again and told him not to waste his breath, but I wanted to know what bothered him so deeply. 'I need to know what I'm agreeing to before I answer.'

'When we get your magic back, don't give it to the acolytes.' Killian floated towards me, tentacles flaring out beneath him, twisting and writhing as though they reacted to whatever sparked this anxiety. 'I don't know what god gifted you your power, but it shouldn't be handed over to them willingly.'

'And what would you have me do with it?' I asked, finding that I whispered the question, drowning in the sudden tension between us.

'Kill them. End the acolytes of Gorgana. Destroy everything they care about.'

The thought alone was dangerous. Murder was not in my blood... but one brush of my tongue against my teeth and I tasted the coppery flesh of the acolyte I had killed today. I'd done it without thinking. Where guilt should have been, there was nothing.

'I'll help you. Whatever barrier you raise, I'll show you a way to break it apart. Just... please, Ernest. Please promise me you won't give them your power. More children will die. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters. Anyone who opposes the acolytes will meet their end. Do not give them the key to control.'

His words sank into my skin, burying deep into my bones where they scored themselves upon my soul. I practically watched him change before me, breaking down into a powerless man who faced nothing but the fear of possibility.

It was then I understood that this was personal to him. Killian had ties to the acolytes, a story he had yet to share.

'And then I free you?' I had yet to ask him about his curse, but I would. In fact, I knew nothing of this man and yet I felt something tethering us together. A shared goal, or something deeper that I hadn't had the time to discern.

Killian closed his eyes, the tension easing from him. A faint hint of a smile turned up his lips. 'Yes, and then I'm free.'

What he was asking was not impossible, but even I understood the risks standing between me and that outcome. The lives. 'None of this matters, no promise or addendum, unless we find Aleanna and get my magic back.'

There was the issue of how, but I would come to that.

Killian's eyes flared wide. He turned to face the dark but not before he extended a hand for me. 'Then let us begin, shall we?'

'No more distractions,' I said, my words commanding.

'Oh, little princeling. I am confident we have room for a few more along the way.'

# PART IV DAY THREE OF INFECTION



### Chapter Twenty-Seven - Ernest

to the

I sat on the gritty sands, the calm tide brushing against my toes. Never had I seen the sea such a vibrant blue. It helped that there wasn't a single cloud in the sky, only the rising sun as it cast golden rays over the endless expanse before me. Dawn had arrived hours ago, forcing me back into my human form. It was Killian who had called an end to our search for Aleanna, reminding me that we needed to find land. I would have argued, refused his offer and demanded we continued to search—but my bones ached, my skin felt as though it had been pulled and stretched, and my skull sang with the agony of exhaustion.

'You really should stop doing that,' Killian said, standing at my side. I hadn't noticed he was there until he cast a shadow over me. 'It will get infected.'

I followed the gesture of his hands to my arm. It was smeared with blood and silver scales, my fingers halfway through plucking another out from my skin. I dropped the single scale I had just ripped from the root, allowing it to fall upon the smattering of others on the sand around me. 'I didn't realise I was doing it.'

Gods, my head hurt. I could hardly open my eyes without the light stinging them.

'The more times your body shifts, the more you will find another part of the Mer form will remain.'

'As if I need more of a reminder as to the noose wrapped around my neck,' I replied, conscious that Killian was still glaring at the blood. 'If it

disgusts you, Killian, I suggest you stop staring at it.'

His reply came without a breath. 'It doesn't disgust me.'

Before I could truly drink in the seriousness of his response, Killian took my hand and eased me to standing. 'What are you doing?'

'Helping.'

I might have stopped him guiding me into the shallow water, but I was far too focused on the way my skin reacted to him. Shivers erupted from his touch, spreading up my arm and over my back like a cool breeze. They only continued to overwhelm me until we were waist deep in the shallows and Killian guided my arm into the azure water.

'You don't need to do this,' I said, my voice barely a whisper.

'I know.' But he didn't stop. Killian cupped water and poured it over my skin. Then he took his large, imposing hand and rubbed the blood and loose scales away until they fell through the water like forgotten coins.

We did not speak until he was satisfied I was clean. I could have said something else, but a part of me did not want to ruin the moment. Instead of fighting it, I allowed Killian to offer me the silent gift of his touch—of comfort.

'Thank you.' A flush of heat crept over my face. Killian noticed, choosing that moment to release my hand. He waded back out of the shallows, leaving me with nothing but his phantom touch as a reminder.

'I've prepared a place for us to rest,' he said with his back to me. 'Sleep will help with the exhaustion your body is suffering from. Something to eat, too. Then we'll continue tonight.'

Continue searching for Aleanna, continue hunting for my magic.

Killian didn't need to say it, but we both knew what would happen by nightfall. The days had never felt so short before, like I was trying to grasp onto the passing seconds but unable to hold on.

Just off the beach, where a canopy of rough barked trees offered shade from the sun and its heat, was a shack. Although *shack* was an overly kind way of describing the four rotten walls of old wood and a roof which was more rust than metal.

*'This* is where we're staying?' I asked, nose screwed up at the thought of stepping foot inside the ramshackle place, let alone sleeping in it.

'It is. Or is it not sufficient enough for you, Your Majesty?'

I scoffed, pushing myself past him so I was the first to enter. 'The correct title is Your Highness. And I've slept in worse places... your

humble dwelling, for example.'

Killian's low chuckle followed me inside. 'Well played, princeling.'

Turned out, the inside did not match the outside. *At all*. A single bed was pushed against the far wall, just beneath what could only be described as a stubbornly defiant shelf. It was one wrong knock from falling down, the only thing brave enough to be on it was the dust. And by the gods, there was so much of it. Fish traps were piled high beside the door, the fragrant stench of rotten catch lingering on the netting they were made from.

'Modest,' I said, feeling as though I had to say something because Killian was watching me at the entrance. 'And where are you going to sleep?'

His purple eyes flickered towards the bed. 'Well, in the bed.'

I stumbled over my words, unable to stifle the sudden rush of annoyance. 'But there's only enough room for one person.'

'Ernest, I'm well aware.'

I practically exploded on the spot. 'So where do you expect *me* to sleep?'

Killian narrowed his eyes, inspecting. He could pretend all he wanted that he was being serious, but there was no doubt he was enjoying every moment of this. 'Princeling, how could I possibly make you rest that rigid, royal back on anything but a feather-down mattress? You're welcome to the bed. I suppose I'll find an alternative.'

A few deep breaths and I felt the nervousness ebb away. Killian enjoyed getting a rise out of me, something that was as painfully clear as the way his eyes never seemed to stray far from where I was.

We busied ourselves with getting ready for sleep. Killian draped an old sheet over the single window, casting the room in a cool shadow. It was sweltering outside on whatever nameless island he had taken me to. I checked for scorpions beneath the thin sheet and overly used pillow. Satisfied there was nothing in the bed that could kill me, I climbed onto the creaking cot. I must have audibly moaned, because Killian snapped his head towards me, brow peaked in what I could only explain as cautious expectance.

He, to my dismay, lay himself out across the floor with nothing but the wooden panels beneath him. Muscles flexed in his arms as he positioned them beneath his head. White hair spilled around him like rivers of melted silver.

'Comfortable?' he asked, voice light but the message beneath it was clear as day.

I rolled my eyes, tutted, and scooted as far back in the bed as I could. When the press of the warm wood wall was against my spine, I patted the space beside me. 'Get your sorry ass off the floor, Killian.'

'Why? As you so plainly pointed out, this is luxury compared to my humble dwelling.'

'Shut up and get in the bed,' I said, more aggressively this time. 'Before I change my mind.'

I half expected Killian to refuse me, but he sat quickly, gathered himself, and paced to the side. Gods, it took effort to hold his eyes and not let mine wander. He was topless, which was not usual for him. He only wore the trousers he had found in the shack when we arrived, practically clinging to his hips.

'Never in all my years did I think I would be sharing a bed with...'

'A man?' I asked, although I regretted it the moment it left my mouth.

Killian sat on the edge, making the entire weight of the bed shift. He motioned a hand down his bare torso. 'Do you see me and believe I have not lain with men before, princeling?'

I was thankful his back was to me so he couldn't see me screw my face up and bite down into my lower lip. 'Well, have you?'

My stomach was so exceptionally close to Killian's flesh. I found myself breathing in for fear of touching him, which was ridiculous, because there was already barely an inch between us. His body was far larger, far wider, and far more muscular than mine. Yet he curled himself up, spine aching, enough to offer me some room to breathe.

'I have lived for many years. More than you could begin to imagine. When I have the offer of a basket of fruits to enjoy, why limit myself to only one kind?'

A new type of heat rose in me, and this time it was *not* in my face. I couldn't believe the jolt that shot through my crotch, as though a bolt of lightning chose that moment to strike. To make matters worse, Killian was chuckling again, almost as if he was aware of my reaction.

'Go on then, try and explain. How many years have you been lurking around my Kingdom?'

Killian exhaled out his nose, a long and tempered breath. 'Should we not be trying to sleep?'

I bit my tongue, trying my best to think of the best response. 'Believe me, if you talk enough it would knock me right out.'

My sarcasm was meant to be like a jab of a blade, but instead it hit Killian more like the tickle of a feather.

He rolled over and looked me dead in the eyes. 'I have been around longer than it's been your Kingdom, Ernest.'

'And Karakos is your patron?' Any magically gifted human was blessed by patronage from one of the gods or goddesses. And from the inking across Killian's chest, he took his support by the God of the Oceans extremely personally.

But Killian followed my question with yet more silence. It wasn't the silence that came with someone being unsure of what to say, but the type of silence which revealed they had no idea how to say what they wanted to. Killian opted for simple words, whereas his expression suggested there was more to it. 'Yes, something like that.'

'So,' I said, repositioning myself as the arm beneath me began to prickle with pins and needles. 'Karakos gifted you with immortality. I gather that's the 'curse' you wish for me to break.'

'I wish to be free of Karakos and his *gifts*.' Killian's eyes widened, if only for a moment, before he steeled his expression. In that moment, something clicked between us. Although I didn't know the god who had blessed me with magic, I understood the desire to give away my gifts—and more so the burdens that came with them. Aleanna was proof of that.

'To answer your earlier question, truthfully, I'm not sure how long I've been alive for. I lost count a very long time ago. But I can say that I have seen princelings come and go before you, watched the Kingdom of Ire spread like poison over once fertile lands, and witnessed both the birth and death of stars.'

I waited for the punchline, for the moment he told me it was all a joke. But it never came. 'Are you toying with me again?'

'Believe it or not, I'm being rather honest with you.'

It was going to be almost impossible to sleep knowing the endless possibilities of who this person was. Yes, we had all heard whispers of the Sea Witch. But magic was rare—I was proof of that. In truth, I only really believed the Sea Witch was a figment of stories told by parents who wished to keep children in line.

Until he showed up in my life, like a thorn embedded in my flesh.

'You're a puzzle, Killian.' Had I made a mistake asking him to get into bed? I hardly knew him. Gods, I didn't even know his last name.

'That is a fair assumption. One we should fix.' Killian, to my shock and horror, shifted closer. The blood drained from my face, rushing down the length of me until I was practically frozen from the inside out. This close, there was no hiding my reaction to him. But that was both ways, for Killian couldn't hide from me either. 'My name is Killian Metropoli. And my curse is not the immortality, or my power of the sea and sky. It is the cost that comes with it. The never-ending task and the toll it takes on me.'

I could tell he wasn't being entirely honest, so I probed him for more detail. 'Your task being...' I sensed his trepidation in the long pause before he replied.

'Eradicating the Mer. They are the plague upon Ire, and I am their cure.' Killian's tone deepened.

Suddenly, I felt the urge to bolt. But with his mountainous form blocking me from getting off the bed, I was as trapped as a fish in a box net. 'Sounds like a rather personal goal for you.'

'It is.'

I swallowed, throat bobbing as I forced the spit down. 'So if we don't find Aleanna, get my magic back, save Ire from the acolytes, and grant you your wish...'

You will kill me.

'You don't want to hear the answer to that.' Killian broke eye contact and exhaled slowly through his nose. 'So ask me another question.'

He didn't need to say it out loud for the possibility to flood me with dread. Yes, once the infection took hold, I would be a monster... how could I blame him from wanting to eradicate yet another risk to the whole world?

'What happened between you and the acolytes of Gorgana?'

For the first time since Killian rolled over to face me, his eyes darkened. He moved until he was on his back, the arm closest to me raised above his head. I thought it was to get himself comfortable, but it was actually to offer me more room. I took it, because my back was aching from holding my position.

'It's not the type of story that should be shared before sleep,' Killian said, eyes fixated on the rickety ceiling. Small holes had worn into the metal sheets, letting in the sky. In a strange way, it was like looking at the night sky with a constellation of watching stars.

'That sounds to me like you don't wish to answer the question.'

Another pause. 'No, I have nothing to hide. If you'd like to know what became of me, I'll tell you, but don't hold me accountable if you don't find solace in your dreams afterwards.'

Gods, what had happened between him and the acolytes? It must have been truly haunting if the story came with a warning. When I didn't retract my initial question, Killian took the silence between us and filled it.

'I was born into a household of non-believers during a time when the gods were names to worship and revere. Karakos, Gorgana, Lera, and Nyssa just to name the most important to this story. I was five years old when my father became unwell. What started as a mundane infection from a nick on his forearm mutated to a disease of the blood which spread violently and destroyed him from the inside out.'

It suddenly made sense as to why Killian was so concerned about me picking at my scales. My mind replayed the moment we had not long shared, searching for anything I may have said in my lack of knowledge about his father which would have been insensitive.

'He was the pillar that held our family together, and when he passed it left a hole that nothing could fill. Nothing beside Gorgana. My mother turned to the local priest, seeking guidance. But instead of a supporting hand, they filled her head with worms and poison, convincing her that my father would never reach Mount Asphodel, the eternal lands where souls ventured and enjoyed the benefits of living a good, honest life.' Killian took a deep breath in, allowing the story to resonate in the minimal space between us. It hadn't taken long for the small room to be full of his words, echoing until nothing else seemed to matter.

'So even all those years ago, the acolytes were as twisted as they are now,' I said, feeling my skin prickle in gooseflesh.

'I would say that it was worse when I was a child, but then a young mind would see the world in such muted colours, especially after such loss. My father was my sun and I gravitated towards him. When he left me, the world no longer held onto colour.'

'Perhaps you just couldn't find the colour,' I added, fighting the urge to lay a hand on him. 'Grief can do that to a person. It takes time for us to find the strength to open the curtains again.'

'You speak from experience,' he said, side-eying me.

'I lost my mother before I had the chance to know her.' As I said it, a lump formed in my throat and threatened to choke me. 'To the world, parents are made to look after their children. But to the children, their parents *are* the world. Without them, it feels as though nothing moves, like life has no solid path on which to walk.'

'Beautifully put, except it would have seemed my mother missed this important message.' Killian laughed for a beat, as though something he said was funny only to him. His laugh, I quickly realised, was not a reaction of something humorous, but a very human response to hiding another emotion: sadness.

'If you don't want to continue, I'll understand.'

'It's strange.' Killian tilted his head. 'It's been a long time since I shared this story and there's something... freeing about telling it to someone.'

'Then consider me all ears,' I said, selfishly glad he would continue. I wanted to know it all. I thirsted for it.

'There is no other way to put it except plainly. My mother was easily manipulated. They took her grief, her broken heart, and moulded it into something that would benefit them. And in turn, my mother made me follow in her footsteps.'

'What was her name?' I asked.

Killian contemplated the question, chewing it over within his tensed jaw. 'Sofina. Her name was Sofina and *they* ruined her.' When he spoke, his voice was overwhelmed by emotion I could not name. It was a storm of many feelings, but it was the anger in his darkening eyes that stole my breath away.

Without needing to ask, I knew that the acolytes of Gorgana were responsible for ruining his mother. 'That is certainly enough reason to despise them.'

Killian rolled his head to the side, eyes dropping from mine for a moment. 'Believe me, the reason I harbour such disdain for them has little to do with the story thus far. Because it was not until a handful of years later when they—'

Killian reached for my hand, fingers smooth as sea-glass and pressed it to his throat. It was a strange action, but it felt important. His lost gaze, his sudden silence, were all proof that he was suffering in a memory. Drowning in it.

I was buzzing, my skin shivering with a sudden need that had come out of nowhere. 'Killian, are you okay?'

He shook himself from whatever dark place he had disappeared to. But when he spoke, it was not to shed light, but to draw me into the darkness with him. '—when the acolytes of Gorgana tasked my mother with murdering me.'

## Chapter Twenty-Eight - Killian

the the

My body was a well, my words the stale water which had been left to fester in the deepest pits. And Ernest, one little human man, was the bucket reaching deep down and emptying me of my truth. The story I shared with him was something I had lived with every hour, every day, every godsforsaken year, and yet it felt different. Because, for once, it was as though I could allow myself to be brave in the face of my mother's betrayal.

Ernest's ocean eyes widened a fraction. The bed creaked as he lifted himself up onto his haunches and peered down at me, mouth agape. His fingers had just dropped from my throat, but his touch lingered even after he removed them.

'She killed you? She killed her own son?'

I took a deep breath in, feeling both my hearts beat in tandem. One from my short time as a mortal, the other gifted to me when Karakos had betrayed Gorgana, keeping me from the Goddess of Death's grasp only to use me as his puppet.

'Before the congregation of acolytes, my mother took me to the cliff's edge, held me over the abyss, and drew her blade across my throat,' I said, watching emotions race across Ernest's face. 'The woman who brought me into the world deemed herself worthy to take me out of it.'

My skin rippled everywhere his eyes roamed. I delighted in the way my nerves lit up where he looked, and I wished for Ernest to never take his eyes off me.

'But how... I mean... you are... you're alive, are you not?'

I smiled at him, because I was learning that watching the silver-tongued prince fumble over his words was one of life's surprising pleasures.

'Although my life was taken as a means of appeasing Karakos, the ocean god was't satisfied by the death of an innocent. But do you know the deity who thrives on such a thing?'

'Gorgana,' Ernest whispered, his stare distant for a moment. 'Death herself.'

'A god's power lays within belief. Karakos, for example, surrounds this world. There is more ocean than land and sky. All it takes is for a mortal to gaze out of a window and see the expanse of blue to think of the god who rules it. That's why Karakos is the most powerful of the gods after Nyssa's banishment, and why he rid the world of her. He was jealous of her power.'

I was practically watching the cogs turn in Ernest's mind. 'And The Great Betrayal removed Nyssa from her throne, offering Karakos the chance to take up the mantle.'

'You've listened in your history lessons.' I smiled, but it was forced. 'After The Great Betrayal, it was Karakos who took the mantle of God of the Gods. But Gorgana is the same in her thirst for power. Death delights in the brutal, premature murders of innocent lives. Back when I was a child, some may have even argued that the goddess held as much power as Karakos... enough for each to rival the other.'

'What changed then?' Ernest asked, lashes wet with tears of pity. I almost told him not to allow them to fall, but there was something deeply satisfying about another crying for me. 'If Gorgana was as powerful, how did the goddess loose so many followers?'

'Me.'

Ernest rocked away, enough until his back was pressed to the wall and his knees were drawn up to his chest. All the while, I had hardly moved a muscle. I focused on the princeling, refusing to close my eyes.

'Not the bedtime story you were expecting,' I said, dryly.

Ernest took the back of his hand and cleared his eyes before a single tear fell. 'With you, honestly, I expected nothing else but misery and pain.'

If it was not for the feigned smile, I may have taken his words as the insult they were meant as. But in the little time I had spent with Ernest, I had learned that his insults were always veiled emotions he did not wish to share... at least not yet.

'Do you fear me?' I asked him. What did I wish to hear in response?

'No,' Ernest replied, loosening some of the tension gripped around my chest.

'Not yet,' I corrected, 'for you still don't know what I am.'

'I know that you'll seek to kill me if I don't find a cure to this sickness. I know your hatred for the acolytes is highly justified. And I know you are clearly not human.'

The air throbbed as though the minuscule particles of water begged for me to reach for them. 'Pray tell, Ernest of Ire. What do you believe I am?'

'That I've yet to determine. But for now, I can trust you. I hope.' He slowly lowered himself back until he lied beside me once again, as though his body language proved he did, in fact, trust me.

It was only then I realised I had not denied his initial suggestion about me needing to kill him if we failed. Then again, I was not prepared to start lying.

'So, let me get this straight,' Ernest added, staring up at the rotting ceiling. 'Karakos healed you, gave you access to powers and eternal life, all to stick a middle finger up at his rival?'

I contemplated that for a moment, because Ernest was not entirely off the mark. 'Karakos, like all gods, is vengeful and violent, but he too understands the balance of right and wrong. To him, I was the latter. But I was also potential. You see, Karakos and Gorgana have always had a lack of care for one another. What is water if not life? It gives sustenance to the world, feeds the soil allowing for vegetation to grow. Mortals drink from springs, animals require it to live, as do all if not most living beings.'

'And Gorgana is the opposite of life. She opposes it.'

I nodded, silver hair falling down the side of my face. 'You're listening.'

'I don't have much of a choice,' Ernest countered before rolling his eyes. 'Continue, *please*.'

'Oh, you look pained, little princeling. Did it hurt to be so polite?'

'Yes.' He pouted, shooting me a sideways glance. 'It did.'

'I admire your honesty.' I wondered if he shared in that with me. Whatever he asked, I told him. I could have stopped, could have refused him, but instead I allowed him to flip through the pages of a story I had held under lock and key. 'Back to the gods. You know that Karakos was in love with Luna.'

'Everyone knows that tale. It is Luna whose light draws Karakos towards her. It is because of Luna and Karakos that the tide is real and not just a concept.'

'As you seem to know it all, tell me what connection the gods have to the Mer.' I opened the door for Ernest to answer, knowing all too well that the version of the story he knew and the one I knew were two entirely different things.

'They were their children. A product of a union between two gods.'

'Not quite,' I said, narrowing my eyes. 'Gods are known to create children, but it is not in the same vein as mortals. The children of gods would best be known as monsters. Abominations, if you will.'

Ernest's eyes flared wide, his words coming out before he truly took in a breath. 'I've figured it out. You, you're an abomination, a monster. Saved by Karakos and changed into... well, this—'

'Wrong again, little princeling. I'm what the stories called heroes, as you would be with access to your magic. Yes, you may title me both things, but my true nature isn't of either. Mer are monsters, creatures born not from Karakos and Luna, but Karakos and Gorgana.'

I enjoyed the silent shock that followed, the way Ernest's pale eyes widened inch by inch until they were saucers on his face. It was clear that this was not the story he knew.

'Karakos was tricked, something the gods enjoyed doing with one another. The Great Betrayal was all a result of trickery and misplaced trust. But unlike that resulting in the banishment of Nyssa, Gorgana's deception created the Mer—poisoned creatures who longed to spread death, thus strengthening Gorgana within Karakos's domain.'

Ernest's silence and slackened jaw were proof enough that he didn't expect for me to say that. 'That's why the acolytes sacrifice people to Karakos... because it feeds the monsters?'

'Yes. That's right. I wasn't the first. But my sacrifice offended Karakos, enough for him to take pity on me. This world has always suffered the consequence of warring gods far before me, and will continue to long after I am gone.'

I couldn't conceal the hope from my eyes, and Ernest noticed.

'And yet they're all gone,' Ernest said, eyeing me with a knowing suspicion. 'Disappeared, never meddling or heard of beyond the retelling of myths and stories.'

'No god is ever gone. Not even Nyssa. They can be banished, weakened, stripped of power and made to scuttle into the confines of bone and flesh to protect themselves. My task is to eradicate the Mer. To clear the spoils of their union from this world. Only then will I be free from my bargain.' I blinked, staring deep into Ernest's eyes as my inner voice finished my plea.

Unless you free me first.

'You were right. This wasn't a wise bedtime story,' Ernest said, rolling onto his side to face the wall.

I fought the urge to reach out and lay a hand on his shoulder. My muscles strained with the need to touch him. 'It's a lot to take in, I understand.'

I took a moment, watching the rise and fall of Ernest's back. Freckles lined his shoulder blade, perfectly placed as though mirroring a constellation of stars. I counted them, silently getting up to the number eight before losing myself to the silk of his skin.

Ernest's silence was a clear sign he didn't want to speak further. I just didn't know which part of what I'd shared had so affected him. The story of gods and monsters, or the knowledge that I would be forced to kill him.

Even if I may not have wanted to.

But Ernest would lose his humanity when the infection truly took hold. As I drove the trident into his gut, I would be looking into the empty, lifeless eyes of a monster. Mer lacked humanity. They were parasites, and I was the being entrusted to eradicate them.

Just as a Mer's only instinct was to spread death, mine was to destroy them.

I rolled onto my back, trying to find physical comfort while my mind was practically quaking with fear. These were only single moments of tenderness, but moments I seemed to crave. It was dangerous, to allow those feelings to fester, knowing what would become of Ernest.

A sickening rush came over me, gripping at my stomach. I laid a hand down on my lower abdomen, unsure what such a feeling was. It was familiar but distant, an aching I had not felt since Karakos offered me my bargain.

It was the possibility of failure. No, it was the idea of hope. Hope that we would find Ernest's power and free him from his infection, so he could

free me. Or was it because the thought of killing him, humanity or none, was painful?

It was that very feeling which kept me awake long after Ernest's breathing evened out. Sleep wasn't something I would find, nor necessarily needed. Yet I found myself lying beside him, refusing to move, even as the discomfort inside of me grew like a distant storm.

Only when I was brave enough to abandon his warmth did I rise from the bed, take my trident and leave. All the while, I felt him. The way his back brushed my arm with every inhale and exhale he took.

Walking away from the shack was difficult. Each step back towards the glassy, calm ocean, Ernest's curled up body was imprinted in my mind.

I lowered myself in the soft sands, knees sinking as I dipped the three-pointed tips of my trident into the water. Power pulsed beneath my palm, shooting down the length of my conduit. Ripples cast outwards, growing and growing until I was sure it could be felt in every dark corner of the sea. Not that it needed to stretch so far, not when the message was meant for one being only. All the speaking about gods and monsters reminded me of a creature who would have the means to find what we were looking for.

But it was a risk to call upon it, as all good things were. Just like Ernest. He was a risk, likely my greatest one yet.

'Crakales.' My water called, searching for an imprint of the Mer amongst my oceans. 'Crakales, I free you. Seek me out.'

# Chapter Twenty-Nine - Ernest

to the

'A crab?' I stared dumfounded at the orange-armoured creature that Killian held in his outstretched palm. 'You've got to be fucking kidding me.'

'Contrary to your belief, my words are bond. I do not '*kid*' around with you. I'm trying to help you.'

Since waking, my frustration had reached new heights. Not only because Killian had not bothered to wake me, instead leaving me alone until I'd woken to find the sky already darkening with mid-afternoon. Added to that, in the little break I had hoped to sleep peacefully, Killian had infiltrated my mind. Nightmares fuelled the dark, painting pictures of a child being murdered by his mother, thrown into the fates of gods and their monsters.

But what truly lingered after I woke was the terror. There was nothing more frightening than a child's fear. It was both irrational and rational. The concept of my faceless mother murdering me, when she had the best reason to seek revenge, burrowed something poisonous deep inside of me.

'What good is that going to do?' I said, flinging my hand towards the crab in dismissal. A sharp click followed as the crab reached out its serrated claw and snapped at me.

'Now, Ernest, if you knew any better, I would suggest you don't offend Crakales. Offending a monster will only lead to pain and suffering.'

My mouth dried as I narrowed my eyes back on the creature. 'Monster? That thing?'

Killian lifted his hand closer, making me jolt back a step with a newfound fear. 'Crakales is likely the most formidable of them all.'

I fought the urge to place a hand on my hip and lean into it. 'Okay, Killian, and what exactly is such a little cra—Crakales.' I caught myself before earning another nip of its claw. 'Going to do for us?'

'Find what we're looking for. Perhaps if I explained it in mortal terms, you might see the method in this madness. Aleanna is a needle, the ocean a haystack. Except think of the hay being the creatures the ocean is made up of. So, if we can ask the hay itself where the needle is, then that will save us many wasted hours searching every corner of the ocean for her.'

I swallowed back a laugh, enjoying just how serious Killian was as he explained his plan. A little crease had formed between his pale brows, as though the analogy itself was hard for even him to understand.

'So Crakales is going to help us find Aleanna who, in your terms, is our needle?'

The crease smoothed and his lips lifted in pride. 'Exactly. I thought that might help you understand.'

Oh, I understood alright.

What stumped me was waking to find Killian, not beside me, but scheming. I reminded myself he was only helping me because of what my magic could give him. But there was something in the way he looked at me which planted another possibility in my mind.

'Thank you,' I said, eyes flickering between his violet gaze and the crab in his palm. 'I would... be lost without you.'

'Convincing,' Killian added, a smile creeping up his face. 'You've almost perfected your attempt at being honest.'

Gods, he was handsome when he smiled. Not devilishly so, but otherworldly in his beauty. It made sense to me that Killian had lived for a long time—surely he had been the one to inspire those statues back at my castle. Any sculptor would find a muse simply by looking in his face.

'And yet you still need more practice of being less of an insufferable—'

The sand beneath my feet shifted, silencing me. It didn't move entirely, just the distant rumble of an earthquake. But it was as though the grains began to shiver and dance. I looked down and found... crabs. Hundreds, if not thousands. of them. The sands birthed them out in hordes. They scuttled over my toes, nipping at skin.

'Shit!' I screamed, but Killian didn't seem bothered by the unexpected visitors. He was whispering something to Crakales, as though the crab

could understand him. Then, he lowered the creature to the sands and released it.

I stumbled back, trying everything in my power not to crush the army of crabs beneath my feet. Unfortunately, the crunching sounds only proved otherwise.

'Stand still before you truly face Crakales' wrath,' Killian snapped, watching as the army of crabs moved towards the water, scuttling on strange legs, before the tide swept them away. 'The more you leave alive, the quicker they'll locate Aleanna.'

Once I was satisfied that the sand was, in fact, sand again, and that the final waves had lapped up the dregs of Crakales's army, I stepped in beside Killian. 'You are truly full of *monstrous* surprises.'

He shot me a sideways glance and I could have sworn a fire lit in my belly. There was something distracting about the way he looked at me. 'Princeling, you have no idea.'

I almost choked at the intensity in his eyes. 'So, what do we do now?'

'We wait,' he answered plainly. 'Crakales's kin will locate Aleanna, and the moment they do we will go to her. Could take minutes, maybe hours, at worst days...'

'Days aren't something I have to spare.' The sun had moved far from its peak in the sky, but dusk was still hours away. 'We have to find her, and today. Or do you need a reminder as to what the acolytes will do tonight?'

To my surprise, his hand landed on my shoulder. The suddenness of his touch drew me out of the impending doom I had woken with, offering me some much-required distraction. 'Trust me, I'm aware. And we have time. In the meantime, I have something I'd like to show you.'

'Not another crab-monster, I hope?'

I watched the right side of his mouth quirk up, then the left. The smile didn't stop there—it climbed up his face and broke over his purple-hued eyes until his expression radiated with the emotion. Then, beneath his fingers, I felt the thudding beat of his hearts. 'No, but some would call her a monster.'

'Who?'

His eyes left me and I felt like I could finally breathe properly. He glanced over my shoulder, into the canopy of trees that lined the beech. 'Tell me, Ernest. Do you believe in fate?'

The question was strange, but then again, I found myself pondering it. 'What good is fate to me when mine is resting in the hand of doom?'

Killian leaned in, closing the space between us until there was barely an inch. 'Ever the optimist.'

'Am I that predictable?'

Killian drew back and I found myself leaning in. It was silly, embarrassing almost, especially since I knew he recognised it. It seemed my short temper was not the only thing I had woken up with, but an insatiable hunger in my groin. *Gods*, *help me*. I could blame the Mer poison for such a feeling, but even I knew that would only last so long.

'Not quite, little princeling,' Killian whispered his answer, threading his fingers with mine. His soft palm sparked a shiver to race up my arm. 'Not quite.'



WE HAD LEFT the beach and followed some unseen path into the island. White gulls cawed overhead, following us from above. Serpents coiled around low-hanging branches and other creatures shot through the undergrowth. Sweltering heat beat down on my skin, making the thin clothing we found in the shack feel more like a winter coat lined with fur. Between the feeling of cooking in my skin, and the endless waste of time, my frustration was practically boiling over.

I believed we were walking aimlessly until the treeline broke and I caught what could only be described as a small castle in the middle of woodland. Or at least the ruins of one. I had asked Killian where we were, but he'd found it amusing to leave me without an answer. All he'd said was, 'amongst friends' which really didn't mean much.

The closer we came to the old walls, the more I noticed other things which didn't seem to make sense, out of place in a remote area like this. Little bags hung from sparse branches, containing herbs or other dried leaves. Glass vials of all assortments and sizes were nestled against the roots of trees or discarded along the foot-worn path we followed.

I couldn't place it, but something about it all unsettled me deeply. I almost felt as though we were being watched from the shadows. Which, in a place like this, there were an abundance of.

'After you.' Killian gestured towards the doorless entrance of the strange ruins. Thick trunks grew through the walls, making it hard to discern where the castle ended and the forest began. Crumbled stone surrounded us, as though this place had once been far grander, far larger. Now it was barely the outline of an old castle, claimed by earth and time.

'Killian, my boy, is that you?' A voice echoed down the dark corridor before me, as though it carried on the stale air lingering in the building. It was raspy, like rusted coins clanging together in a purse. Although I couldn't see the person who spoke, I had no doubt they were ancient from their all-knowing tone.

'When have you been one for pointless questions, Larisa?' Killian replied, a constant presence just behind me. 'Have the years since my last visit dulled your senses?'

The laugh began, rumbling through every crevice and crack that darkness could reach. 'Far from it, my child. Time has been a friend of mine, as you well know. Come, you know where to find me, and bring that pretty little friend of yours.'

'He prefers Ernest, but I call him princeling.' Killian's hand fell to the curve of my lower back, urging me a step forward.

'I do *not* like this,' I said, to the amused and dark cackle that echoed with more intensity. 'Not one bit.'

'No harm will come to you, Ernest.' There was no denying the total honesty in Killian's words. 'I promise.'

*I promise*. How did two words make my knees weak? I wished they didn't make me feel better, but they had. Although that didn't stop me from snatching up his hand again, threading his fingers with mine and holding on. The shock on his face melted to horror, then to something else entirely.

'What?' I asked, sticking out my lower lip. 'I've seen you naked. I'm sure holding your hand isn't going to bother you.'

'It's not that.'

'What is it then?' I gripped tighter when the sound of feet was caught on the warm breeze.

Killian's stare was intense. He looked from my hand, to his, as though he was expecting something more to happen. 'I usually don't like being touched.' His fingers drummed on the back of my hand, as though proving a point. I tried to pull back, suddenly ashamed, but I couldn't tug my fingers from his iron hold. 'Sorry.'

'I said *usually*, princeling.' There was no denying his smile. 'I was merely surprised. Now, come on. Let's not keep Larisa waiting.'

There was barely time to contemplate Killian's pronouncement as we continued navigating the ruins of the strangely decorated place. When the mysterious woman Killian had named Larisa spoke, it sounded as though she stood only at the end of the corridor. But it turned out I couldn't have been more wrong. As we wound through the dark, climbing narrow stairs and passing over floors that looked like they could barely hold our weight, Larisa did not reveal herself.

But I knew we were close because I could smell something... proof of life. Whoever this Larisa was, whatever she was, she enjoyed tea.

My mouth salivated at the scent of lemon verbena and honey stewed over a fire. The harsh scent of crackling wood hit the back of my throat and stung my nose, but the sweet lemon soothed it.

Calling the place we entered a room was perhaps too generous. It was no more than four crumbling walls, a hearth, a rickety table and a large brass pot which a hunched woman stood before. The ceiling was more a collection of overlapping branches from the trees that had infiltrated the ruins and claimed them. At least the air was cool beneath the shadows.

'Having two visitors is a rarity for me. Be thankful I have enough tea brewed,' Larisa said. Her back moved as her arms turned a ladle the length of her body in the pot before her, which oozed with the smells of the concoction she brewed.

'As if you didn't know this moment was coming years before any of us,' Killian said from my side, still holding onto my hand. Through his palm, I could feel the thump of his two hearts in tandem. One after the other. Beat, beat, beat. It was a comforting rhythm, which I needed in that moment.

'You caught me, Master Metropoli. Please, both of you, take a seat,' she said without turning around. 'It is not every day I get company, and I understand your time is limited. So, let us not dilly dally, huh?'

Killian peeled my stiff fingers from his, and I carefully dropped my arm back to my side. I still found it hard to move as I watched the old woman hum to herself, barely bothering to notice we were here.

Not wanting to offend our host, I walked to the table and pulled up a chair. Killian joined me, sitting so close to my side that his knee brushed mine.

'Does *he* speak?' Larisa asked, turning sharply on us.

My breath hitched in my throat as I took in her face. Milky eyes, a faroff expression, skin like the melted wax of a candle and a crown of greybrown hair twisted upon her head.

I leaned forwards. 'I know you.'

'Ah, so you do,' Larisa said, scooping up a clay mug from the shelf at her side and turning back to the pot. 'And I know you, Prince Ernest of Ire.'

'You were outside of the city,' I continued, knowing she had not told me I was wrong. 'In the crowd trying to get in, you told me to run. You told me my father was...'

'Doomed. I remember. Would not leave the city alive. Yes, yes. I know what I told you, for I was the one who spoke.'

I shot Killian a look, one that told me this was news to him, before he spoke. 'Then we can skip the introductions and move on swiftly.'

Larisa spun back around, moving on lithe feet for a woman of her age. She walked to the table, slowly, as though every step had to be careful. Which, from her colourless eyes and the way she never looked to us when she spoke, made me sure that she was blind. 'I do not rush you, Killian, so I ask that you do not rush me in return. Seeing fate takes time, and patience. A virtue which I asked you to work on the last time you visited me, did I not? I see that fell on deaf ears?'

'My apologies, Larisa, but as you've mentioned, we have no time to dilly dally.'

'Time is a godless concept. No one controls it.' The mug was placed before me, and another before Killian. Not a drop was spilled. 'Drink up, Ernest of Ire.'

Years of doing as others asked flooded over me. If there was one lesson Father taught me it was respecting my elders, and there was something about this woman that told me I didn't want to offend her.

I watched her warily over the rim of the mug. She wasn't looking at me, not even in my direction, but she sensed my hesitation. 'The tea is nothing but tea. It isn't poisoned, spiked, or brewed with anything nefarious. It is simply tea. Drink. Up.'

That didn't stop me from watching Killian take the first sip. The liquid ran over his lips, a single droplet escaping down the corner of his mouth. I watched it, transfixed, eyes tracing over the lump in this throat as he swallowed. 'Ah, you picked my favourite concoction.'

'Of course I did.' Larisa slapped the table. 'I knew you were coming.'

'*Of course* you did,' Killian echoed, tilting his head up sharply to make me follow suit and drink. 'Then you'll know what we've come for.'

'Answers, which you know I cannot give. Although paths, I can suggest.'

She was talking in riddles, but I didn't care, because the tea was so gods damned incredible. My first few sips were polite and careful, but I soon tipped it back and gulped every ounce of it down.

'What answers?' I asked, hissing across the table to Killian.

He did everything not to look at me when he replied. 'Where your magic comes from. Which forgotten god wishes to return to this world and use you as a pawn. Your fate.'

All my life, it had been speculated by my father, but never known. 'Is it possible to find out?'

'Anything is possible, Ernest,' Larisa said as she snatched the mug away from my fingers. She lifted the mug to her nose and inhaled so deeply I thought her chest would burst.

'How do you know a person's fate?'

'Larisa *is* fate,' Killian answered, speaking on behalf of the woman who dug her bent finger into my cup, swept the dregs of sodden leaves from the bottom, and stuffed it into her cheek greedily, rubbing them on her gums. 'Larisa is many things. I said some would call her a monster, a title which no doubt pleases her. Many years ago, others called her a witch. But the truth, princeling, is she is no different to you. A hero. A human blessed by a god.'

'And you?' I didn't mean to sound so offended, but then again, how else would I take it?

Killian ignored that comment, swiftly moving on with his explanation. 'She has magic, abilities which are as rare as raw opal lost in beds of rock. Whereas your ability can—*could* grant wishes through speaking them aloud, hers can see the outcome of almost anyone's story.'

'Not the outcome, you blowfish,' Larisa snapped, tea leaves stuck to her wonky and rotten teeth. 'I see paths. I witness all the many ways someone's

story may go. Some have long winding roads, others short and narrow paths that end abruptly. It is different for every person and they change like the tide. It is maddening, or can be, to see a person's fate when it is no more than a knot of possibilities yet to unravel. And yours.' Larisa ran her tongue over rotten teeth, showing bits of tea leaves stuck in between them. 'Yours is not what I expected.'

I found myself leaning towards her, thirsting for more. 'Do I... succeed? Do we find Aleanna, get my magic back and—'

'Save the world?' Larisa tilted her head so sharply, I was sure I heard bone snap. 'No, not the world as it has been.'

My blood raced down to my feet. 'But that is just one outcome, no?'

'Depends on the path you tread upon, Ernest of... of.' A feral look came over her face. Instead of using her finger to scoop tealeaves from the bottom of my mug, her tongue slithered free and lapped at the clay. It was a rushed and frantic movement, one that made me edge closer to Killian.

The atmosphere shifted so quickly, I almost lost my breath. A thunderous expression pinched at Larisa's face, turning her more into a monster than the hero Killian suggested she was.

Killian noticed too, grasping my thigh beneath the table, reminding me he was close.

'What have you brought to me, Killian?' Larisa snapped, milky eyes landing exactly where he sat.

'That was a question I was hoping you would answer. Do you see something in his fate?'

Larisa snapped a hand out to him. 'Your. Mug. Now.'

Killian wasted no time in handing his over. Once she licked it clean, Larisa leaned back in her chair and released a moan whilst her spine clicked from her lower back to neck. 'Two threads.'

'Pardon?' I leaned in. Was that supposed to mean something?

'Two threads,' Larisa repeated, almost giddy or drunk. 'I see two, connecting many times over. Tying him.' She pointed at Killian, then at me. 'To you.'

'I made a bargain, Larisa. One to help Ernest in his venture to retrieve stolen power and save his world.'

'*Our* world,' she snapped, her voice deepening to something ancient. Shadows crawled over the room as though dancing to her changing tone, or perhaps shrinking away from her in fear. 'Or have you forgotten you belong

to it after all these years? Did Karakos take your humanity away so thoroughly that it is lost to you?'

She was not the only one to react in anger. Killian buzzed with it, practically shaking. One hand was a fist on the table, the other tightened around his trident. I found myself reaching for him, attempting to offer my own kind of comfort. Beyond the castle the sky cracked, lightning whipping across the gathering clouds.

'I apologise if something has offended you. That was not our intention coming here,' I said, trying to ease the tension. 'Killian, we should leave. Please.'

'No.' His voice shattered the dark apart. 'Not without what I came for.'

I looked expectantly to the old crone, praying to whatever god could protect us from such a being. It was to find she was already glaring at me, devouring me with milky-blind eyes as though they saw every mark on my skin.

'It is not you, Killian, who determines if they want the answer. If Ernest so desires it, he can use that voice of his and ask.'

I cleared my throat, missing the power that once lingered within it. Not only did it offer me control, but protection. And right now, beneath the scrutiny of this ancient woman, I could do with some protection. 'Who is my patron?' I asked outright. 'Do you see who gave me my power?'

Larisa snapped her head to me, eyes wide and feral, but they softened slightly at the corners. 'Nyssa wishes to make claim to this world again, through you...'

Nyssa. The banished goddess. Mother. Life herself. 'But she was banished long before I was born...'

'And yet here you sit, marked by her.' Larisa stood so violently that Killian's mug was knocked over. It rolled around a couple of times before tilting over the edge of the table and smashing against the floor. 'You both shall find your answers. You both shall find your peace. But the cost will break more than the rules of nature. It will shatter the seas. It will cleave this world in two. And you both will pay the ultimate price.'

'I have heard enough.' I got up, head aching, body already feeling the call of the Mer. How long had it been since we came? It felt like minutes, but time felt odd in this place. 'Killian, I want to leave. Now.'

He didn't move a muscle. Instead he continued to glare at Larisa with thunderous intent. It was as though he didn't hear me.

'Now!' I shouted.

It was as if my power came back in that moment, because the tension broke. Larisa cleared her throat, her expression softening as she looked between us. When she smiled, it was to show missing teeth and cherry-red gums. Not even a hint of her previous fury was left. 'Well, that was brief. Ernest, it was truly lovely to see you again. Killian, ever the pleasure.'

I bowed my head, wanting this to end. But before I could utter Killian's name, he stood so abruptly that the chair was knocked to the floor. Without a word, he turned on his heel, steam practically coming out of his ears, and left.

A frail hand reached out and snatched my upper arm. Nails pinched through the light tunic, aching my skin. I turned to find Larisa latching onto me like a leech, her expression serious.

'Heed my warning, Ernest.' My blood cooled at her use of my name. It was a weapon unto itself. 'There will come a time when you will be forced to make a choice. It will be painful, but you must make it.'

I allowed her threat to sink in. It could mean a multitude of different things. 'You said Killian and I were bound. Two threads. What did you mean?'

She released me. 'That is not for me to share. Killian will tell you in his own time, when he works the truth out for himself. Until then, be wary. We are pawns on the gameboard for the gods. Tools. Guard yourself.'

My head ached, my thoughts swirling. I had so many questions. About Nyssa, about this truth that Killian had yet to work out. I had no doubt that Larisa saw our fate but kept it from me for a reason. Even if I wanted to persist, I couldn't. I had no time. Silver flashed between us, caught in the dull light. I glanced down to find silver scales across my arm, the tell-tale sign that I would turn soon.

'I will come back for answers,' I said, drawing back.

'Don't waste your time with an old soul like me. Answers do not lie here.'

A breath hitched in my throat. 'Then where do I find them?'

She leaned in, foul breath itching against my skin. I found myself stiffening, growing cold as her presence enveloped me. But when she whispered her answer into my ears, it was the maddening sting of inconsequential words.

'Knock. Knock. Open.'

# Chapter Thirty - Killian

the state

Every time Ernest called my name, it took everything in me not to stop. I stormed through Larisa's ruins, entirely aware of the colossal tantrum that I was having. But nothing could stop me. Likely not even the magic we hunted for Ernest.

Rain fell across the dense forest, the air humid and thick. I waded through it, putting as much distance between me and the old woman.

'Killian, I swear to any god listening, if you don't stop, I will fucking *make you*.'

*Make you*. Two little words and I couldn't help but sense Ernest's honest fury in them. I swatted bags of Larisa's incense, kicking bottles out of my way as I forged towards the beach. 'Leave it alone, Ernest.'

'Leave it?' he echoed, his feet smacking the ground as he made chase. He was breathless by the time he drew closer, snapping at me with his ferocious little teeth. 'How do you expect me to leave something I didn't ask for?'

'Then forget it.' It was so easy to argue with him. Not that I wanted to, but there was something about our contrasting tempests that always ended up clashing. 'None of this will matter in a few days. Just *forget* it.'

'You bastard.'

Ernest, to my surprise, picked up his pace until he stood before me. I couldn't do anything but stop with him in my way. As much as I longed to barrel through him, I didn't think I could. Not ever.

'What was that about, Killian?' he shouted, pointing in the direction of the ruins. Even from here, I could hear Larisa laugh. 'Your reaction was fucking confusing!' 'I thought I was doing the right thing, to help you get some answers.'

His eyes widened, his finger lowering. 'At what cost?'

'You want your magic back, do you not? I am expending every possible tool I have to help you, and this was just another wasted chance. Now please move out of my way.'

He narrowed those fucking blue eyes, his black hair stuck to his face in thick curls dampened by the humidity of the island. 'Make me.'

I stepped close, fuelled by the challenge. 'You do not know what you are playing with.'

Ernest stepped in to contest me. 'Yes, I do. I'm facing a man who is so stuck in his trauma that he doesn't know how to deal with it. A man whose past is so deeply embedded in his soul that scars have healed over the thorn and he doesn't care to allow anyone to help him free it.'

Water dripped from my nose, falling over my lips to my chin. 'The bargain I made was to help you, not the other way around.'

Ernest rolled his eyes, hands pressed firmly on his hips whilst he looked to the sky for patience. 'Except your bargain means I *am* supposed to do something for you. How did you put it, 'free you.' Free you from what exactly? You never did say.'

I should have forged my lips together, should have bit down on my tongue and swallowed my reply down with the blood that swelled in my mouth. Instead I spoke it. 'This. This life. This path. This fucking thread that tethers me here until I solve an issue I never started.'

Something Larisa said replayed in my mind.

Two threads. I see two, they connect many times over. Tying him. To you.

'An issue?' Ernest repeated, taking in my words, believing I referred to him and not the Mer infecting the oceans. 'Karakos damn you, Killian. I never asked for your fucking help. I never wanted you to sweep in and save me. If I was so much of an *issue* then leave. Go and crawl back into whatever hole Karakos has kept you in. Go fester in your past and fuck off.'

My hearts stopped in my chest. Both, simultaneously. 'No, I wasn't talking about you.'

Ernest turned sharply, his body moving with such fluidity there was an otherworldly grace to him. 'I forgo our bargain. Forget it, break it, cancel it. Do whatever you want with it.'

I stood, dumfounded, as I watched Ernest march ahead. He rolled his shoulders back, held his chin high and all the while he had no idea of the

collection of scales which had grown on the back of his neck. Then I did the only thing I could. I gave chase.

Oh, how the tables had turned.

'You need me,' I said, desperately.

'No, I don't,' Ernest dismissed me with the coldest tone I had ever heard him use. 'Didn't you hear, Nyssa's my patron. I have the Goddess of Life behind me, a literal Queen. She trumps your little ocean god, doesn't she?'

'Except she won't care for you, since you gave your magic away freely.'

If anything, my retort only made him storm ahead with more vigour. Damn my mouth, damn my inability to think before I spoke. Had years of no real human contact ruined my ability to be one?

Was I even one at all anymore?

'Ernest, wait. You don't understand the dangers lurking out there.'

'Dangers as in a god-cursed man who would hunt me down the moment I fully turned?' Ernest asked from over his shoulder. 'I know everything about danger. I have looked into your eyes, knowing they would one day be the last thing I see if I don't get my power back.'

He was right, of course he was. But that didn't stop me from pleading with him to listen. Who had I become? I hardly recognised the weakness inside of me as I chased after a human, begging for him to hear what I had to say.

'Ernest, wait. Please.'

'Leave me alone, Killian.' He used my name in the same weaponised manner I had just used his. I could have easily made him stop, used my power and controlled his body as though I held the strings. But I didn't dare do that, not ever again.

Ernest broke out of the tree line, his heavy footfalls softening beneath sand as the thrashing waves clawed at the shoreline ahead.

'Okay, Ernest. You're right, it's me who needs you.' Out on the beach again, away from the density of the forest, there was nothing to muffle my truth. 'I need you.'

'And finally the truth shows itself.' He stopped, turning on me once more. I thought this was my chance, until I saw the red stain that was once the pearl-white of his eyes. 'The night I was bitten, you saved me. Then I saved you in Thalasapoli. We're even.'

'I can't just leave you to face this, I won't just—'

'I believe Ernest asked you to stop.' A figure stepped in from behind him. It spoke with a voice so melodic and sweet, sickly almost. Worst of all, it dripped with power. Waves of red hair fell like rivers of blood over pale skin. It clung to the damp body of a woman with vivid emerald eyes and a smile so deadly I reached for my power without thought.

It was her. The woman we searched for, except she had found us first.

'Aleanna?' Ernest exhaled, turning to face the woman standing too close behind him.

Lightning flashed in my veins, echoing over the sky, but before I could cast it towards her, Aleanna lifted a pointed nail. Gold light glowed at the base of her throat. 'Ah, ah, Sea Witch. *Keep still for me.*'

I did stop, because it was all I could do. Magic blanketed over me, something strange and cold, forcing my muscles to turn to stone and my wants and desires to refuse my body's commands. From the woman's throat, golden light spilled beyond as though she swallowed a star. A star being Ernest's power.

Here it was, just in reach. Freedom, my chance. Then why did I wish to turn my back on it?

'This is not the warm welcome I expected,' Aleanna said, slinking around Ernest on careful feet. Like him, her skin was speckled in scales, but hers were purple and green. I watched her out the corner of my eye, out of fear and interest. 'You send your little crabs to fetch me like some hound and then greet me with lightning?'

Even if I wanted to reply, I couldn't. What made matters worse was the genuine concern in Ernest's eyes when he looked between us, as though he watched a lion circle a lamb.

The last time I had felt this powerless was when my mother's fingers had gripped my hair whilst her blade dragged across my throat. Even with the trident in my hand, it was as though Aleanna's voice was cutting me off from its power.

Ernest placed himself between me and the Mer. 'Aleanna, please don't hurt him.'

My chest cracked at Ernest's plea. It was as though the sea and sky watched on, waiting to see how this ended.

'I don't plan to.' Instead of rebuking him, she said something else. 'All the effort to reach me, and it has worked, Ernest of Ire. I'm here now, just as you wanted.'

'Then...' Ernest stopped himself, cleared his throat and straightened his posture. It was as though I watched him change, not from man to Mer, but from the man I had come to know to the prince he had been before. 'Then you know what I need back from you.'

Aleanna tapped her finger to her throat, just over the glow of light that shone beneath her clavicle. 'I have an idea...'

'Please.' He dropped to his knees, mimicking what many others had done for him before. 'If I don't get it back, it is in the fates that Ire will be doomed.'

Her expression was kind, soft eyes and a tension free mouth. Aleanna pondered this, her jaw flexing as though she chewed on Ernest's words. 'Come, Ernest. I have something I would like to show you.'

Light glowed from her throat as she laced her voice with his magic. Although if Aleanna truly knew him, Ernest did not need to be controlled to follow her. He would have gone without it given the chance of getting his power back.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to break apart the sky and ravage the world the moment Ernest rose from his knees and turned towards the sea with Aleanna by his side. Words were shared between them, but nothing I could hear. All I could do was watch them both walk into the waiting water as the sunset reflected before them in a halo of light.

Ernest stopped when he was waist deep. He turned to face me, defying the odds of her control for only but a moment. I could not hear him over the thunder of my hearts, the roaring of the ocean or the untapped power that hummed in my skin.

But I read his lips.

Will he be safe?

He. He referred to me.

Aleanna smiled at this, placed her hand on Ernest's shoulder and continued to urge him forwards. All I could do was watch. Watch as the Mer took him from me. Watch as saltwater melted his human flesh from his body, revealing the Mer which lurked beneath.

The last thing to disappear was the flick of a silver tail, then the surface was still, and Ernest was gone.

# Chapter Thirty-One - Ernest

the state

Aleanna was unlike the other Mer I'd seen before. It was as though her body had held onto the humanity the sickness should have purged, leaving behind something familiar yet entirely different.

Something *new*.

Her tail was a sea-glass green and dawn-stained purple, complimenting the hue of her eyes. The ocean currents pulled back her poppy-red hair, making it seem as though rivers of blood flowed in her wake. Scales coated her body, covering her chest and spreading down her shoulders to her talontipped, webbed hands. Aleanna no longer looked like she was in the midst of decay. She was beautiful and rejuvenated. Human but...changed.

We didn't speak. There was nothing to do but shadow her. Even if she hadn't woven the spell around my limbs, making me prematurely shift in this form and follow her, I would've. Her command echoed even now as the water rushed past my ears.

The deeper we swam, the cooler the water became. We moved through reefs of the most beautiful coral, passing amongst shoals of fish. Perhaps if everything wasn't on the line, my power literally just out of reach, I might have appreciated the change in the scenery around me. The water opened up, revealing a film of strangely dancing mist where I believed the sandy bed of the ocean to be. But Aleanna spared me a glance and dove beneath.

I followed. What lurked beyond took my breath away.

A trench reached far deeper than I ever imagined possible. On either side, the harsh rock face of the earth's deepest layer felt like it was closing in on me. I followed close behind Aleanna, her green and purple tail flicking with vitality. I searched the grooves in the rocky walls, noticing the

flashing of light from within. Eyes. They were everywhere. Large and imposing, they watched me as I passed.

'They won't harm you,' Aleanna said, swimming in tandem beside me. 'You're one of their own. This is likely the safest place you could be in all of Ire.'

'And where in Ire are we?' I asked, the question forming in bubbles beyond my lips.

*'Home*. Not the one I grew up in, but the one I found after your father abused his control and killed me.'

Guilt uncoiled within me. Aleanna stopped, her hair fanning out around her shoulders. I joined her, hyperaware now of the scaled bodies which practically crawled out of the cavernous spaces in the trench. Steams of hot air billowed out of strange formations, spitting liquid fire out across the stone. In the flash of light, I saw hundreds, if not thousands of eyes. Some were like Aleanna, almost human with heads of hair and kind eyes. Others were the monstrous creatures I had seen before, hairless with milky eyes and mouths overspilling with rows of sharpened teeth.

'Not what you expected, is it?' Aleanna asked, following my line of sight as it swept over the trench. There was a knowing in her voice, a hint which suggested she already knew the answer.

'I don't know what I was expecting, or what I'm looking at for that matter.'

'This, Ernest, is what I have used the power you gave me, to do. To offer life back to those who lost it. All these Mer, all these people, are regaining what was taken from them when they changed. Humanity. I am offering them a future, just as you gave one to me.'

As she spoke, I watched a child no older than Ernie had been slip out of a hole in the rock face. A woman with short black hair attempted to call him back but was unsuccessful.

'You've done this?'

'I would say you did this, Ernest.'

I shook my head, wanting to shrink beneath the glares of so many Mer. 'How?'

'Your father threw me to my death, and it was death that greeted me with open arms. It was instinctual for the Mer to feast on me—except you also acted on instinct. I heard you, through Gorgana's domain, begging for me to take your magic. So I did. And with it, this is what I have achieved.'

There was a sadness in Aleanna's eyes, but there was also fury.

'I'm sorry for what he did,' I said as a swell of sickness crested within me. 'My father—'

'He has offered the same end to many people before me.' Aleanna's lips curled, as though my apology disgusted her. 'Ernest, you were the only one with the power to stop him. And yet you watched, crying out my name, wasting your gifts. Then, just as your father threw me away, you threw that magic away. But now you want it back?'

'I *need* it, not want it,' I stammered, feeling as though I was drowning beneath the truth of her words. Everything Aleanna had said was true. I *did* have the power to stop my father, but I hadn't. I was no better than him. 'Yes, I don't deserve it. But if I don't get it back, so many more people will die. Ire has been overrun, death is creeping over the land...'

'Look around you, Ernest.' Aleanna gestured, sweeping her arm through the dark water as Mer slowly slunk out of their hidden groves. 'I need it too. Unlike you, I'm using it for something good. I'm giving back the humanity that was lost with the Mer's infection. I'm using it for more than just control. This magic has a *purpose* now.'

'You don't understand.' My tail flicked, pushing towards her. I silently begged for her to see my desperation. Maybe if she recognised it, she would give my magic back to me. 'Ire has been taken by the acolytes of Gorgana. They... they have my father. Every night they will continue killing innocents. If I don't get my magic back, I cannot stop them.'

'Do you think I care about *him*?' Aleanna twisted in the water, extending her hands out to the Mer who watched on. 'The man who cared only for his own power. The man who decided he had the authority to throw me to my death for no reason. Ire was doomed the moment your family gained dominion over us all... something impossible I've come to understand. You see, this magic will finally be used for something good. Look around you. See the faces of other people your father's lack of care has sent here.'

A ripple of panic had me reaching out for her. I grasped her scaled arms, squeezing. I had focused on finding Aleanna but didn't know what would happen when I did. And it showed. I practically fumbled over my words, throwing out a net in hopes of catching her to help, except that net was riddled with gaps and holes. 'I helped you. I granted you a wish, I didn't only use that power to control...'

'The only reason I have not killed you, Ernest, is because you once showed me kindness. But do not think for a moment that I'm in debt to you. That's not how life works.'

Those words hit me with an otherworldly force. I dropped my hands, overwhelmed with a sense of failure. 'The acolytes are killing innocent people, Aleanna. Forget my father, forget everything I've asked for. Can you sit back and allow children to die in the name of a god?'

Her answer was simple. 'I was not given the choice to forgo my life before this. But instead of dwelling on what was taken from me, I'm focusing on what I have got. Lost souls, forgotten people, innocents made into monsters. No one had a choice. But this... this can be your home too. Forget what came before this and focus on what you will do with this new life instead. Anyone who is sent to the depths will be offered a new life, a second chance. A new home. One away from the dangers of the Above. Here, they will be cared for. Here, I will keep them safe.'

'It's not as simple as that.'

'And why not?'

I looked upwards, seeing the distant glow of moonlight which barely penetrated through the wall of mist at the mouth of the trench. 'Because it's my fault, and I need to make it right.'

'Ernest, you belong to the Below now. This is your home. These beings are your family. Leave the Above to fight their own battles. It's no longer your responsibility. You do not have the power to change the world.'

Except I'd had the power to save the world, and I'd wasted it. I'd given it up and now innocents were paying the price.

More children swam out from the dark caves, tails from pale pink to the richest of cobalt flicking beneath them. Everything I had known about the Mer had shattered the moment Aleanna led me here.

'If you knew what I wanted from you, and also the answer you were to give me, why did you bring me here?' I murmured.

'Because telling you why I won't give you this magic back wouldn't be as powerful as showing you. All this time you had the power to change lives, and the only one you altered was your own. You now see what I'm doing with it. I'm making the Below safe, I'm giving the Mer a chance to regain their humanity and live the lives that were cut short for them. Children, mothers, fathers, siblings. A new world.'

Just then, the atmosphere changed like a swell moving through the water. It rippled across the trench, causing the children to scream before swimming with haste back to the shadows of their dwellings.

Aleanna looked up, an animalistic snarl breaking across her face. '*He* has found us.'

A clicking sound echoed from our side. I turned to see the rock face moving, except it wasn't moving at all. It was what scuttled over the rocks that did. Crabs. My attention fell upon the larger creature with the armour of scales and beady eyes that were watching us intently.

Shit.

'Do the right thing,' Aleanna pleaded. 'Now is your chance. I brought you here to show you what I must protect, but I cannot do that if *he* finds us.'

He. Killian. The man who'd clearly used Crakales to locate me. And he was coming. This time, when I looked to the Mer, I saw them in the same light Aleanna painted them in. They weren't the monsters Gorgana made them to be. These were the creations Karakos and Luna had first intended. Representations of life. Aleanna was righting the wrongs. She was using this power as it should have always been used. Killian's life purpose was to eradicate the Mer, and if he located this place he would kill all of them.

'I *will* go to him,' I said, not wishing to leave but knowing I would endanger every soul hidden from him here if I didn't. 'But please, just as it is your responsibility to protect the Mer, it is mine to ensure the people I failed are saved from a worse fate than being beneath my rule. I wish I could just forget it, but I cannot.'

'Sometimes we do not have the choice,' Aleanna said, her entire posture coiled, gaze fixed on the ceiling of mist, ready to attack Killian the moment he entered. 'Just like I didn't when my life was forfeited for no good reason.'

'I'll prove otherwise,' I said, the muscles in my tail flexing as I prepared to leave. 'The acolytes wish to strengthen the Goddess of Death. If Gorgana gets enough power, they'll ruin the world. Not just Ire, everything. No one will be safe, not human or Mer. Please consider my request. Just because you are hidden here doesn't mean death won't come looking for you.'

My name rang out across the oceans. The water shivered with the sound of Killian's call.

Aleanna didn't refuse me again. Instead, she hissed one single word. 'Go.'

I hesitated, knowing my one chance of getting my magic back was slipping through my fingers. There was nothing else I could say, nothing I could do to convince Aleanna to help me. Maybe in time she would remember what was at stake. But I couldn't blame her for her lack of faith in humanity, for it was my father who took that very thing away from her, and I had helped. Yes, I may not have helped throw her over the balcony, but I'd stood by and watched.

The blame weighed heavily on my shoulders, and I had to face the consequences.

But I wasn't going to turn my back on Ire. All my life I had used my magic as a crutch, but that had to change. And whereas everyone else was against helping me, there was one being who would scour the fucking oceans just to support me.

My tail jolted, the muscles propelling me up and up, leaving everything I had focused on behind whilst I saw to him.

My last resort.

Killian.

# Chapter Thirty-Two - Killian



I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't move.

My body was weighed down by a power so great, I watched helplessly as night settled upon the world. Sweat beaded across my skin as the trembling began. I longed to clutch my chest as though I could rip away my ribs to ease the pressure. But there was nothing I could do, nothing but watch the light slip away with no knowledge of where Ernest had been taken.

Ernest.

I longed to scream his name, but sound was frozen in my throat. It was like wading through stone which had seized around me. My limbs, my throat, my face, my soul. Aleanna had woven her stolen magic across my skin, making sure I couldn't follow.

Time had never been so painful. It hurt to simply exist, knowing I was helpless to do anything. Powerless. So I stood there, agony tearing through my chest, head spinning until I could focus on little but the single name repeating in my mind, body, and soul.

Ernest. Ernest. Ernest.

So the moment the cord snapped and my body became my own again, there was no room for thought. Only action. I would empty the ocean entirely if it meant finding him. It wasn't a feeling I could explain, fuelled by the desperate need to see him, to know he was okay. All the while, I felt ruination rip me apart with monstrous teeth.

# Chapter Thirty-Three - Ernest

to the

A storm raged across the ocean. It pulled at my body, tossing me this way and that. Harsh currents ripped up the sand, turning the water murky. Even with my heightened sense, I had no understanding of where I was going. There was only instinct, some unnatural draw to the very pulse behind this magic.

To Killian. His name was imprinted all over this unnatural storm in the Below.

Although this power was far more than magic. This was the essence of a god. It was as though Karakos had finally awoken, a reaction to equally violent emotions, poisoning the oceans.

'Killian!' I shouted his name out into the depths. 'I'm here.'

The magic must have heard me, just as I knew it would. The storm picked up in its viciousness, responding without words but more energy, more terrifying power. Ribbons of water wrapped around my waist, solidifying into metal bands. Although uncaring, there was a familiarity to the touch. An echo of the man who controlled it, wherever he hid within the ocean.

In a blink, I was torn from my path, dragged along the ribbon of twisting water. There was no fighting it, no hoping to break free. I was an autumn leaf caught in a torrent of wind as the current drew me far from the ravine.

I'd come searching for Killian, but he'd found me first. Just as I knew he always would.

Pulsing in the centre of the tempest his current had drawn me to was Killian. Purple eyes flared with power no man or Mer should hold. It

rippled off his skin, echoing across the water which hissed and spat with streaks of azure light. It was not uncommon for Ire to experience storms, not with the clash of the day's warm weather meeting the cool of evening. Father often told me to search for the eye, the storm's centre, because there was no place safer. As a child I often thought that concept ridiculous. What storm had eyes to see? Did it delight in watching the destruction and chaos left in its wake?

But now I understood.

Killian hung suspended in the water, tentacles slithering out beneath him. He was my safety. I lifted a hand over my eyes, calling his name out in hopes he would see me. He saw nothing. His stare was lost to the world and the power he expelled. Physically he was here, but mentally his mind was adrift. And all I could think about was reaching him.

Forging ahead, the wild water ripped and tore at me. I felt it pry scales from my skin as it slapped my flesh like the hands of an uncaring lover and snatched at my body. It hurt, but it was nothing I wasn't already used to.

So, I didn't stop.

I didn't stop calling his name, using my webbed fingers to claw through the almost solid layers of his power. I was a thorn, embedding myself deep into Killian's flesh, demanding that he notice me.

I could have been struggling forward for seconds, hours, days, centuries. The relief I felt when I finally reached him was immense. I steadied myself inches before him until I was close enough to wrap my fingers around his closed fist. Although he didn't recognise me, I recognised the pain drawing down at his features. I performed a quick inspection over his body and saw no wounds. Whatever he was suffering from was a scar far deeper than flesh. And it ruled him.

'Stop it!' I screamed, knowing it was useless but unable to do anything else. Around me the tempest picked up, water spinning in a cyclone so powerful I could no longer see past its walls. 'Killian, you need to *stop*. Do you hear me?'

I rested my hands on the hard curves of his chest. Beneath my splayed palms, there was no ignoring the thunderous beat of his two hearts. One after the other, with hardly a beat to spare, they cantered like a stampede of wild horses. Any moment, surely, they would break free of his ribs and fall into my waiting hands. With one still pressed to his chest, the other moved back to the closed fist around his trident. I willed for him to notice me. And,

for a moment, his eyes focused, his pupils dilating. My breathing hitched as the wild, screaming tempest spluttered in pace. It was as though my touch was the anchoring he required. Slowly, his eyes focused on me, not through me. The deep rush of magic lifted, revealing the bright purple hue I had grown familiar with. His hearts hammered beneath my palm as though they were prisoners begging for release.

'Ern—Ernest.' His breathing was shallow and rapid, the gills across his neck flaring with vigour, tentacles writhing and slithering beneath him. Although my touch was enough to draw his attention, it was as if he could not see me completely. Something else still ruled his mind. Although, this time, Killian mumbled my name, saying it over and over beneath his breath, beneath the raging storm. 'Ernest.'

My name. It shattered out of him and understanding broke over me. This reaction, his explosion of power, it was nothing but his emotions reflecting the lack of control, his panic... his anxiety.

'Breathe,' I said, tail flicking until my entire body was practically forced against him. He was cold, so cold, but shivering as though the energy he was expelling still did not free him of the pent-up power he still held back. 'Killian, look only at me and breathe.'

I felt it then, beneath the press of my palm. His heartbeats slowed just a fraction, but enough to show me he was calming.

'I...I am...' Killian screwed his eyes closed, his divine face creasing in lines of concentration. 'I'm *frightened*, Ernest.'

That was the gleam that had been in his wide, unblinking eyes. Killian was scared. Of what, I couldn't understand yet. Big, powerful Killian who'd made a deal with a god was scared. He was *terrified*. I'd seen the emotion haunting his eyes. 'Anxiety is frightening, but it's going to be okay. I'm going to help you through it.'

Karakos knew I was familiar with anxiety. It snuck up on me, sometimes without warning, explanation, or reason. There had been days I had woken with the constricting agony wrapped around my chest. Other days it was a niggling little voice in the back of my mind.

'It. Hurts.' Killian barely got the two words out before his hand moved atop mine and held it in place.

'Listen, Killian. I'm here. I'm with you. Focus on nothing but my breathing, in and out. Together, okay? We breathe together.'

'I cannot— I—'

Emotion pushed at the confines of my ribs until it cracked me open. There was no stopping my next words, nor the boiling honesty of them. I meant every fucking word. 'Then let me be the one to rid your demons, Killian. That is my promise to you. Let me help you.'

Just as you have helped me, over and over.

He opened his eyes enough to peer at me. There was surprise in his face, enough to distract him for a moment. The nod he offered me was proof he would try. So, I breathed, in and out, gills flaring as it absorbed the air from the water, filling my lungs and repurposing it. Killian joined in a moment after me. His chest rose and fell, bubbles fleeing his mouth. I was acutely aware of his hand on mine, then the curling of tentacles around my silver tail. But I didn't feel trapped in his hold, not this time.

Slowly, his fingers began to drum a series of rhythms on the back of my hand.

*One. Two. Three. Four. Five.* It was always five taps before a short break, then Killian would begin again.

'Good,' I said calmly, recognising the swell of the cyclone finally easing. It was as if the water released a breath too, mirroring Killian who focused on nothing but me and breathing. 'Just like that.'

And gods, I couldn't focus on anything else either. Especially not when he leaned his forehead onto mine. Suddenly it was as though nothing else mattered. Not Aleanna and her hidden dwelling of Mer, the magic she refused to give me or a world in which the promise of gods was frighteningly true.

There was only us.

I closed my eyes as well, focusing on the rhythmic beat of his hearts, the smooth grace of his fingers on mine and the way his magic was back in his control. I didn't make a move to pull away. Nor did Killian.

'I thought I'd lost you,' Killian said softly, words muffled by calmer water. 'When you left, I couldn't follow. I thought... I thought I'd failed you.'

*Failed you.* Those two words sunk deep into my chest cavity, piercing the thumping organ which hurt for Killian.

'Would it be so bad if you did?' I asked, unsure why, but I was barely in control of my honesty. The relief of knowing Killian was calming, that I had reached him not physically but mentally, seemed to drown out my ability to think before I spoke.

Killian withdrew his forehead from mine and stared deeply into my soul. 'Yes.'

Karakos, help me.

His tentacles slithered around me, affixing themselves to my scaled flesh. My body arched, leaning into him more, giving over my control to him. It was my eyes that I was sure betrayed me. They flickered between his violet gaze, down to his mouth, as though I expected his lips to do something. I watched them curl into a smile. This time when he dipped his face closer to mine, it was with the beginning of a question. 'Ernest, I want to—'

'Do it.' I was breathless from anticipation, the need to think of nothing but him.

'But I haven't finished. How do you know what I'm going to ask?'

Because I could see the desire in his eyes. It was mirrored by the heat curling in my core. 'Just do it, Killian. Take what it is you want, before the moment's missed.'

He contemplated my words, panting slightly. A new type of anxiety flashed through him. It wasn't panic of losing me, but the fear I would reject his advances.

'I'm here. I found you. You found me.' I leaned so close into him that every inch of my bare chest was pressed to his skin. 'So do it. I dare you.'

'How could I ever refuse you, princeling?'

There was a single moment of stillness before my mouth crashed into his.

The kiss was an explosive release of tension. Like an exhale we both shared. Our lips meet with the politeness that came with being careful. Yes, it was rushed on my part, easing myself into him until I felt like there was naught but an inch that separated us. All the while, Killian was careful with me. Gentle. His hand released mine but his tentacles constricted a little tighter, the pressure pleasant. Then his fingers rested against the side of my face, so large they stretched the entire length from my jawline into the curls of my hair.

A roar of need spasmed through my lower stomach. It was a deep, innate hunger and it surprised me. It built in my loins, clawing its way out across my body like the feral thing it revealed itself to be.

I wanted more. I wanted him. *All* of him.

A memory of another man speared through my head. Hadeon. A name which had once motivated me only days prior now had no effect. It didn't sway me away from Killian, but only made me desire him more.

Unlike Hadeon, at least Killian was honest with his need for me. Did he use me for my power? Yes. But how could he use me unless I allowed it? We both knew what we had gotten into, and in this moment, I needed it.

Starved, I parted his lips with my tongue. It offered Killian a silent invitation which he met. He was a feast, one I selfishly devoured whole. Our tongues twisted, two dancing eels desperate for one another.

My hands were awkward. Useless. I didn't know what to do with them in our inhuman forms. If we were on land, his cock would be rubbing against my palm, my knees aching with anticipation to drop down onto them. But here I was without knowledge, without room to even understand if sex was possible beneath the water.

I delighted in every tip of his eight limbs as they brushed over my skin. A fleshy pucker sucked against my nipple, popping it raw as Killian snatched his tentacle back. The pain was nothing but pleasure, encouragement. It fuelled my need for more.

My urge was sudden, but I longed to sink my nails into his flesh, bury them deep until he could never pull away. And from the way the pressure of his hold tightened against me, I sensed the feeling was mutual.

So when Killian pulled back, I groaned in disappointment. 'No, come back.' It was a guttural sound that caused a physical reaction from him. Shadows of darkness spluttered beneath us. It took me a moment to realise the tendrils of ink seeping out across the water came from him.

'You should never feel the need to kiss me out of pity.'

Hackles rose over my back, scales prickling like hair. 'Is that why you think I just kissed you? Because you showed vulnerability?'

'Weakness,' Killian said as if correcting me, eyeing me inquisitively, seeing the truth behind actions that even I didn't know.

'Don't you dare say that. Believe that. You're far too... ancient to be so ridiculous. Anxiety is not a weakness, Killian. It is a monster, lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike. If anything, fighting it makes you a warrior. Someone with the ability to battle invisible enemies and win. You aren't weak in the face of inner demons, but brave.'

Killian lifted a finger to his swollen lips, lost to thought as my words sunk in. I hoped they lodged deep. 'I would never have beat it if you hadn't

found me.'

'That's an assumption, one you'll never be able to prove right.' I longed to touch him again. But I feared the line our strange relationship had been skirting had not only been crossed but had burned to cinders.

'I suppose not.' His eyes met mine, then traced my body as if searching for something. It was when he spoke again that I knew what he looked for. 'Aleanna did not harm you, then?'

I shook my head, finally sparing a thought to the woman I'd left behind. 'But I've failed,' I said, lips tender from the kiss whilst also desiring more. 'She won't give me back the magic. Killian, it no longer belongs to me.'

*I no longer deserve it.* 

Killian's mouth was pink, lips raw from our kiss. His taste lingered on my tongue and refused to release me. It was the tang of citrus, the crisp bite of salt. His kiss was like drinking liquor, burning down my throat, stinging my cheeks, leaving a sweet aftertaste of thrill.

I expected him to look at me like wasted potential. This was the moment he discovered I could no longer give him what he desired. But instead of drawing back, releasing his tentacles from me and turning his back on a failure, he surprised me. 'We'll find another way.'

My hands moved, exploring his hardened stomach, the way the muscles dipped into a V-shape at his hips where skin met the flesh of his tentacles. 'There's no other way. Without my magic, I cannot appease the acolytes, cannot give you want you want—'

'I have more than I could ever want.'

I swallowed hard. 'Tell me what to do, Killian. I need you.'

'We give up,' he murmured, refusing to look away from me, my mouth, my eyes.

My breathing hitched at the honesty behind his words. 'But that would mean I can't free you from your bargain,' I said, wondering if even that would distract him from me.

'I know what it means, Ernest. It doesn't matter, none of it matters.'

Even if it means you're fated to kill me? But I couldn't say it, at least not aloud.

'What does matter, then?' I asked, feeling the need to hold my breath for fear I would miss the answer.

'Stopping Gorgana's acolytes from hurting another soul. Evening is upon us.' Killian said it like it was supposed to mean something. I looked up to the Above, where the sky was dark navy.

'And?' I fought the urge to just bury my fingers in his silver hair, tangle myself in his strands, and guide him back to my mouth before the taste of him faded.

'The acolytes will be offering up another sacrifice,' Killian said, his words puncturing the mood immediately. 'We should go and stop them. You don't need your magic to put up a fight. That strength is within you now.'

I slipped out of his loosening tentacles, acutely aware Killian was saying it because he regretted the moment we'd just shared.

'Yes, of course.' My tail caught the water, shifting me away from him, facing the darkness as though I had a clue where we were in relation to Ire. But before I moved too far, a hand reached out and wrapped around my wrist, stopping me.

'Ernest?' Killian spoke my name like it was a question.

My mouth was as dry as a bone which, considering we were literally breathing beneath the water, seemed like a miracle. 'Yes?'

'You didn't think I was finished with you yet, did you?'

Fire erupted across my hips, echoing in the place where my cock had once been. Although if I reached down and pressed my fingers against scales, there was still a promise of instinctual release and pleasure.

'Now, are you saying that out of pity because I've failed?' I asked, echoing his previous comment.

Lightning flashed behind his eyes, brightening the hue into glimmering jewels. There was a seriousness to his stare that only made the feral twinge in my hips increase. 'No. And I mean it.'

'You'll need to be more specific,' I said, my encouragement barely a whisper.

'The moment we are done tonight. The second we have the chance...'
He paused, likely for dramatic effect, or to make me more desperate for an answer.

Which worked. My stomach turned, mimicking the tempest Killian's anxiety had imprisoned him in. 'Spit it out, Killian.'

'I'm going to fuck you,' he rasped. 'If you would like that, of course.'

My lips curled over teeth, flashing my sudden hunger for him. 'I would very much like that.'

'Good,' Killian said, drawing me in the direction opposite to where I was about to swim towards. 'Good boy.'

# Chapter Thirty-Four - Ernest

400

As we surfaced in the shadows of my castle, the cold night breeze tickling over my bare shoulders, I was horrified to find that the acolytes had already offered a sacrifice to Karakos. We were too late.

But it wasn't a child they'd murdered this time. It was someone else, a person much closer to me, someone whose death they'd expected to teach me a lesson.

King Terian was dead. My father was dead.

Even as a corpse I would recognise my father anywhere. In any realm, in any world. Even as he was presented before me now, hanging upside down from my balcony, legs tied together by rope, swaying in the nightly breeze.

'This is my fault,' Killian said, his fingers never leaving the small of my lower back. 'I distracted you, I wasted time.'

He waited for me to respond, offering me a moment of silence for me to fill. But I had no words. Well, I did, but they were lodged in the base of my throat, the lump there suffocating me, refusing to let me speak.

All I could do was look at the man who had once loved me, but who had then loved what I could do for him so much more.

'He's really gone?' I asked the question more to myself than anyone else. Where I expected pain to radiate through my chest, there was only silence. Surely the agony would come any second. But with every moment that passed, no feeling seemed to rear its ugly head.

'I'm sorry, Ernest,' Killian spoke softly, but the way he was quick to guide me away only proved he did not know who it was that hung from my balcony like a puppet. I supposed he wouldn't, not as we both waited for the winds to turn him enough to reveal his face. 'Tomorrow. We'll try again tomorrow.'

Killian had no idea who the corpse was, or what he meant to me. I supposed for Killian it was hard to determine the man's once bright auburn hair from the deep russet it was now. Slowly, as the body continued to spin, I finally saw his face, or what I could make out of it. It was stained from the blood which oozed down from his split neck, spreading over his face in a mask. Eyes as dark as the night sky seemed to gaze at me, as though his dead body could sense me.

The man who'd loved me.

The man who'd used me.

The man who had killed Aleanna.

'My father.' The acknowledgement broke out of me. 'That... is my father.'

Killian snapped his head to me, but I couldn't look away. Then he returned his stare back to the swinging corpse, seeing him in a new light. 'That's... King Terian? Are you sure?'

My mouth was as dry as desert sands. 'Yes.'

I couldn't cry. I couldn't do anything but watch as the remaining droplets of blood fell from his wound, feeding the ocean beneath him.

Killian moved closer, inching towards where my father swung like a pendulum, water sloshing around his broad torso. It was easier to watch Killian, the grace he moved with, the vision of his tentacles which twisted beneath the water. 'But he wasn't... the King before.'

What a ridiculous statement. Everyone knew my father. He was king. *Was.* Because he was dead now, bleeding into the ocean. Before I could release the spike of fury that crested within me, a voice called out from the shadows of the balcony.

'Have you finally come to give me what I asked for?'

It was only when the words echoed from above that I caught the movement. A shifting of a body, slowly emerging from the shadows. Silver hair fell free from a blood-red robe. It was snatched by the winds, cast to the side as though pulled by unseen hands. Piercing red eyes and a face of milk-pale skin that glowed brighter than Luna herself.

The Priestess. Seeing her sparked some instinctual tempest in me, the need to pull myself up the cliff face to the balcony and tear into her. 'Did you really think this would hurt me?'

'I'd hoped it would. Actions reap punishments. And I have not been pleased, Ernest of Ire.'

The Priestess's voice carried out from the balcony, skipping over the calm water's surface like a stone. Except the water wasn't calm for long. It spat and frothed around me. Conjured waves rippled out from where Killian watched. I couldn't see his face, but it was clear that her words had evoked a strong reaction in him.

'I offered you a peaceful route, and you disregarded it. All actions have repercussions, something you wouldn't understand living such a life of luxury in your golden cage. But Gorgana *will* teach you. Death will remind you what happens when you cross it.'

My jaw ached as my teeth grew to sharper points. There was no holding back the monster within me, not as I fixed my eyes on the woman above.

'You'll pay for this!' I shouted. There was so much anger in my voice that it wouldn't have surprised me if I was causing the storm in the water around me. If I wrapped my fingers around Killian's trident, I had no doubt I could have used it to level the castle and everything around it.

The Priestess opened her arms up, as though waiting for the darkness to embrace her. There was no denying her glee, even from the distance between us. 'But I have nothing left to offer as payment. I'm penniless. There is nothing you can take from me that has not already been lost. Your threats are wasted, Ernest, but mine still stand. Except after what you did in Thalasapoli, I have decided to alter my offer slightly.'

Wrath built in my chest, making my very skin shiver. 'Fuck your offer. The magic's gone. And I too have nothing you want...'

She lowered her hands, grasping the stone balcony that my father had thrown Aleanna over. Even from the distance I could make out the strain of her grip, how the stone seemed to crumble beneath it. 'Ah, ah, ah. That's not entirely true, is it?' Her red glare fell upon Killian, and I fought the urge to hide him behind me. 'I see you've brought company. Hello again, Killian. It's been an awfully long time, hasn't it? Who would have believed we'd ever see each other again?'

Killian did not speak. He was frozen in place, gazing up at the balcony, entirely immobilised by fear.

'Well,' the Priestess called down, 'you know exactly how to stop this, do you not?'

Again, Killian didn't speak. Instead, he lifted long fingers to his neck and pressed them to his flesh. I moved towards him without thought, unable to look at my father again. My hand rested upon his shoulder, my grip tightening in hopes of distracting him.

'Killian?'

'I... 'He stopped himself, taking a deep breath as the waves continued to lap and swell. The clouds rumbled with far-off thunder. The anxiety he had just fought was coming back, but this time he was refusing to relinquish his control to it.

'We've seen enough,' I said as I attempted to pry him away from the scene. His skin was oddly cold to the touch, the beats of his two hearts thumping too quickly. 'Come, Killian. Please, I want to go.'

The Priestess laughed down upon us. It began slowly, deep belly chuckles until she erupted in violent caws. The sound of it scored against my skin, promising to flay me open from the inside out.

Still, Killian did not move. He just continued to stare upwards, as if it was *his* father swinging like a pendulum, neck split and skin cold in death.

'Killian,' I said with more urgency, my nails digging into the flesh of his shoulders, enough to draw blood. I didn't want to hurt him, but the distant gaze in his eyes and the incoherent mumbles told me that I was losing him, and quickly. 'Look at me.'

And he did. He settled his rich eyes upon mine and relief passed over his face. It was short lived, like a flash of lightning, but it was enough for me to hook him in. Resolve hardened his features, but there was still a momentary glance back to the balcony. Then his arm wrapped around my middle and he guided me away.

That was when the laughing stopped. It came to an end abruptly, before the Priestess shouted to us one final time. 'The fates have your story written, your threads are tied. You shall give me what I desire, Ernest of Ire. And when you do, I will offer this world back to the one true goddess.'

Gorgana.

'The gods are gone!' I screamed back, almost gagging on the fury behind each word. 'Give up, just as they've given up on us.'

'The gods aren't gone,' she replied, oddly calm. 'They're simply... hiding. Isn't that right, Killian?'

There was something beneath her words, a disguised blade that she threw along with the taunt. Although I couldn't truly understand the hidden meaning, something that stopped Killian dead in his tracks.

'Doom *will* befall Ire,' the Priestess called out, humour lacing her tone. 'That I don't need to tell you. Larisa has already shared such knowledge with you, did she not? Either way, death comes for Ire. Gorgana will be restored, and we shall rule over all humans. Together. That is the thing about fate, you can never escape it. Can you, my—'

Killian exploded in a roar so fierce the night was split in stark light. Trident raised, a bolt of furious white lightning shot down from the heavens, aimed directly for the balcony. It exploded in a burst of stone and rubble. My father fell, his body no longer held up by rope.

But when the smoke settled and the dust fell around the ruins of my balcony, the Priestess was no longer there. But her laugh which rippled from the shadows told me she had survived.

For now.

# PART V DAY FOUR OF INFECTION

# **\$** 

### Chapter Thirty-Five - Ernest

400

As dawn graced the sky and I shed my Mer form, I climbed from the water and beelined for the privacy of the shack on Larisa's island. Killian followed close behind, as speechless as he had been since we left my Kingdom. He hardly looked at me, didn't utter a word. His gaze was fixed forwards, entranced by something. The usual colour to his cheeks had been drawn out, his eyes exhausted and mind distant. Even if I had the energy to demand his attention, I didn't think I could have.

It hadn't been difficult to find sleep, since neither of us had the energy to speak. Previous promises had been forgotten, stored away.

I had half expected my mind to be haunted with nightmares, but I felt nothing. Before Killian could see my lack of tears, I had rolled over and evened out my breathing in hopes he thought I slept so I could keep any questions at bay. He hadn't protested. Since the interaction with the Priestess, Killian had retreated into himself.

When I came to hours later, my body felt oddly rested. As my senses returned to me, I was all too aware of the heavy presence draped over my side. I craned my neck to find an arm and long fingers pressed softly against my navel. The sheet had ridden down during the night, allowing the cool breeze to caress my bare skin. As well as Killian's, it seemed.

Killian's body was distracting. I felt every inch of his bare skin pressed against me, making focus almost impossible. I dared not move for fear it would incite a physical reaction. My mind was telling me not to desire him, but this close my body was craving him.

I pinched my eyes closed, trying to push the knowledge of his warm flesh to the far reaches of my mind.

I attempted to think over the events of the night before, but I felt nothing. I blinked, expecting the tears of my father's death to finally come, but my eyes stayed dry.

My father was dead. Was I a terrible son to feel relief? It was as though the leash that had been tightening over my neck for years had finally loosened enough for me to take a deep, honest breath for the first time in a long time.

Perhaps grief was lost to me because I had already experienced it years ago.

My father—the one I'd cared for—had died the day he'd begun using me. Although physically he was no longer in this realm, the soul who deserved grief had passed many years prior.

I needed fresh air, not the heavy scent of warmed wood and stale salt which accompanied the interior of the shack. But with Killian's slow breathing tickling the hairs on the back of my neck, and his hand resting on my lower stomach, there was no moving without waking him.

Slowly, cautious that I still wasn't ready for him to look at me and find the cold-hearted man I had woken as, I tried prying his fingers from me. All the while, I marvelled at how smooth and warm his hands were. I was too aware of his soft touch even after I successfully moved him away. I tried to climb over his hulking frame to get to my freedom. But in doing so, I had to lift my leg over his waist.

I was halfway into the strange position when Killian's hand clamped back on my thigh and he sighed. 'This is the third time you've straddled my waist, by my calculations.'

I gazed down at him, recognising the distant look in his eyes, the same one he had fallen asleep with. His brow was furrowed with tension. For a moment, I believed I had done something to offend him, upset him. 'You're awake?'

'I am now.' Killian's fingers dug firmly into my thighs, keeping me in place.

I was forced to sit upon his hips with nothing but the thin layer of sheet between us. All thoughts of fresh air faded.

'I'm beginning to believe you have a problem with running away from me,' Killian growled.

'Am I not permitted to move without your knowing?' I attempted to keep some form of haughtiness in my tone, but all hopes of that were wasted as I looked down upon him. Killian's silver hair had fanned out across the pillow, flowing like rivers around his face, sculpted from strong, proud lines with flawless skin. My eyes flicked between his long lashes and the way his lips peaked at their bow—lips I'd just kissed hours ago. It was as though a painter had taken weeks to bring forth his features.

'I'm not your keeper,' Killian replied, drinking me in with his serious stare. To my surprise, the whites of his eyes were stained red, as though he'd been crying. Which was strange, because it was *I* who'd lost a parent last night. 'But I've found myself feeling rather responsible for your safety, I must admit.'

This time, when he looked at me it was with something else glinting in his eyes. It was the look of a haunted man, someone who harboured thoughts he couldn't share. It was guilt—I would recognise it anywhere.

It was the look I saw on my own face every time I looked in a mirror.

Even though I wanted to ask him to open up, it wasn't like I deserved to know. 'Then you'll take your hands off me and let me go,' I said instead.

He looked at me expectantly, searching my face for the one thing I was sure he'd thought was missing since I woke. Grief. Still, his hands didn't move. 'I'm afraid I won't be able to do that.'

I didn't reply, instead taking deep breaths to still the strange tension between us. It seemed to dissipate quickly when Killian's expression softened to a smile. It was so believable, I almost forgot the guilt that came before it.

'How did you sleep, princeling?' he asked, deep voice echoing over my skin, making the fine hairs stand on end.

My cock twitched at the rasp of his voice. Not wanting to give myself away, I shrugged, forced to sit upon his waist, acutely aware of the way his stomach muscles rippled as he breathed. The wrapping tattoos of tentacles around his torso moved as though they were a living, breathing thing.

'I slept as well as one would knowing that today might be their last day being human. Knowing their father was dead, knowing their city is lost to a cult that wishes to endow Gorgana with power over the world. So pretty well, all considering.'

I didn't mean for my words to have such a bite to them. Killian recoiled, his eyes roaming my body. I knew he searched for the patches of scales that

coated my flesh. There were many of them now, yet another reminder that I was too late to not only save my father, but myself.

'Don't hide behind a wall of sarcasm, Ernest. Not with me. Not anymore.'

Gods, every time he used my name it disarmed me of any forced layer of confidence I built as protection.

'If you are asking me how I slept after I found out my father no longer walks this earth, then you'll be horrified to learn that I'm... fine.'

'Fine?'

I nodded, just as his fingers tightened against my skin, nails tracing the soft flesh in warning or promise. 'Relieved, is that a better word?'

Killian pondered my words, allowing them to sink in. There was something in the way he looked up at me, as though he contemplated saying something but was deciding if it was the right moment or not.

'Your... King Terian used you. He controlled you. I don't blame you for feeling relief at his passing. In fact, if you felt anything but that I think I would be worried.' Killian's hands slowly moved through my thighs, up to the curve of my hips. 'He doesn't deserve your grief. You aren't a monster for feeling a lack of it.'

I dropped my gaze, watching his soft palms brush over a nest of silver scales growing from my skin like feathers. His confident touch, the lack of reluctance, was a welcome distraction.

'If I'm not a monster, what am I?' I held my breath, allowing for silence as I waited for his reply.

'That's not for me to say. Nor should it concern you with what I or anyone else thinks of you. Only your own judgement matters, Ernest.'

'I preferred it when you didn't use my name so freely.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Is that so?'

I nodded, swallowing hard. As my throat bobbed, Killian's eyes settled on my tender skin as though he could study the veins, bones and sinew beneath it. 'The Priestess thought the sacrifice would hurt me, but in a sense, I feel free for the first time in a... well, ever.'

Killian's face paled, his eyes falling from me as he lost himself in thought. The change in his demeanour was so sudden, I found myself grasping for a way to distract him from his thoughts.

'Are you alright?'

'Yes.' I could tell he was lying. 'I'd prefer if we didn't talk about last night, not yet.'

*Not yet*. Something truly haunted him. Between his red eyes and frightened expression, I couldn't understand why my father's death affected him so physically. Maybe it was jealously, knowing I was free whereas he never would be.

'It would be my pleasure to ignore what has happened.' I placed my fingers on his chin and turned his face back to meet mine. 'Having my father's name on your tongue as I'm straddled over you is not exactly an enjoyable experience.'

'Consider the conversation changed.' Killian lifted a finger to his lips and sealed them closed. 'Ernest, you're free to go, if you want. I'm not here to replace the shackles you've just been freed from. I know it's over now. You could walk out of this door and never turn back, and I wouldn't blame you. I failed you, the bargain no longer stands.'

The ink around my wrist suggested otherwise. It was as thick and prominent as the moment Killian forged it around me.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Because in truth, I didn't want to go. I didn't want to remove myself from Killian's waist. I wanted his hands back on me, I wanted his eyes to look at nothing else. 'That isn't what I want, Killian.'

Relief crested over his handsome face. 'Good. Then tell me... what do you want?'

The question hung between us. It was as physical as the sea-salt tang to the air and the warmth of baked wood as the sun beat upon the shack from the outside.

'This may be the last time I experience this human body,' I said.

Killian flinched, but it was only brief. 'I won't lie and say otherwise. Yes, it may be.'

'So I want to make the most of it.'

It was Killian's turn to swallow hard. 'And how would you like to spend your last day?'

*'Possible* last day,' I added.

'Possible last day, of course,' Killian corrected.

'I want you to kiss me again,' I said matter-of-factly. I enjoyed watching Killian's face shift from surprise, to expectance to... hunger. 'I want to feel

your mouth on mine. Then I want to feel your mouth on other parts of my body. Can you do that for me?'

A flush of colour filled Killian's cheeks. Then I took his hands, because clearly, he was far too surprised to move. Guiding them, I placed them back on my waist. As his fingers wrapped around me, I felt small and fragile—which I finally knew was the opposite of the truth.

'I don't want to take advantage of you,' Killian said, his words thick with honesty.

'Believe me.' I lowered myself until my mouth was inches from his. We were so close our breaths mingled. 'I *want* you to take advantage of me. But if you tell me this isn't what you want, then I'll get up and go. But let's face it, Killian. I see it in your eyes, in the imprint your fingers make as they hold me. You want me. You want to experience me. Are you going to pretend otherwise, or are you going to take what you want?'

'I cannot...' Killian said softly.

'Cannot what?'

'Cannot lie and tell you I do not want you.'

Shivers raced over my back. They spread over my skin until not an inch was spared from the goosebumps and prickled hair. 'Good boy.'

Those words of praise had found an entirely new meaning.

Our mouths pressed softly together. The connection was subtle, at first, just lips and the long exhale through our noses. Then Killian's fingers pressed tighter into me and I rocked my hips over his cock as it hardened beneath the sheet. The more aware we became of our bodies, the deeper the kiss grew.

During sex, I was always more demanding. But it wasn't with my words alone. As my tongue wove between his lips, enticing his to meet mine, it was the physical cue that I was ready for more. Then, as I dug my teeth into his lower lip, nipping hard before sucking the tender skin, I showed Killian the limits of what I enjoyed.

If this was the last time I would experience such a thing, I would ensure the memory would imprint so deep I would never forget it, even in death.

'Ernest.' Killian tangled his fingers in my hair and pulled me back. I gasped for breath, enjoying the swell of my lips and the redness of his. 'Before this... I really should explain something—'

'No. No explanations, no words, no talking.' I had clapped my hand over his mouth, shivering as his tongue brushed my palm. 'All I want to

hear you say is how fucking good I feel as I take in your cock. I want you to listen to every moan of pleasure, every breathless delight as I suck your cock. Can you do that for me?'

He drew my hand back far enough to speak. 'Such a wicked little mouth,' Killian growled, eyes drinking me in.

'Punish it then. If it's so terribly wicked.'

His eyes widened, clearly not expecting me to be capable of speaking in such a way. That thrilled me more than the hardening length of Killian's cock pressed beneath me. 'And how would you want me to do that?'

We were playing with fire. But I was all too aware that we were miles from anyone that could hear us. Besides Larisa, but I had no doubt she already saw this happening when she licked the tea-leaves from our cups. So, I decided, to hell with it—let the fire spark and rage into an inferno for all I cared.

'Well, I have an idea,' I said as I got off the bed, kneeing beside it. All the while Killian hardly moved. His eyes followed me, watching as I positioned myself upon the floorboards and placed my hands behind my back. The tilt of my chin, the narrowing of my eyes, were all a physical indication as to what I wanted.

'You're trouble, Ernest of Ire.'

My mouth watered, tongue tracing my lips as I prepared for the inevitable. Out the corner of my eye I could see the way the white sheet pitched at his crotch. I hungered for this more than anything else. 'You have no idea.'

'I'm interested in your idea of punishment.' Killian sat up, carefully swung his legs over the bed until they were placed either side of me where I knelt. His fingers grasped at the bulge of his cock until I could make out the sheer size of it. There was one thing feeling it press beneath my ass, but seeing it made that fire in me fucking *rage*.

'Have I not been clear?' I flashed him my tongue, enjoying how his entire focus went to the wet cavern of my open mouth. 'Punish this wicked little mouth, Killian.'

'I take it back,' Killian said as he slowly drew the sheet away until I got a look at the pure length of him, the way the vein bulged out from the skin of his cock. 'You *are* a monster.'

I smiled, a dark and wicked grin that stretched from ear to ear. 'Trust me, you have no idea.'

Then, as my eyes sang with the cinders of seduction, I opened my mouth and beckoned him into it.

### Chapter Thirty-Six - Killian

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I longed to think only of Ernest, as his tongue lapped around the glistening tip of my cock. But my mind was occupied by two warring thoughts. Truths, both of which I'd kept from Ernest. But neither could I divulge them now as he knelt before me with his tongue laving my cock. So I did what I was good at and gathered up the thoughts, closing them in a chest deep within me.

The first truth being that the man who called himself Ernest's father was not actually his father. Not by blood. Ernest spoke of him as King Terian. But the last time I had seen him, many years prior, he was not a King. He'd been a fisherman, and I'd handed him a baby.

Terian had used Ernest to place a crown upon his head.

He may have taken on the mantle of guardian, but King Terian shared no blood with Ernest. After Ernest's reaction, or lack of grief, I'd expected he had known. Although after pressing him for his knowledge, I knew that wasn't the case. Ernest shared nothing with the man who called himself his father. Not a single thing.

The second haunting truth that kept me awake was the Priestess. I closed my eyes and saw her, white hair whipping around a sharpened face, crimson eyes and skin the pallor of spilt milk. She had lived well beyond her mortal lifespan and proved that she too was like me, *other*.

Not monster, not hero.

Who would have believed we would once again be brought together under such circumstances? Seeing her defied all odds.

Because I had killed that woman many moons ago. Except there she had stood, proving death truly was meaningless.

My mother. Sofina Metropoli.

As Karakos welcomed me in death with open arms, stealing me from Gorgana with a single bargain, my mother must have made a bargain all her own. The skin itched across my neck, mirroring the blade she'd drawn across it. Although my skin was without scars, without marks, that didn't mean I couldn't feel it all those years later. I could feel it now more so than ever.

My mother had killed me and sent me into the arms of Karakos.

And I had killed her in return, sending her into the arms of the goddess who'd started all of this. Gorgana.

I supposed there had been a third issue which had kept me awake—the press of Ernest's cool body into my chest, how he'd nestled into me for warmth and fallen willingly into sleep.

I had planned to tell Ernest the truth the moment I had the chance, but as he knelt before me with his tongue teasing my cock, all thoughts of deception turned to dust.

This man was danger incarnate.

I was sure there was a god who presided over peril and menace, and I supposed Ernest took that mantle now. As he gazed up at me through his dark lashes, eyes hazy with desire, mouth practically dripping with spit, I knew he would be the ruin of me. My damnation.

Truths would have to wait. Ernest was right—this could be his last day. He deserved this distraction before humanity left him. And selfishly, I needed it too. I needed him.

My cock swelled in my grip, fighting against the tension I was applying to the base. I didn't dare move my wrist out of fear that the seed rumbling in my heavy balls would explode prematurely. Instead, without taking my eyes off my dangerous little prince, I guided my length and placed the curved tip to his tongue.

Karakos, help me.

'Open your mouth wide for me,' I said, before groaning at the soft brush of his tongue against my tip. Ernest took the weight of my cock's head, mouth opening as wide as he could, and was forced to loosen his jaw. Other lovers had struggled to take me in, but Ernest faced the challenge head first... literally.

'Deeper,' I commanded, although there was no denying the breathy pleasure that overrode my tone. 'Can you do that for me, princeling?'

Ernest didn't take his predatory eyes off me. He barely blinked as his spare hand came up and cupped my balls, where the other peeled my fingers one by one from my cock until he took it.

'I shall take that as a yes.'

Pleasure exploded across every inch of skin as Ernest closed his mouth over me. The pressure of his lips was perfect, as was the swirl of his tongue as it wrapped around my tip, lathering the tender flesh. His hand tightened on my base, twisting as he drew slowly up the shaft as though he was revealing a secret.

Disappointment had me gasping as Ernest withdrew me completely from his perfect fucking lips. I could have sworn and demanded that he returned me into his mouth. It took restraint for me to not grab the back of his head and force him back upon me. From the glint in those ocean eyes, I was confident he would have liked that.

Ernest's narrowed gaze flooded with mischief. 'You do as *I* say, Killian.'

A growl erupted from my core. 'Do you often get your own way?'

I knew the answer already, but that didn't stop me from asking it.

Ernest's sharp brow lifted, a flush of colour splashing across his cheeks. 'I do. Are you going to resist me?'

This was new. Thrilling. I had never lain with someone with so much fire in their veins. It was like a wild ravine, running down through mountains, tearing at stones and debris. I was simply caught in the current, willingly being tossed by Ernest's controlling aura.

'No.' I shook my head, cock throbbing. 'I will not.'

Ernest grinned as he returned his lips to my cock. Just before he took me in, only when the brush of that soft touch enticed a drip of my seed to smear over lower his lip, did he stop. 'This may be my last day, Killian, so I'm going to need something from you.'

With my cock in his hand, the promise of his wet mouth seconds away, I would have given him the world. 'Anything. Ask it, command it, and I will see it done.'

Ernest knew the power he held over me, and I offered no resistance to it. 'I'm going to suck your cock until my cheeks fill with the taste of you. Then you are going to bend me over this bed and fuck me until the memory is seared into my mind—wherever I end up next, I want to remember this moment. You do as I say, and I will make sure you feel pleasure unlike

anything you have ever experienced before. Do you think you can do that for me?'

'Gods, you little brat. How could I say no to such an ask?'

'Brat?' His wicked eyes narrowed further. The monster beneath my skin rumbled in response. 'Careful with what you offer. I may have you in precarious positions that will have you questioning everything you've ever known.'

Fuck. Me.

Fuelled by my desperate need, I clamped my fingers around his jaw and squeezed. Ernest erupted in a moan of his own, the hardened cock between his thighs twitching with the need to be touched.

'No more talking,' I said, longing to thrust myself into his mouth and stop only when I felt the back of his throat. 'Get sucking, you wicked little brat.'

'Ah, ah, ah,' Ernest said, tension humming between us. His grip tightened. 'Finally, a nickname I actually agree with.'

I opened my mouth to say it again, but no words managed to come out. Ernest wrapped his lips back around my cock, his tongue swirling in patterns against the rock-hard flesh he held in his mouth. Whilst his hand massaged my balls and his other followed the rhythm, I fell backwards onto the bed. My legs completely gave out as a wave of enjoyment devoured me. I was swept away from everything, laying back as my toes curled in on themselves.

There was nothing I could do but give in to Ernest.

At some point I threaded my fingers into his hair, tightening my grip until I pulled subtly against his scalp. That didn't deter him, as I knew it wouldn't. If anything, Ernest was encouraged, taking as much of me into him until he couldn't devour another inch—and I had plenty to spare.

'Gods, Ernest, your mouth is divine.'

He gagged, which sparked yet more fire in my belly. As he finally drew back for breath, long strings of spit tethered us together. A single tear rolled down his cheek, caught by my thumb as I brushed it away. Then I guided my thumb to his panting mouth. 'Suck it clean.'

He did as I asked. So, it turned out that control was mutual with Ernest. I would do as he asked, just as he too would do whatever I requested. He took my thumb into his mouth, sucking it, moaning into the back of his

throat. All the while, he hadn't stopped jerking my length with his perfectly gripped fist.

'Now who's the good boy?'

Ernest's eyes brightened. 'Me. I am.'

'Except you cannot take me all in,' I said, tilting my head as he looked up at me. 'That is a punishable offence.'

'Then punish me,' Ernest replied, his eyes alone telling me he was open to my suggestion. 'Do it.'

'Is that what you want?'

'Anything,' Ernest repeated, mocking my deep voice. 'You said you would do anything.' Ernest released my cock, allowing the hard length to slap against my inner thigh. His hands rose over my legs, across my navel and up to my chest. I watched as his fingers traced the lines of my tattoo, as though his touch could remove the lines my bargain with Karakos had etched into me. 'So yes, I need to be punished. Do it. Be a man of your word, Killian, and fucking punish me.'

- 'I... I...' I did not expect to actually do anything. But then again, this was Ernest I was looking at.
- 'I... 'I...' he mimicked as he stood before me. He wedged himself between my knees, his perfectly tight body leaning over me, forcing me back onto the bed. 'Have I surprised you?'

'You... are one of life's *greatest* surprises, Ernest of Ire.'

As his title slipped from my slack mouth, I regretted it.

Ernest didn't seem to notice as he manoeuvred himself over my knees. He bent over, his belly on my thighs, his back to the ceiling, his perfectly ripe ass lifted skyward. I watched with my hands propped behind me to keep me upright. My eyes refused to leave his lean body for a moment. There was no need to ask what he was doing—that was obvious the second my gaze fell upon the perfect soft curve of his ass.

'I trust you know what to do to punish me.'

'Are you certain?' I asked, unable to take my eyes off his flesh.

'Spank me, Killian, for I have been a devilish monster. A brat, as you so aptly put it. Go on, I'm not scared of a little pain. I daresay I need it.'

I took my fingers to his ass, because I could not resist another moment without feeling it. I grasped a handful, delighting in the doughy softness. It was so enticing I could have buried my face between his cheeks, something I had no doubt I would do next. But first, I had to do as he asked.

I couldn't disappoint the prince, could I?

The first strike of my palm was clearly not as hard as Ernest was expecting. He barely chirped as my palm met his ass. Then I squeezed the tender skin, fingers pinching hard.

'Like that?' I asked.

'Harder,' Ernest snapped, almost berating me. 'Again, but better.'

I did it again, my palm smacking harder until the sound rang out across the shack. It shocked me at first, and I waited for Ernest to tell me to stop. He didn't. Instead, his monstrous mouth opened, and he spoke a single word. 'Harder.'

Again, I smacked him, the skin beneath my palm reddened. I knew it was enough because of the gasp Ernest emitted, the way his stomach muscles hardened against my knee. His nails dug into my leg, his teeth sinking into his lower lip.

'Again.'

I did as he asked, not wanting to disappoint him.

'Again. Again. Again.'

If I did not stop myself, Ernest would have begged me to continue until his ass was black and blue. It was on the seventh time that he shouted his demand that I refused him.

'No more.' He had no chance to move as I lifted him in my arms, spinning his body around until he dangled upside down in my hold. He was weightless, nothing I could not cope with. The squeak of surprise from Ernest fuelled me as I gazed down at his ass, spread just before my face.

I was vaguely aware of Ernest's arms wrapping around my lower back. He took my cock back into his mouth and began sucking again, the blood likely rushing around his skull as I continued to hold him upside down. But my focus was solely on the centre of him, how close it was, how I wanted to spread my tongue over him whilst utterly devouring his fucking centre.

Starved. I was utterly ravished.

My tongue slipped free of my mouth, dipped towards him and drew it across the entire stretch of his opened ass. I spread my spit across his centre, not stopping until it glistened in the light which spilled in through the slats of the shack's wall. I toyed with him, nipping the tender skin of his ass cheeks before licking at his centre again. Then my hips began thrusting, fucking his mouth as I ate his behind like a piece of ripened fruit.

Time no longer mattered. All that consumed me was his flavour, his soft tongue and desperate sucking. I swear it could have been years before I tore him free, spun him quickly around until he faced me once again.

The blood had rushed to his face, filling it with a crimson blush. He was breathless, as was I.

'How do I taste?' Ernest asked, his brilliantly-blue eyes roaming over my face.

'Like sin. Like paradise.'

There was no care for the spit that smeared my chin, or how my lips had swollen from sucking his ass. Ernest dove in for a kiss anyway, lips smacking into mine, tongue fondling mine, tender from being used to loosen his tight hole in preparation for what would come next.

His nails scratched down my back, gouging lines, distorting the face of the god inked into my flesh. If he wished to, I would have allowed him to flay it off, to remove every mark of the god who imprisoned me in this life. Then again, for the first time, I wanted to thank Karakos. Because this was what life was all about.

Ernest.

'Are you going to fuck me now?' Ernest pulled back and asked the question with the attitude of asking someone about the weather, or what they would like to eat. Mundane. Simple. To the point.

'I am.'

Ernest giggled to himself as I hoisted him up with a jolt. He wrapped his legs around my waist, his arms behind my neck. I held onto him from beneath, each of my hands grasping a cheek and spreading them apart. Not once had I stopped my middle finger from roaming over his tight hole.

'Don't be gentle with me,' Ernest warned, brows furrowing in seriousness.

'You'll regret that,' I murmured, and Ernest's mouth parted slowly as I slipped not one, but two spit-glistened fingers into his hole. 'But I don't think you're prepared to take me in. You're far too tight. Regardless of your commands, I don't want to hurt you.'

'Haven't you worked it out yet?' Ernest glowered, thighs tightening. 'I like the pain.'

'I do not know if that should concern me or thrill me.'

'Both.' Ernest pressed his open mouth to my neck and bit down hard. What followed was the suck of his lips and brush of his tongue as a reward.

Pleasure to bury the pain. 'If you're so concerned, allow me to guide you.'

'As if I could say no to you.'

Ernest took this as his chance. All the while I had been holding him, Ernest had made me think I had the control and power over him. But that was all but an illusion as one push had me falling backwards. For such a small little creature, he held much power.

We fell back on the bed with a slam.

What followed was the violent crack of the wooden slats beneath us, the bowing of the thin mattress. Ernest straddled my waist, a hand pressed down on my chest, keeping me pinned in place. I couldn't see my cock behind him, but I felt him reach back for it and stroke it firmly.

It was then when I realised we didn't have lubrication. My vials, although not used in years, were left in the cottage outside of Ire. I didn't want to ruin the moment, but I couldn't stop myself from saying it. 'Ernest, we cannot go further. I don't have any...'

But Ernest was too quick. He lifted his ass up, positioned the spitglistening curve of my cock before his hole, and then eased himself down. Seconds. It took seconds. All words were lost as the tight ring of muscles swallowed the length of my cock until there was no more to take in. The feeling was all-encompassing. It overwhelmed me, blinded me, stole my breath away and made me think of nothing but it. Nothing but him.

We didn't communicate with coherent words after he took me in. The shack was heavy with breathing, our audible reactions to pleasure and the movement of our bodies. Through the haze of euphoria, I made sure to watch Ernest. When he gripped his thighs, and lowered himself to my base, I knew it was time to take over.

Reaching up, I grasped his shoulders and pulled him down atop me. To ensure my cock stayed buried within him, I lifted my hips and repositioned my legs into a seat for Ernest to rest upon. Then I began to penetrate him with a building rhythm.

I did so until my stomach muscles burned. My legs ached. But above all that minor discomfort was the pure, explosive orgasm that came with his tightness, the way his eyes fixed on mine, and how our hearts seemed to synchronise to one thumping beat.

He was transcendent. Behind him, as light spilled into the room, he was haloed by it. He was beautiful. I could have counted every strand of his black hair, how the faint-pale hairs which lined his skin flickered in the

light. Sweat beaded on his brow, his eyes rolling into the back of his skull every time my cock connected with the deepest part of him.

'You are the most beautiful creature I've had the pleasure of looking upon.' I reached out and brushed a strand of hair from his eye.

Ernest leaned into my palm, letting out a long exhale, as though he'd just recited a whole page of poetry to me with a single breath. Every part of his body was soft. Even as my fingers trailed from his cheek to his neck, passing over a patch of silver-hued scales, it was akin to brushing my hands over sea-polished glass.

When I would think back to this moment, I would remember the very second when the sex seemed to change between us. From frantic, demanding, and frankly desperate to slow and tender. It became all eye contact, as though nothing else mattered but one another. A storm could have torn through the world and ruined everything around us, and I could honestly say to myself that I would not have cared.

'Touch me, Killian,' Ernest said, taking my hand and guiding it to his cock. I took it, gently anchoring myself to him. It seemed his pleasure reached new heights as I played with his length, whilst continuously burying *my* cock deep inside him.

I longed to kiss him. Pure need built in my abdomen and spread tingles across my balls. I was close to bursting, the flood gates crumbling with every passing second.

'Don't stop,' Ernest moaned, eyes rolling into the back of his head. 'Don't you dare stop, Killian.'

'Talk to me.' Encouraged, I fucked deeper whilst holding this strange, tethering connection between us. 'Does it feel good when I'm deep inside of you?'

'Yes,' he gasped, eyelids fluttering. 'I want it, I want you.'

Gods help me.

My wrist moved in tandem with my thrusting hips. I knew Ernest was close to coming when he could barely breathe properly, that and the tightening of his arse around my cock which was the battering ram that finally took down the walls holding back my climax.

As all good things came to an end, we raced to our finish as one.

'You are everything,' I managed to breathe just before I was overtaken by the orgasm. All at once, I lost control of my body, of space and time. Ernest bowed over me, pressing his mouth to mine, capturing my groan as my seed burst out of me. My hand was moving quickly, urging him to follow suit, and I felt another wash of pleasure as his seed spurted onto my fist, spreading over my stomach.

Ernest flopped atop me, pulling my cock free of his ass with a pop. I gathered him up, wrapping him tight to me whilst undulant waves of pure pleasure continued to roll throughout my body.

I could feel his heart thumping vigorously, his breath caressing the damp skin across my chest and.... gods, those eyes. Tired, blinking eyes looked up at me as though I held all the answers in the world.

'That was... eye opening,' Ernest said, a dazzling smile fixed on his face—a face I could have taken in my hands, brought to my lips and started kissing all over again.

'I live to please. How do you feel?' I asked him, brushing the back of his head, wanting nothing more than to continue touching and memorising his body with my fingers until I could remember it for centuries to come.

Ernest seemed to hold his breath, pondering my question as he searched for the right answer. Then he closed his eyes, laid his head back on my chest and exhaled his answer. '*Free*.'

### Chapter Thirty-Seven - Ernest

to the

My humanity was trickling away with haste. Every day the change to Mer came sooner than the one before, scales worming their way out of my skin as though forced by an unseen hand.

I brushed my finger over the patches of silver, nicking the soft pads on their sharp edges, delighting in the swell of blood and pain. It reminded me that this was real. It reminded me that soon pain would no longer bother me, and that I would crave nothing but blood.

Killian had fallen back to sleep, a smile still plastered to his face. I would have given anything to join him, to close my eyes and allow rest to snatch me away. Gods, I was exhausted from what we'd shared, so deep it ached in my bones. My legs had been numb for a while, but I had blamed it on the deep strokes his cock had taken, a willing after-effect of his sheer size.

But I was wrong.

I was changing.

The bedsheets had soaked through by the time my skin began melting away, revealing the tail of muscle and scales beneath. My eyes snapped to the light still slipping in through the shack's walls, proving the moon was far from calling me. The sun still beat over the world, and yet the Mer was overtaking me once again.

I opened my mouth to wake Killian, but my lungs refused the air and I was suddenly drowning in it.

Panicked, I had dug my nails into his upper arm, snapping him awake. Killian's eyes looked to me, unblinking, not caring for the four beads of blood that dribbled down his pale skin. Relief filled me as he regarded my

scales, elongated teeth, pointed-tipped ears and the gills opening on my neck.

'I've got you,' Killian said. And he did, although it wasn't without a face pinched in uncontrolled panic. 'It's going to be okay.'

Was it? Somehow, I didn't believe him, panic building in my chest.

In seconds I was swept into his arms, my tail dangling over the crook of his elbow, as he barrelled out the door, racing across the soft sands and wading into the ocean. What little of my humanity that had not faded already was snatched by the lapping waves. Like the tongue of a divine beast, they drew away my remaining flesh, making the silver hue of my scales glow like newly forged metal.

The discomfort was over as quickly as it had begun. As the healing balm of salt and sea surrounded me, it was as though my lungs could take a deep breath for the first time. No matter how I filled this Mer form with the sustenance of the water it so craved, there was no distilling the frightening truth.

'This is it, isn't it?' I said, staring back to the shack as though I would never step foot on land again. 'The change has never happened so quickly before. Evening is still hours away. This... this is the end.'

This is when I fail you. This is when you have to kill me.

Killian had yet to change, to free the tentacles he hid beneath his skin. His arms pushed at the waves, keeping him above the water as he regarded me.

'I'm sorry.' Killian refused to look away. 'The poison is anchoring the creature to your soul. In time you will lose it, alongside your body, to the sickness.'

He didn't mince words, which I respected. So, I took the opportunity to be as blunt with the truth too. 'So is this the part of our story when you turn on me?'

'Don't say that, Ernest.' Killian's eyes widened, horrified by my question. It was only then, when the harsh lines of realisation cut across his brow, that I knew he had truly forgotten what he was to do with me.

'We both know what's going to happen. No point pretending otherwise just because you've fucked me one time.'

Perhaps the Mer was already latching onto my soul, because it was as cold and harsh as my words. There was barely a twinge of discomfort as Killian absorbed everything.

'Ernest,' he said softly, as though my name pained him. 'I've dreaded this moment, long before I lay with you.'

A lump formed in my throat, threatening to choke me. It took effort to swallow it down, forcing it deeper and deeper. There was something in the way Killian looked at me, with a heavy guilt, as though this was all his fault. I had noticed a flash of the emotion before we slept with each other, but now it burned like a falling star behind his eyes.

'This isn't your fault,' I said, unsure what drove me to say it.

Killian faltered, almost stumbling over my admission. He mumbled something beneath his breath, and I was confident it was about how wrong I was. But when he spoke aloud, it was the rushed and frantic tone of a man grasping onto threads, trying to patch this problem together.

'I don't want for it to end this way,' Killian said softly, his words buried by the rushing water. 'Aleanna may not give you the power back, but whatever you did to her ensures she can walk on land. What if we can convince her to offer you the same relief from the curse?'

He was right. It was like something snapped in my mind. Aleanna was not a monster, nor were the Mer I had seen in her hidden commune. She was using her power to change them, which was why I hadn't mentioned it to Killian. Because he, above anything else, was a killer. He would hunt them, because that was his single purpose, his instinct.

'Killian.' My head ached as his words offered me a scrap of hope I wasn't brave enough to contemplate. *Unless...* 'No more talk of any of it. We both know what's going to happen, and so be it. It would be best if you just forget about me, everything, all of it. Just forget we ever—'

'Impossible,' Killian interrupted, violet eyes wide. He reached for me, large hands grasping my waist and pulling me to him. There was an urgency to the way he looked at me, as though if he dared blink I might disappear. 'We'll find a way to fix this. We still have time. I refuse to give up now, and you should too.'

Time. Such a silly concept. It had been mere days since I'd even known anything about Killian, and yet it felt as though we had been together for years. And my father was dead, killed by Gorgana's Priestess. Yet it felt as though it had only been yesterday when he was sitting upon his throne watching as I sang to a stadium full of our doting subjects. What would time mean to me when the poison truly took over?

Not wanting to give my thoughts away, I lifted my palm and held it to Killian's cheek. He leaned into it, glad for the touch, his hopeful expression sinking so deep into his skin that it would never fade.

'Will you do something for me, Killian? One last thing. I know you owe me nothing, that our bargain is null and void. But just in case this is my last day, please, do something for me.'

'Anything, princeling. I have already told you this. I am not afraid to admit that you are my weakness.'

The emotion behind those words almost speared me to the core.

'Distract me. Make me think of nothing else. If this... if this is my last day, then make it a memorable one.' *Memorable, not for me, but for you.* But I could not say that. I could not vocalise that it was memories I wanted to make for Killian, knowing that if—when—I was taken by the curse and he had to kill me, at least he would have memories to hold dear to him. 'Can you do that?'

He swallowed hard, the long strands of his white hair spilling around his shoulder. 'I can.'

I offered him a smile, knowing the points of my teeth pricked at my taut lips. Even as the taste of copper spilled into my mouth, filling my cheeks and making my stomach rumble with an unnatural hunger, I refused to dwell on it.

Because I had a plan.



KILLIAN LED THE WAY, his tentacles spinning in a vortex beneath him as he propelled through the rich water. We passed over cities of coral that were a multitude of colours. Schools of fish swam amongst the deep and large turtles passed by. Everywhere I looked I saw a new creature. There were octopuses slithering over the sandy bed beneath us, cuttlefish investigating our presence. There was so much beauty and wonder in the Below, a place I'd once feared.

I knew, without a doubt, that Killian had something to do with the presence of so many creatures. Perhaps his connection to the water had called them all here, another part of his power that I would never have the time to understand.

His trident never left his hand, the metal winking as it caught the rays of light piercing the Above.

With my arms pressed to my side, my tail rippled against the water, keeping me moving. At one point, blue-grey shapes parted from the darkness of the ocean like phantoms. High pitched squeaks rang through the darkness. It was then that a pod of dolphins came and swam beside me, singing to me in their shrill calls. I reached out, running my fingers over the side of one of them. Then they began to swim around me, dancing in tandem as though they played with me.

'They want you to hold onto them,' Killian said, reaching for a dolphin as well. He wrapped his fingers around its tipped fin, latching himself to the powerful body. I did the same, laughing at the complete absurdity of it.

My muscles were glad for the rest as the dolphin guided me. It swam us towards the rippling surface with such speed I screamed in delight. We flew out of the water, curving in the air as droplets fell around us. As the Below raced back, I closed my eyes and swallowed down my anticipation.

Killian leapt next, his deep chuckle echoing over my soul, his laugh such a real and honest thing. I held onto the sound of it, storing it away in the corners of my mind, attempting to hide the joy from the poison ruining my body.

At one point, a school of pufferfish distracted the dolphins. They dipped and wove amongst the school, knocking the balls of needles between one another, chirping in delight at the new game they played.

'It's the Below's natural drug,' Killian explained as we watched the dolphins take the pufferfish between their teeth and bite down. 'If humans take doses of the pufferfish's venom, it's fatal. But for creatures of the Below, small doses offer a high.'

That explained the sudden change in the dolphins' behaviour. They seemed dazed, their movements slowed, the sounds they made sounding like frantic laughter.

'Killian, thank you. For this, all of this. It was exactly what I wanted. Needed,' I said, drinking in the beauty of the Below, admiring a place that once frightened me.

It was colourful and full of life. Even if I cured myself, I didn't think I would ever be able to ignore the draw of the water again. Perhaps it wasn't so bad that I would be stuck here. In a place without responsibility and requirements. Here, in the Below, I could just exist...

My eyes caught the three-pronged points of Killian's trident and hope dissipated like smoke on the wind. If he noticed my sudden change, Killian didn't show it. Instead, he nudged my shoulder with his, sparking a rumbling hunger for him in the pits of my stomach.

'I am far from done yet, princeling.'

'I see mischief in your eyes.'

Killian blinked, doing his best to clear them of his devious thoughts. When he opened them again, it was to reveal that same flash of guilt I had noticed earlier.

'There is something I... I must show you.'

I could tell it was only half a sentence he spoke. It was missing the *before*.

Before you perish to the curse. Before I have to kill you.

All those thoughts ceased the moment he took my hand in his, anchoring himself to me as we faced the dark wall of water. Without another word, we left the drugged dolphins and exhausted pufferfish behind. I didn't ask where he was taking me, because it didn't matter. In the moments when my mind wasn't occupied, I would look up and study the darkening sky above. It was stained a dark navy, as though a god took a brush and stroked a darker blue over the heavens.

'There's been something I have been meaning to talk to you about,' Killian said as we reached our final destination.

Ruins were highlighted by the fading strands of light penetrating through the water. It was a city, or had been, now lost and buried beneath the sea. Old walls and buildings were erected amongst sand and stretched for as far as I could see, the hint of old pathways still visible.

'What is this place?' I asked as we swam through the archway of an old entrance. Seaweed and crustaceans lingered between ancient sandstone, claiming it as their own.

'I cannot tell you the name, because that was lost when Karakos rose the waves and swallowed this city whole.' Killian guided us forwards, but his focus kept moving to me. There was something expectant about it, as though he looked to me for answers.

'It's so... quiet.'

Killian nodded, weaving us around an old street and through the crumbled ruins of what must have been homes. 'Haunted. A place where many died. I believe it is tied to the creation of the Mer. Karakos was

angered by Gorgana's deceit and unfortunately this city faced the brunt of the god's wrath.'

'You speak as though you do know the answers.'

He shrugged. 'I know suggestions of a past.'

Seeing the forgotten city through new eyes, I imagined streets full of people like Ire. Would peddlers have sold their goods and fairs from wagons and stalls? In my mind's eye I could see clothes strung between buildings, drying in the sunlight whilst children ran beneath on bare feet, laughing and playing. Then Karakos swept them all away with a gigantic wave.

I swam away from Killian, drawing deeper until the sandy bed was inches before me. Sweeping a hand out across the fine sand, it twisted away in a current, revealing glimmering mosaic tiles. In a way, I knew it would have been here. Made from chips and broken pottery, a scene stretched out across the street. It was breath-taking. The more sand I swept out of the way, the more I saw the image beneath.

I was uncovering a piece of long forgotten history, something the Above's historians would bite arms off to see. Salt and muted light had worn the colours, but the image was clear enough. I ran my fingers over the three figures, each faceless but gargantuan compared to the depictions of humans beside them.

'This is from The Great Betrayal,' I said, tracing my finger over the only goddess that I was less familiar with. An image of Nyssa, Goddess of Life, the very same who was banished from our world by Karakos and Gorgana's deception.

Killian sunk to a position beside me, gazing down at the picture with a thunderous glare. 'So it is.'

One hand on his trident, the other stretched out, he conjured a ball of twisting water and cast it down upon the sand-covered mosaic. As though a storm of winds had come in, the sand was banished, revealing more of the scene.

There was Nyssa again, shown smaller this time, pointing at another. Paler chips of stone depicted light glowing around her finger. The unfortunate soul she gestured towards was Karakos, shown this time in his kraken form. Beneath him was an object I could not entirely make out at first. It was thin and long, with sharpened points like a weapon.

A trident. Strange.

'Believe it or not, I didn't bring you here for this,' Killian said a beat before his own tentacles laid themselves over the picture, blocking it from view. His gaze lifted over my shoulder, seeing something else in the distance that I had yet to notice.

'Well, when I wanted a distraction, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind.' I winked, half joking but also half not. There was a chill here, a strange feeling that seemed to ripple over me.

'We won't be long,' Killian said, still holding onto the expectant look. 'Come, princeling.'

It was only a short swim from what must have been one of the main streets in the old city. We followed it into the centre, the ruins of old buildings thinning, giving view to something I never deemed possible to find in such a place.

A tree. Full of life as though it was not buried leagues beneath the sea. Thick, rich brown bark and an expansive canopy with emerald leaves that danced languidly in the ocean's currents.

I was so focused on the tree I didn't notice that Killian had released my hand. He was somewhere behind me, watching as I inspected this impossible thing. Whereas the rest of the city had been eaten away by the creatures which dwelled in the Below, this tree was untouched. It was as though something had dug it up from the Above and placed it here only moments before, not years or centuries ago.

The current caught the scent of earth, the natural fragrance of oak mingled with the tang of salt.

'Do you... recognise it?' Killian's voice rang out behind me.

I would have turned to look at him, to pull a face at such a strange question, but I didn't, because he wasn't wrong. There was something familiar about this tree. Not in my mind, but in my body, as though it tugged me towards it. I lifted my hand and pressed my palm against the bark. Closing my eyes, focusing on the connection, I could have sworn there was a pulse coming from within. It was like Killian, his hearts beating behind bones and skin, but this was deeper... buried, like the knocking of a fist against a faraway door.

'Should I remember this place?'

Killian was silent for a moment. I turned to look at him, half expecting him to have disappeared. But his expression caught my nerves and bundled them into a knot. I had never seen him so serious; it was more frightening than anything else.

'Yes,' he said finally. 'Because this is where I found you.'

My blood cooled to ice in my veins. I just kept my mouth closed, allowing the knocking to vibrate against my palm, and for Killian to spill a truth that I seemed to know the moment I saw this place.

I turned my head slightly to look at him. 'You're going to have to be clearer, Killian. What do you mean you *found* me?'

'You were only a baby, a small little thing, floating amongst so much death. I had never seen it before. The bodies shifting around the tree, a place far from any island, no shipwreck. And yet here they all were, as though put here by someone... or something.' Killian was suddenly behind me, hands grasping my waist as his smooth warmth pressed into me. 'You were the only one alive. Perhaps because Nyssa is your patron.' His smile was weak, never quite reaching his eyes. 'Only the Goddess of Life could keep you alive when so many others weren't as lucky.'

Killian unravelled the ribbon of everything I knew, pulling the lies free with a single tug of his words.

'But my father...' I refused to look away from him, not wanting to miss a single hint of a lie across his face. When I had asked to be distracted, this was certainly not it.

'King Terian was your father, but not by blood. I...' He stopped himself from continuing.

I too found myself holding a breath, waiting for Killian to crack a smile and tell me this was all some sick joke. 'You're lying.'

'I'm not.' Killian took my hand from the tree and gathered it in his. The tender squeeze of his fingers anchored my attention to him. 'When I saw your father last night, I knew I had seen him before. It was the night I'd found you. He was fishing on the water only a mile away from here. I was in no position to care for you, so I... I gave you to him.'

I gave you to him.

It was as though those five words were the key to opening up the grief deep in my chest. The door did not only open, but it was also thrown wide, allowing the breathless sobs to break out of my throat. Tears were caught by the water, snatched from my cheeks before Killian could reach for them.

I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came out. That pained Killian—I saw it in the way his expression crumpled and how his

hands fell to his sides as I pulled free of his touch.

'I feel responsible for the way your life has gone,' Killian said, his voice echoing through the forgotten city. 'So you see now why this is my fault. I put you on the path to this moment. I handed you over to him.'

'Why... why tell me now? I could have lost myself to the curse and never known. It changes nothing...'

'It changes *everything*, Ernest.' The water shivered around Killian's skin. Or was it a sensation that came from the tree? A deep thumping which had not stopped, as though someone was inside, asking for release.

'You deserved to know your truth before the inevitable.' The last word must have soured in his mouth because his face screwed up. 'I cannot tell you what you were doing out in such a place. I cannot confirm if your true parents were one of those corpses that floated around you. But what I *can* tell you is you weren't to blame for your mother's death. Terian used that over your head, wrapped it around your throat like a leash and controlled you with something that had nothing to do with you. I cannot allow you to lose your humanity before you know that you are innocent of all crimes he put upon you.'

It was as Killian spoke that I realised that it was not grief that I cried from. It was relief. Because deep in my subconscious, I had already clicked these pieces together. All my life I had formed the face of a woman who I believed to be my mother, but she was nothing but an illusory set of chains tied around me and my magic. Was there ever even a woman in Terian's life? Father... Terian had used me, blamed me for taking something dear to him.

But it had all been a lie.

The spark of relief kindled like wildfires in summer. Soon enough it was anger.

My tail flicked beneath me, forcing me into Killian's chest. I knocked him hard with fists, slamming them into the stone-slabs of flesh that was his torso. His tentacles flared, catching the water to keep him from being forced back.

'I hate him!' I screamed, bellowing out into the Below.

Killian stayed calm, which only infuriated me more. 'I know. But you should hate me too.'

'Hate you? Because you handed me over to a monster?' I bellowed with yet another slam of my fists. 'You practically gifted Terian with the leash.'

'I know.' He winced, his proud chest red from the constant slams of my fist.

'It would have been kinder to let me die here. Why did you have to save me? *Why*?'

Killian was silent, or perhaps the raging emotion just filled my ears with the rush of blood, suffocating any other noise. The tempest was no longer within me, it *was* me. I was a twisting and violent storm, anger fuelling me, keeping me going.

I was flicking through the memories of my past, thinking of everyone who had been hurt by my father. All the innocent people I had controlled for him. Aleanna, who died by his hand, as well as many others. Killian had not only given my father the key to control, but also the handle of a blade. Then it all stopped as Larisa's words filled my head.

'Two threads.' I was breathless, ribs aching from the thunderous beat of my heart. 'That is what she had meant, wasn't it? Two threads, because we had already met before the night Aleanna bit me.'

Killian nodded, taking my moment of distraction and pulling me towards him. 'I believe that's what she was referring to. But believe me, until I saw your father, I hadn't known the truth of it.' He anchored his arms around my waist, wrapping his sinuous tentacles around my tail. 'Ernest, I deserve for you to scream at me. I deserve your hate. I take full responsibility for everything you've endured, which is why I won't give up on you now. Do you hear me, Ernest? I am *not* giving up.'

Out of everything he said, there was one fact that I had to dispute. 'I don't hate you, Killian.'

His eyes widened, his hold on me tightening. 'Then you're more of a fool than I first thought.'

'Perhaps I am,' I said, the anger spilling away from me. I did not even bother to try and claw it back. 'Why bring me here?'

Killian contemplated my question, his eyes leaving mine for only a brief moment. 'Because I had always wondered what became of that child. I should have known it was you from the song you sang all those days ago. It was the same lullaby I had sung to you. I've been so blinded by my bargain to Karakos that I've lost myself along the way. But then you stumbled into my path and reminded me that life is more than just what we owe to other people.'

It was so natural for me to raise the wall of my sarcasm to protect me. 'Coming from the man who wanted me for my magic in the beginning, or did you forget?'

Killian hardly reacted. Instead, he lifted his fingers and swept the hairs away from my temple. 'You've already freed me.'

'But I haven't—'

Killian shook his head and white hair danced around his broad shoulders. 'Not with your magic. Just you, Ernest. You freed me of all the shackles that have chained me. You changed me. Before you, I'd lost myself. But you... you helped find me. You guided me back to the man that never existed... the potential of a person.' He took my palm and placed it over his chest. I splayed my fingers over his crimson-stained flesh, hating that I had done that to him. 'You reminded me of everything I could have been, and everything I can still be... I'm just sorry that I haven't been successful in doing the same for you.'

I believed every word that came out of his mouth. Killian was honest and raw, open enough for me to see every inch of his sensitive soul. It had only been days that I'd known him, but if there was anything I could have wished for, it was to spend so many years with him that I would also forget the importance of everything else.

'I want you to know...' I paused, taking a moment to allow my sadness to ebb away so it wouldn't control me.

'Take your time,' Killian said through a saddened grin, one which reflected in the pools of his lavender jewelled eyes.

'I want you to know that, if given the chance, I think I could have loved you.'

'Think?' Killian tilted his head, laughing slightly to himself.

'Is that really what you're going to take away from that?'

He dipped his head to mine, meeting my mouth with his soft kiss. It was gentle and slow. His hand cradled the back of my head and his nails tickled over my scalp. When he was finished, drawing back whilst I tried to lean in again, his voice came out in a husky rasp. 'There is no doubt in my mind that I could love you, Ernest.'

My body pressed further into his, as though it desired him in ways I wasn't even sure was possible in our monstrous forms. Killian's eyes widened an inch, as though reading my thoughts was a new power he'd

unlocked. He knew just what went through my mind simply by looking at my eyes.

'Would it be inappropriate to say how I wish I could give you my body one more time before the inevitable?' I used the same word he had to describe what was going to become of my humanity.

'What are you asking of me, princeling?'

A devilish grin rose across my mouth. My tongue slipped free and lapped the taste of him from my lips. 'Well, I'm asking if sex is a possibility this deep in the Below?'

Lightning seemed to flash behind his eyes. As his pale brows lifted and lines deepened in his forehead, I knew I had already worked out the answer.

'Oh, believe me, Ernest. Where there is a will, there is most certainly a way.'

'Then will you do the honours of having me one more time, Sea Witch?' I asked, my claws scratching down his back. I wished I could gouge out the bargain mark Karakos had inked into his flesh, take it from him, grant that one wish he wanted.

Killian's voice deepened, his grasp on me tightening before he replied. 'It would be my pleasure.'

## Chapter Thirty-Eight - Ernest

to the

I had always enjoyed being in control, but here, deep in the Below, it was Killian who led the way. Although there was nothing stopping me from holding onto a thread of power for myself, letting go made everything more exciting.

In my Mer form, I had more innate strength than my human body ever held. My arms were hooked around the back of Killian's neck, my fingers tangled in his hair as our kiss became desperate and starved. All it took was one pound of my tail and it sent us propelling away from the tree. We stopped when Killian's back slammed into the old stone wall of a building. Dust and sand exploded across the water, falling like snow to the sandy bed beneath. He groaned into my mouth, his tongue twisting with mine.

There was no room for contemplation with Killian. The sweet press of his mouth on mine, his hands trailing up the back of my spine and down across the curve where flesh met scales. In the far reaches of my thoughts, I knew what was to come after this. But I would be selfish, I would take whatever Killian could give me and refuse to think about anything else.

Where there would have been room for anxiety, Killian filled it.

He tore away from my mouth, dipping to my neck. I gasped as his tongue brushed over the sensitive folds of my gills. A rush of pleasure rolled outwards beneath his tongue until every scale vibrated with it.

'Killian, more,' I whimpered. There was no denying the lack of command in my tone. As the water echoed my voice back to me, I sounded like a desperate and pleading man, practically begging for Killian to continue showing my body this new pleasure.

'I intend to give you so much more,' Killian responded between breaks in his devouring. 'I want to give you everything.'

'Everything?' I asked.

Killian's brow lifted, his eyes overspilling with just how serious he was. 'The world. A life. Happiness. Joy. Relief. Hope. Everything and anything.'

A pressure rushed over my groin, spreading deep within the muscles of my tail. 'As much as the sentiment is wonderful, I think I would take pleasure right now over all the rest of it. You, Killian, would suffice.'

Because you're my everything, and I'm too weak to admit it.

Another jolt and we were moving again. Killian guided us away from the ruined wall I had forced him onto, pushing us into the shadows of an old archway. Three of his tentacles had wrapped around me, the suckers adding pressure to my waist. Soon enough I had been tilted until my back was pressed to the old stone slabs coated in seaweed. The stone grit scratched against my skin, mixing pleasure and pain simultaneously.

I needed more.

'You look so pretty on your back,' Killian said, eyes narrowing down at me as though seeing me for the first time. 'Princeling.'

Encouraged by the danger in his eyes, I reached over his shoulders and scored my nails down his skin. He arched his back, hissing through a smile.

'And you look pretty buried deep inside of me,' I replied. 'Shame that isn't possible.'

When Killian settled his eyes back on me, they were glowing with violet-hued lust. 'We live in a world of gods and monsters. Believe me when I tell you *anything* is possible.'

He rose above me, leaving me laid out against the bed of sand and seaweed. His tentacles flared around him, spinning like a skirt of orange fleshy limbs. Except one remained more static than the rest, the point of it drifting towards my waist. I watched, heart hammering, as the tip of the tentacle fondled with the silky frills at my waist. A shock of pleasure coursed through me as Killian carefully moved aside the frills and lifted a subtle fold amongst my scales.

I would never have noticed it, until he found it. A fold, a cavity for him to fill.

My eyes flared wide as he entered me. It was... otherworldly pleasure. The type of orgasm that came from this connection would have taken the constant deep strokes of a cock. This was instant. An explosion that

unfurled from the point he touched which spread outwards across every inch of my skin and scales.

Killian settled himself atop me, the rest of his tentacles knotting around my tail and waist as he continued to pulse inside me. He scooped me up, all the while I was completely immobilised with the feeling of him filling me.

'Gods,' I spluttered, eyes wide, euphoria ruling me.

Shocked, I didn't know what to do with my hands. So I was glad when Killian captured my jaw in his unyielding grip and brought my mouth back to his. All I could focus on was the pressure of his limb inside of me, the way the heat of our connection spread in undulant waves around my abdomen and the frantic vibrating of our sex.

It took me a moment to acclimatise to him. Once our breathing synced and my body eased around his sex, I was confident enough to control my own body once again. We kissed feverishly, nipping lips with teeth and sucking tongues in tandem. His back was a mess of scratched flesh as I sunk my nails into him, refusing him to pull back, keeping him to me.

Suddenly, Killian spun me around until my back was pressed to his chest. The sudden withdrawal of his tentacle made me gasp, but when he thrust it back beneath my scales, I screamed out.

'Karakos,' I swore, praying to the God to finally reveal himself.

'Say *my* name,' Killian said, 'I need to hear you call for me, I need to hear it on your lips. *Please*.'

Facing the tree, Killian took me from behind. His hand grasped my neck and squeezed as his tentacle throbbed within me. It was enough for me to see stars burst behind my eyelids.

'Killian.'

'Louder,' Killian growled, fingers tightening, the tentacle swelling inside of me, stretching me, pleasuring me. 'Say it louder so that every fucking creature hears. Let them all know you are mine, now and forever.'

'Killian, Killian, Killian!'

The water roared around us, spinning in a vortex. It whipped sand and stone up, coating us in a wall of protection. All I could think about was how the sounds the vortex made matched the thunderous clang inside of me.

Shadows were spilling from beneath us, ribbons of darkness being snatched by the twisting water. I quickly realised it was ink from Killian. Each spout of thick, oily liquid came with the breathy grunt from his throat.

This sex was not thrusting—it was a swelling. The bulbous tip of his appendage filled every sensitive inch of my cavity, making it feel as though we were one and the same. Another tentacle slithered around my neck, the tip working up my jaw. I took it instinctually into my mouth and sucked *hard*.

It was tasteless, but so thick the corners of my lips ached. Killian seemed to enjoy it though, his breathless mouth parted, eyes roaming over me. Every place his tentacles touched, needles of pleasure pricked my skin. I wanted him everywhere. I wanted to feel him over my scales, so he would imprint himself upon me, humanity or no.

I never wanted it to end. Him and me, joined like this. But all good things surely had an ending as they did beginnings, and we both raced towards it.

Pinching my own nipples between my finger and thumb, the release inside of me was heavenly. Killian returned his mouth to my neck, sucking and biting, unable to stifle the pleasured moans rumbling over my flesh. I too gasped out as the pressure inside of me had built to such heights I truly believed I would burst apart with it.

And I did.

I imploded like a dying star. My pleasure was a gathering force so violent it raged through my insides until every vein was alight with fire. Killian met his end in tandem with me. I watched, delighting in the undoing of his expression, the way his mouth opened so wide it was a miracle that he did not swallow the entire ocean whole.

The water calmed, matching the roaring inside of me which slowly, tranquilly came to an end. Killian was still inside of me, his biting now soft brushes of a tongue against my skin. His hand had relaxed around my throat, falling to my chest where it pressed over my beating heart.

I leaned my head back, lightheaded from the unearthly orgasm that rocked my insides. The ruins of the old city came back into focus, as did the strange tree. Its leaves rippled from the branches closest to us.

My eyes met Killian's, just as his vortex simmered around us. I longed to touch him, to run my fingers over the planes of his face and memorise the details for an eternity. But alas, we did not have eternity to spare. We had hours, if that.

Killian lifted his thumb and swept something from my cheek. His expression quickly solidified into one of concern. It filled the lines of

pleasure which had been etched deep into his forehead until it was all I could recognise.

'You're crying,' he said, sounding almost confused.

'I am.' There was no hiding it. Simply looking at him pained me, but I laughed despite the tears rolling from my cheeks into the water. 'I *am* crying, aren't I? How foolish.'

I no longer grieved the life I had left behind, but the life I had stumbled into.

'It's not over yet, Ernest.' The way he used my name was treacherous. My undoing. 'We'll locate Aleanna and demand she uses your power to offer you the same freedom from the curse that you have offered her. It's not a cure, but it will suffice...'

'And what does that mean for you?' I asked, snapping furiously at his wasted hope. 'You are bound to Karakos, made to rid the world of the Mer. It's your one task. Are you telling me, whether or not I can walk on land, whether or not I can grasp onto humanity, that you'll give up on your purpose?'

His eyes hardened with resolve, more so when he looked to the trident he had stabbed into the sandy bed while he'd fucked me. 'I'll try. I'll find a way.'

'Why?' I exhaled.

'Because of you!' Killian shouted, tentacles wrapping themselves around me again, as though one faint current of water would snatch me away from him. 'I cannot bear to give up on you.'

'But I cannot grant your wish.' I pushed at his chest, wanting him to release me but also wanting him to never let go. 'Your freedom balances on you eradicating all Mer from the oceans, or with the use of my magic. If both fail then—'

'Then I will still be free. With you, by my side, facing gods and monsters alike. I do not care for bargains, I do not care for wishes and magic. Ernest.' He took my face in his hands and held me firmly. 'Give me one wish and it will be for you. Give me magic and it will be used to secure you to my side. Because you are my freedom. You have reminded me of the importance of connection, and I understand we hardly know each other, but fate never lies. Our threads are not simply connected, they're knotted... together.'

I allowed his declaration to settle over me, to fill the empty spaces in my soul and piece the broken parts back together again. There was something completely fulfilling about him. How his touch felt right, how his attention made me feel deserving of him. Never had there been a person who'd looked at me and *wanted* me, not for what I could give them, but for what they could offer me.

'I take it that means you won't kill me when the curse finally takes hold?' I asked, allowing the water to snatch the silent stream of tears from my cheeks.

'Put the blade in my hand, and I would drive it through my chest first instead of yours.'

'But Karakos, he'll—'

Killian's eyes widened, his mouth opening so suddenly that his words came tumbling out. 'I am K—'

I heard nothing else as another sound bellowed into my ear. 'Come.'

The single word was a thunderous boom through the water. I snapped my head towards it, expecting someone else to be floating at my side who had shouted into my ear. But no one was there.

'You're what?' I asked, unsure if my mind had made up the voice. 'You surely aren't going to leave me pondering what you were going to say?'

'Find me.'

Confused, I continued to search through the darkness of the water. 'Did you not hear that?'

Killian's brow furrowed as he followed my gaze, his tentacles falling from my scaled body. 'Hear what?'

'Come. Now.'

This time, nothing stopped me from following the command. I couldn't explain it, but my body acted on some deep instinct. It was not from free will that I swam from Killian's side, allowing him to give chase. My body was no longer my own. It was being moved by the unseen strings of my puppet master.

It was being controlled by Aleanna.

### Chapter Thirty-Nine - Killian

to the

I was so entirely focused on following Ernest that I didn't notice when the atmosphere of the Below changed. Shadows were cast down upon the depths from the Above. There was noise—the echo of wood against water, and the muffled shouts of people. It could only be an armada of ships, carried on the building winds, drawn out deep from the island of Ire. Red material billowed in my mind, taunting me, reminding me of the final secret I had yet to reveal to Ernest.

Ernest, who I couldn't stop looking at, was surrounded by the aura of golden magic. Which meant he was swimming not from choice, but because he was being controlled. Commanded. I'd wanted to find Aleanna for him, but it seemed like she had found us first.

And soon enough I discovered why she was calling him.

The Mer were everywhere. Lithe bodies swam through the water, dipping and weaving through nets. Some had already been gathered up in tangles of thrashing limbs, crying out in terror as they were dragged to the surface in thick rope nets.

My enemies were everywhere. The Mer filled the sea, and the acolytes must be the ones who sailed across it. And yet my focus was on Ernest, who swam into the storm of Mer, losing himself as he speared with focus toward something I hadn't yet seen.

A swish of my wrist and the trident materialised in my hand. Power buzzed through my veins, echoing down the metal until it too was filled with it. I levelled it first towards a Mer who was closest, following my internal need to rid the poison from *my* water. As the tips of my trident glowed with the crackling power, a force slammed into my arms and ruined

my aim. The bolt shot upwards, slicing through the side of one of the gargantuan nets, freeing countless Mer before it smashed into the ship's bow.

'Killian, stop.' I blinked and found Ernest before me, no longer encased in the golden sway of magic. He grasped my arms, holding them back, keeping the trident aimed away from the Mer. I felt his fingers on the metal as though he was touching my skin. Did he feel the magic course into him? Was it flooding his body?

'Look at them,' Ernest demanded urgently. 'Look at the Mer and tell me what you see.'

It took me a moment to listen to him, to look away and take in the scene again. This time, as I looked towards the Mer I was about to destroy with my power, I noticed differences. Its body was not hairless and monstrous. No, it was almost human. I locked eyes with the closest one, noticing the vibrant blue iris that reminded me of the man who still held my trident back. These were not the milky eyes of the monsters I had hunted for countless years. These were the eyes of a being with a soul, windows revealing the fear and panic that ruled it.

Humanity.

Aleanna had done this, I understood in an instant. That was why Ernest had not refused me my idea—because somehow he'd known it was possible. But what truly stopped me from conjuring more of my power was the noise that came out of the Mer's mouths, something which had been impossible until now. They were supposed to be voiceless creatures—except one was offering thanks to Ernest for stopping me. And they weren't the only one who spoke. The voices I had heard first, the ones I believed were muffled because they came from the Above, were actually originating from the throats of every Mer around us.

'It is Aleanna,' Ernest said, as I still didn't trust myself enough to speak. 'She can save me, but first we must save her.'

Slowly, Ernest released my arms, allowing me to control myself again. He watched me expectantly, eyes flickering from my trident to the Mer around us. There were children amongst them, small bodies with coloured tails and human eyes.

Immobilised, I watched as the Mer pulled at the nets, tearing at the rope with pointed teeth and claws, attempting to free those captured within.

Already some nets were being drawn free of the water, hauled up onto the decks above. More would follow if we did nothing.

Deep inside my flesh, the *beast* stirred, feeling my resistance to its command.

'Find... her.' Two words were all I managed. It took everything in me not to aim my trident and unleash all my power. But looking into Ernest's ocean eyes remind me of my new focus. 'I'll save as many as I can.'

Ernest planted a rushed kiss to my mouth. When he pulled back, it was with resolve in his eyes, a determination to save those around him from the acolytes. It was the same resolve I saw in his gaze when he spoke of Ire and those who resided in the Above.

It seemed he had found a new purpose, a new people.

'Go,' I said, knowing if he stayed before me for another second, I would steal him away from danger. 'I'll be right behind you.'

His jaw feathered with tension as he regarded me for another silent moment. 'I believe you will do the right thing. Then find me.'

'I will find you, always.' These were the easiest words to say, and in a way, they were exactly what Ernest needed to hear. He nodded, turned back to the tempest of scales and screams, and swam into the fray.

Karakos, forgive me.

I could not begin to comprehend the punishment I would face for going against the god and his bargain. In the back of my mind, I wondered if that was why my body had slowed its healing abilities, why my power had felt more distant at times. I'd first blamed the bargain I had made with Ernest, but perhaps it had something to do with what Aleanna was achieving with the Mer.

My purpose was to rid the oceans of Gorgana's curse. Only then would I be free. But around me, it didn't look like a curse at all. Ernest really *was* freeing me without even realising it. It was his magic that was changing the very demons I hunted. Given time, would Karakos forgo me, find me useless to him?

I had never felt hope so powerful before.

I could no longer see Ernest. But his words remained, haunting me. *I* believe you will do the right thing.

My tentacles tightened beneath me then flared outwards. The force of their spinning propelled me upwards, directly in line with one of the nets that was inches from being dragged onto the ship above. I grasped at the material, just as the Mer inside did and others who attempted to tear it open beside me. Using the tips of my trident, I went around the net, ripping holes large enough for those captured within to swim to freedom. Over and over, I moved without thought, not allowing myself to contemplate exactly what I was doing. Only that I had to save them, because Ernest believed I had it in me to do the right thing.

I would prove him right.

If there was anyone with the power to pit me against a god, it was Ernest. I did it for him, went against my instinct for him. As I tore into the nets, offering my hand to help pull the Mer out from their imprisonment, I couldn't help but realise that Ernest, whether he had his magic or not, still held the power to make me do anything.

He was both my weakness and my greatest strength.

#### Chapter Forty - Ernest



There was no room for thought amongst the chaos which ruled the Below. I swam forwards, leaving Killian behind, all to find the person who had lured me here.

'Aleanna!' I shouted. My attempt was pointless because my cries were buried by the struggling cries of captured Mer and the booming sounds the ships above made as their oars sliced through the water. but that did not stop me from trying again, shouting until my throat ached.

I passed nets, stopping to help the Mer rip them apart. Not all were so lucky to find freedom, though. For every net that was taken up onto the ships, another was thrown down, dragged to the depths by iron weights.

This was hell.

A sky shattering bang split the Above. I looked up to watch a bolt of molten fire fizzle across the dusky sky. It connected with one of the ships, shattering it into thousands of parts. Wood, debris, and humans—humans dressed in the red robes of Gorgana's acolytes—sunk like forgotten toys. Another crash followed as a bundle of scaled flesh and netting slammed back through the water's surface. Mer, countless bodies stuffed inside, gasping for the salt water.

A feral anger pounded through my body. It took everything in me not to swim to one of the humans and tear them apart limb by limb. My teeth ached with the need to feel soft flesh and my stomach growled with an instinctual hunger I had never experienced before.

Above all the sounds, the most beautiful melody rose. My ears pricked and I turned my focus to another net which was being raised from the depths.

I had no doubt Aleanna was in it. Her voice, laced with magic and persuasion, leaked through the tangled rope and bodies. I hadn't heard her voice for a moment because she had been taken from the water. Every free Mer heard her cries now, though, and all dived down towards her. I followed the horde.

Fire flashed like serpents above. More lightning speared through the darkening sky, smashing into bows and sails. I could not see Killian amongst it all, but by the gods, I felt him.

A hand reached out amongst the knot of tangled, scaled bodies. I caught a flash of red hair, and I knew who lingered within. I grasped the hand and squeezed, pulling the body free until the face I expected to find materialised.

'Ernest. Why... have they come?' Aleanna spluttered, holding onto me for dear life.

I grimaced, knowing the answer. 'Because I have doomed you. The acolytes want my power, and they know you have it.'

Aleanna's face pinched. A smear of blood oozed from her nose.

'They're prepared to empty the ocean to get this power for themselves.'

She nodded, overwhelmed by the panicked screams and shouts, the crying children and pleading Mer. 'This is my home. How *dare* they?'

'I won't allow them to get to you,' I said, looking around for a quicker way to free Aleanna and the rest of the Mer. 'Any of you.'

Aleanna grasped my upper arm, nails sinking into my flesh slightly. The pain hardly registered, not that it mattered. In seconds I would be healed, and she would be taken.

I had to act. Now.

My teeth ached as I wrapped them around the netting separating us. I tore at it with my jaw, ripping at the material until it frayed and split apart. Only when the hole was made was Aleanna able to get loose enough to help. We both tore at it, creating a space big enough for her to swim out.

But it wasn't enough. The net was still being hoisted upwards and the hole was only big enough for one Mer to leave at a time. There was far too many left inside for everyone to get free.

'Keep helping them out,' I said as Aleanna blinked wary eyes at me. 'I'll give you some more time.'

I made to move back to the surface, but before I could swim away, Aleanna tugged me close to her. Through strained lips, she hissed, emerald eyes not leaving mine for a second. 'You are *nothing* like your father, Ernest. You are *good*.'

Her words seemed to awaken something in my chest. It was the explosion of encouragement I required. It was the same comment she made before my *father* had murdered her.

'I know.' Those two words held more meaning than I had the time to explain. More than I could even truly understand.

Red hair floated around her narrow shoulders as Aleanna nodded and released me.

'Aleanna.' I grasped onto her arm. 'Free me from this curse. Do what you've achieved with the Mer, and help me.'

A softness passed over her expression. A weak smile lifted at the corners of her lips. 'Oh, Ernest. Have you not already worked it out? I used this given magic to free *all* Mer, to return their stolen humanity back. You're no different. I may not be able to stop the change, but I can ensure you are still *you*. There is nothing more I can do for you that I have not already secured.'

My fingers relaxed. Everything stilled around us. A strange relief lifted over my chest, as though Aleanna's words had snapped the metal bands constricting around my lungs. No, not snapped. Broken. Shattered.

'Whatever god gave me that magic knows you are better off with it,' I said. 'You deserve it far more than I ever did.'

She laid her hand on the side of my face, the touch no different than a sister's caress. I longed to lean into it, but the noise of the chaos was growing.

'These are your people now, Ernest. You don't need to be a prince to protect them.'

I nodded, feeling a renewed sense of focus flood through my body. My limbs, tail, scales, claws, and teeth. This was me. My new normal. And it no longer felt like a curse.

'You're right.'

Aleanna lowered her hand, red hair spilling around her face like fresh blood. 'Of course I am. Now, go. Let's save our people.'

Our people.

We didn't spare each other another word as I focused on the Above. Aleanna continued gouging holes in the net, freeing as many Mer as she could. I looked around, aware this haul was being hoisted to the surface. If I

narrowed my stare, I could watch the smudge of red cloaked figures grouping together as they physically pulled it up.

They were determined, I would give them that. But so was I.

My eyes found the thick rope which gathered the net together at the top, and I swam for it. It took little effort for it to fray between my teeth. I tore at it urgently. Then it finally snapped and the loose rope slithered down into the depths where Aleanna was working to free those captured.

A hiss passed inches beside my ear. I jolted to the side, to watch the serrated-tipped spear disappear beneath me. It was so close it had nicked my ear, but I didn't need to lift a hand to know the wound was already healing. The presence of Killian's trident still lingered across me long after I had touched it.

I moved onto the next net, fuelled with adrenaline, knowing that once this was over I would find Killian. In the darkness of my thoughts, I could imagine his face when he heard the truth. We had a future, or the potential of one, even after the curse took hold.

I would be Mer, but I would be me too.

As I reached for the next net, ready to tear the rope apart with my teeth, I searched for a hint of Killian. Just a flash. But as my heart shuddered in my chest, the moment of distraction was all it took.

Pain lanced through my waist. I looked down, already tasting the blood that oozed up from the wound. It was strange, to find something metal protruding through my stomach. My hands moved towards the tear, fingers toying with the tip of another spear. This one had not missed. The bloodied tip was something which did not belong there, and yet it matched the glint of my scales and almost looked beautiful.

Ribbons of my blood danced around my webbed fingers. I watched it swish languidly, until a harsh yank tore at me from behind. The agony was blinding. Before I knew it, I was being dragged to the Above by the rope latched onto the end of the spear which pierced through my waist.

Darkness crept in at the corners of my vision. I attempted to blink it away, but my attempts were futile.

I called out for Killian. While his name thundered in my head, I didn't know if I'd even managed to speak it aloud. Pain ruled me, everything else bleeding away. I blinked and the scene changed, the cold kiss of air stained with smoke and ash. But my eyes wouldn't stay open. Suddenly, hands

were on me. I opened my mouth, gulping in a breath, only to feel deprived, starved, desperate. Like I was drowning without being near water.

'We have the prince,' a voice said.

I blinked, watching the outline of a figure standing above me. It wasn't until they bent down, red robes fluttering out around them, that I recognised Hadeon. His face had hollowed since I last saw him, the hate in his eyes sharpened into a weapon. There was no relief seeing him, not as I grasped for water, my tail smacking against the damp wood of the ship.

'He will more than do. Put him in the tank,' Hadeon said, his voice both close and far away. And yet he was still kneeling, hands reaching for me. If I could have pulled away, I would have. But the spear was still embedded in my stomach—although that pain hardly even registered compared to my need to be back in the water.

'He's better dead anyway,' the first voice said.

Hadeon didn't bother to look up at the other speaker, not as his gaze was focused on me. His fingers brushed over the soft flesh of my stomach. I pinched my eyes closed, not wanting him to touch me, but helpless to stop him.

'That's still to be determined,' Hadeon replied. Even with my eyes closed I could hear the glee in his tone. A simmering spark of defiance lit within me, filling my body with sudden energy. This was my chance. I flung my eyes open, jaw aching as I split it wide. But as I jolted up to sink my teeth into Hadeon's neck, he leapt away. Before I could lunge again, he wrapped his arms around me in an unwelcome embrace, took hold of the butt of the spear through my back, and pulled.

A scream mingled with the song of lightning that flickered in the sky. I didn't know who made the noise until my throat burned. Then there was nothing as my world faded to black.

### Chapter Forty-One - Killian

to the

There were only a handful of ships left who'd escaped my power. I infected the ocean with my fury, thrashing waves against the ships as they turned and fled, hoping that each one sunk beneath the depths before it got away. But I couldn't pursue them—I had to find Ernest. He was my focus. So I regathered my power, pushing it deep into the cage within me.

Bodies littered this stretch of the Below. I saw death everywhere I looked. I imagined Gorgana would be laughing, rubbing greedy hands together at the number of souls sent into her waiting embrace.

Humans sunk, dragged down by the thick red cloaks draped around their bodies. Mer floated lifelessly beside them, bodies starved of water from being held on the ships before I had shattered them with my storms. Some of the Mer I swam past watched me with unseeing eyes, spears pierced through their necks and tails.

I had killed many in my time, and such a scene had never caused me such discomfort. Because the Mer I had destroyed had looked at me with eyes lacking any recognition, whereas those around me were overspilling with souls. With life. Humanity. And now the acolytes had taken it away.

Even amongst so much death, I couldn't help but feel hope kindle within me. If Aleanna could use the magic and give the Mer the very humanity the curse starved them of, then Ernest had a chance.

We had a chance.

It would mean going against Karakos's bargain, but what good was our deal if the Mer were changed? Maybe that would free me in the end.

There was a nick on my upper arm, caused when a large splinter had scraped me. It had yet to heal, more proof that Karakos was clearly

forgetting me, or perhaps not needing me to keep going. I gripped tighter onto the trident, drawing more of its essence within so that by the time I found Ernest I would be renewed.

As I waded through the watching crowd of Mer, I remembered Karakos' voice, as loud and demanding as it had been that fateful night years ago.

'A deal,' the god had proposed.

But what if vengeance was no longer required? These Mer were not monsters, not in the same sense they had been before. This was the result of Ernest's magic—it had the potential to not only free me, but change the world.

The deeper I travelled into the bowels of chaos, the more I felt as though something was missing. A part taken from me. Mer watched, expecting me to turn on them. Many had died, but many had also been harmed during the acolytes' attempts to capture them. I was still not used to their human pleas, the way children cried in the arms of adults, and adults wailed in grief for those who had been lost. Beneath each sound, there was not just fear, but fury too. Regardless of the curse and their regained humanity, many of the Mer had already turned on the acolyte's corpses, ripping into their flesh, feasting on their bodies. It should have turned my stomach, but it didn't. In fact, my reaction to them eating the humans was the opposite of repulsion.

I longed to join them.

A green-tailed Mer swam up from beneath me, blocking my path. My tentacles ached with the need to reach out and smother her. I continued to fight for control over the beast, refusing to let it win.

'Aleanna,' I said, my jaw tightened. Although she blocked my way, it didn't stop me from scanning the space around her, expecting for Ernest to reveal himself. There was no flash of his silver tail or stark blue eyes. And yet I still looked for him.

It was Aleanna's silence that drew my attention back to her. It spoke a million words, all without saying a single one. It was uncomfortable. At first, I believed my inattentiveness had just drowned out her response. Until I rested my gaze back on her and truly took in her expression. Brows pinched, lips pulled taut with tension, webbed fingers clutched over her chest. She had the expression of a person who was about to shatter my universe with a handful of words.

In fact, it only took three to ruin mine.

'Ernest is gone,' she said, eyes downcast with concern.

A beat of power cast out from my trident, pushing with force at anything near me. Only Aleanna resisted, her poppy-red hair dancing around her shoulders.

'What do you mean he's *gone*?' I replied, growling more than speaking. It built in my chest, rumbling out of my throat.

'The acolytes on the ships took him.'

'Ernest!' I shouted into the depths, refusing to believe her. I scanned the darkened ocean again, stretching out my awareness until I filled every inch of water. But the longer I searched, the more constricted my chest became. Because I could not find Ernest, not with my eyes or my power.

My world stopped.

Agony spasmed in my chest and was echoed by the sudden tension in my skull. I clutched at my ribs, longing to pry them open to free the pressure. The last time I had felt this helpless, it had been Ernest that saved me from the storm of anxiety. But now he was gone. Taken by the acolytes.

It was my mother. She had done this. I had doomed Ernest the moment I revealed him as my weakness, and now she was prepared to use him against me.

Sharpened nails pinched into my arms, opening new wounds across my skin. It was all that registered through the roaring anxiety, the vicious and all-consuming reaction to having my greatest fear realised.

Aleanna fixed her bright eyes on me. Even though my panic, I registered the way her emotions mirrored mine. It was determination, it was focus and promise. 'We will get him back, Killian. Do you hear me? Together. I owe Ernest my life, as do many of the Mer behind me.'

'You were prepared to give up on him,' I sneered, lips curling.

'I thought we could hide from the Above, but they won't leave us alone. I see now there's no hiding from this. We will help you—*I* will help you—get Ernest back.'

I opened my mouth to reply, but all that came out was the building growl of the beast within. It had never been so close to breaking free. No matter how I tried to stifle the building pressure of it, the beast was seeking an escape.

'They... do not want him.'

Aleanna's eyes flashed with knowing. 'No. They want the power I took from him.'

That wasn't entirely true. But voicing the other option went against my very instinct. If the acolytes truly wanted his magic, they wouldn't have left until Aleanna was pulled aboard. 'But you won't give it to them?'

She shook her head 'No. I'll not give the power to them.'

'Then you will free Ernest,' I snapped out, desperately clinging to the final thread of hope. 'You will offer him the same humanity you have returned to the Mer.'

Her expression softened, her grasp on me relaxing to a gentle caress. 'Don't you see, Sea Witch? You've been the one to free him.'

'Not of his curse,' I stammered.

'I say we go and save him, then he can be the one to explain exactly what his freedom looks like.'

Movement spread at Aleanna's back. I watched as an army of Mer fanned out. I scanned my eyes over the collection of tails and scales, regarding the weapons they held in their webbed hands, the determined fury in their eyes.

For the first time, I understood why Karakos once rose the oceans over the world, dragging cities and land into his domain. Given the chance, I would do it. I would swallow the entire world if it meant saving Ernest.

# PART VI DAY FIVE OF INFECTION



## Chapter Forty-Two - Ernest

to the

I woke, floating in a body of salt water. It was the ache in my lungs that tore me from the darkness, a sharp stab that came with the need for breath. Instinctively, I reached up for the stone sides of the tank, pulling myself to the surface whilst my legs—human legs—kicked at the heavy press of the water.

There was no time to celebrate that I had turned back into my human form. I gasped for breath, water sloshing over the stone basin where it puddled across the floor around it. I leaned over the edge, vomiting salty brine from the pit of my stomach.

As my vision cleared and the roaring discomfort in my skull subsided, I noticed the spilled water moving over brown sandals which waited inches before me. My eyes trailed up from the sandals, to the ankles, to the hem of the red cloak, all the way up to the sneering face that watched from the shadows.

Hadeon.

'I always knew you were a determined little prick, but even I admit that I'm impressed you have resisted the infection for this long.' Hadeon titled his head, inspecting me as he paced towards the stone basin. 'I had coin bet on you that you'd have lasted three days at most.'

I edged away from him, slipping back into the water until only the top half of my face was visible. There was something sobering about seeing Hadeon. It sharpened my senses, reminded me not to panic but to think. So that was exactly what I did. As he stalked me, studying me like some pathetic prey, I drank in the details.

The dark, heavy aired room was somewhere I had visited before. The stone basin I floated in was surrounded by lit sconces whose flames hardly penetrated the shadows. The dense scent of mould and salt confirmed we were in the deep belly of the castle. This was one of the cave systems, carved into the rocky mound my castle was built on. These caves were where my father had stored those who had been infected by a Mer, when he was having them studied them for a cure.

This confirmed Hadeon had brought me back to Ire. And a brush of my hand over my lower stomach also confirmed that the spear had been removed and my flesh healed around it. There was only a faint echo of far-off discomfort, a phantom ache.

'I highly recommend you keep your distance,' I warned, refusing to back down from Hadeon's intense gaze. Those beautiful eyes once were my undoing. Now I longed to reach for them and tear them out his skull. 'Haven't you heard that I bite?'

'Oh, I remember.'

A wave of sickness rocked within me. Not only did his words appal me, but seeing him so at ease in the red robe was jarring, even though he had never looked so comfortable.

'How long have you been hiding this part of yourself from me?' I asked, longing to keep up conversation. The longer we spoke, the more time I had to work out a plan. It seemed like we were alone, but I couldn't help but feel as though the shadows had eyes and were watching.

'Since the first day we met,' Hadeon confirmed, grinning like a cat who got the cream. 'The Priestess had sent all her acolytes across Ire. We were to bury ourselves deep into society, whilst searching for a weakness to bring everything down.'

It should have upset me, knowing that the Hadeon I had known, the one I had trusted with my deepest secret, had been an illusion all along. But it didn't. 'Are you suggesting you found a weakness in me?'

'No, not a weakness.' Hadeon's fingers curled around the basin's edge, his straining knuckles turning white. 'A weapon. A power which could topple cities, kings, and most importantly... *gods*.'

That last word burrowed through me. I felt the thud of it, as though another fishing spear had been lodged in my gut. 'Seems like a waste of

time, considering the gods long ago turned their backs on us.'

Hadeon's lips lifted slowly at their corners, the smile spreading across his entire face until even his eyes glowed with glee. I longed to reach out and claw that fucking grin from his face, to dig my nails into his doughy flesh and peel it off.

Since violence was out of the question, I chose my words carefully to make sure I hurt him as much as possible.

'And what would your Priestess think when she hears of all the unholy things you did to me? Everyone knows the rules of celibacy the acolytes follow, and yet here you stand, chin raised high knowing that you've bruised your knees for me, seen more of my insides than—'

His hand came at me so quickly, I couldn't draw back. My skin sang with the sharp pain of his connection and my ears rang. Blood oozed within my cheeks, smudging over my teeth. I could only imagine the horror Hadeon must have felt in that moment as I smiled up at him, bloody mouthed and red cheeked. Had he not remembered?

Pain was my motivator.

I ran my tongue over my teeth, delighting in the taste. 'I'll take that as a no.'

Deep in my gut, the Mer stirred. So, it was still in me. Aleanna hadn't erased it completely. But somehow, I was in control. As though I could reach for the monster and use it if required.

'Hold your tongue,' Hadeon hissed, eyes flared wide. I had never noticed just how ugly he was. Perhaps it was my time with Killian, or the way the sconces skipped their light over the planes of his face, showing the unbalanced bone structure and bulging eyes. It exposed the poisoned soul within him. Hadeon repulsed me. I could have stopped him from grasping my chin, but I wanted to feel the bite of his nails. I wanted more of a reason to hate him—if that were even possible.

Something caught his attention as his eyes flicked down. He snatched my arm, lifting it upwards awkwardly until the bone ached in its socket. Hadeon's eyes marvelled at the black ring of ink around my wrist, the one left from when Killian had offered me his deal.

'Find something interesting?' I asked as Hadeon's hand tightened, his iron grip making my bones scream.

The horrified and shocked look he gave me almost made me laugh. It bubbled in my gut, but I wouldn't let it out yet.

'He did this to you...'

'You'll need to be more specific,' I spat, watching as his eyes crossed slightly the closer he inspected the black-band of ink.

'The Sea Witch, he did this to you. He's marked you.' Hadeon dropped my arm and reached for my chin instead. The suddenness of his hold conjured a hiss out of me, but it wasn't from fear. Nails bit into my flesh as he jolted my jaw, snapping my head so my neck was on full display.

'Of course he has.' I leaned in close, wanting Hadeon to not only hear my reply but see it morph my lips into unforgettable shapes. 'He marked me as his, in more ways than one.'

'No!' Hadeon shouted, flying back. 'That's wrong, you're dirty and unclean.'

I smiled, almost laughing at his hysterical reaction.

Hadeon shot forwards again, bringing his face inches from mine. 'How about I leave a mark on your skin? Skin that belonged to me long before him.'

'Don't be frightened, Hadeon. You can say his name.' The flash of a memory came to mind. 'Karakos knows I have, over and over.' I feigned a light voice, full of pleasure, as I cried out Killian's name into the echoing chamber. 'Killian! Killian!'

With each cry of Killian's name, Hadeon only grew more infuriated.

Jealousy sparked across his face, breaking it into a frantic snarl. I expected him to smack me again, to raise his hand and pummel me. But he surprised me. With Hadeon's full weight, he forced me beneath the water. At the last moment I sucked in a breath before the rippling water blurred his furious face. He was shouting, speaking about cleansing and prayer, Gorgana and death. All the while, he attempted to drown me. I didn't fight back. Even as he held me down beneath the water as though he could cleanse the dirt from my soul, I felt my neck part with gills. My teeth strained in my jawbone, lengthening to points.

Whatever magic Aleanna had wrapped around me after I saved her, this was the result. The shift was partial. It was controlled. She had given me the same freedom from the curse that I'd given her.

Hadeon must have noticed the change because he silenced himself with a choke. But before he could pull away, I reached up, sunk my nails into his neck and yanked him into the basin of water with me. It was easy, shifting his weight, when my body—this new version of it—held the strength of a Mer. Hadeon was unable to fight back even if he wanted to. And I... I was hungry.

There was no thought as I tore into him. My teeth sunk into flesh, my claws gouged at whatever they could touch. Soon enough, it was not only water I was buried beneath, but blood, a thick and heavy blanket of red that filled the basin completely. I didn't stop ripping into Hadeon until he could no longer fight against me. I didn't stop until he was nothing but pieces of flesh floating around me. When I was done, I could taste him deep in the pit of my stomach. The hunger that I had felt when I first changed, the one which had haunted me with every shift, was finally satisfied.

I rose from the water, completely covered in his blood. As I stepped free of the basin, my gills smoothed to flattened skin and my teeth and nails returned to normal. Shifting between both forms was taxing but growing easier. Like learning to walk, learning how to love—it was something I would get in time.

*If* I had time.

Brushing the gore from my face, I flicked it to the floor. Every step I took, I left prints of red behind me. I was naked, only covered by patches of silver scales and Hadeon's remains. Even if I wanted to take the cloak he had worn, it would have been pointless. One look back to the basin and there was no determining what were ribbons of flesh and what were scraps of material.

'Incredible,' came the voice from everywhere and nowhere at once.

I turned around quickly, almost slipping, as I tried to determine the origin. But it was as if the shadows themselves spoke, in a voice that I knew well.

'I'd suspected you were watching, Priestess.'

Twin crimson eyes flashed amongst the darkness before she stepped free of the shadows. One moment there was nothing but thick shadow, and then she revealed herself. Her deathly pale skin looked odd with the warmth of firelight against it. It hollowed her cheeks and made the red of her eyes flash as though they contained an inner light.

'Did you enjoy the show?' I asked as she looked behind me, smiling at the literal bloodbath I had left in my wake. 'Have you come to see more, perhaps partake in it?' 'Oh, I did. I enjoyed it greatly.' The Priestess ran her tongue over her lower lip, seeming completely entranced by the blood, the death. When she looked back to me, her pride only increased. 'When the Mer were first created, it was in this vision that they were moulded. Bringers of eternal death. Monsters made to destroy Karakos. My children, my warriors.'

*My children. My warriors.* 'Would your god see such words as heresy? Surely Gorgana won't like you taking credit for her hard work, Priestess? I'm sure ego is a sin in your beliefs.'

The shadows shivered, swelling around the Priestess like wings. Her eyes flashed a vibrant red, two beacons of light that matched the deep colour of Hadeon's blood.

'Indulge me, Ernest of Ire. What do you know of gods?' Her nostrils flared as though she was sniffing at my skin. 'You smell as though you're rather well acquainted with one in particular.'

Fear overcame me as I faced her, no longer sure who I was looking at. 'Who are you?'

'Finally, questions worth asking,' she replied, her voice everywhere at once. 'I believe you know my name already, although I will remind you. This *vessel* was once called Sofina, many years ago.'

Sofina.

My blood cooled in my veins. That was the name of Killian's mother too, but she would have died a long time ago. Except, as I looked at her, there was no denying the similarities. White hair, striking features, haunted eyes. My fear quickly mutated to anger. Somehow, this was the woman who had taken a blade to Killian's throat and slit it. This was the woman whose actions had sent Killian into the grasp of a god, all to become his slave.

'I see you've heard about me.' Sofina's grin split her hollow face apart. 'Does my son speak fondly of his mother?'

My mind raced, piecing together parts of this story. It explained Killian's reaction when he saw Sofina after we discovered my father was dead. Killian would have known then but had not mentioned anything. And I knew why. Because if he told me, it would have sent me directly back to her to destroy her. To rid Killian of his demons. That was my promise to him. And here his greatest demon stood, inches before me, an impossibility.

'You are no mother,' I snapped, longing to reach out and slice her neck open. 'That's a title you don't deserve.'

'Perhaps not. But we all must make sacrifices. Some greater than others. Killian was simply one of many that came after him.' Sofina floated forwards, moving on the cloud of shadows that seemed to pulse around her. This was magic I was not familiar with. It carried the stench of rot, the silence that came with death.

There was no doubt that Gorgana had blessed Sofina with magic. Like Killian, perhaps it gave them both immortality...

'A god cannot gift their immortality to another.' Sofina reached into my mind and drew out my thoughts. I felt the presence, like a blanket of doom that stretched like a storm. I cringed away from it but found my body immobile, unable to do anything.

'And yet here you stand,' I replied through gritted teeth, eyes trained on the stalking woman with her piercing red eyes. I felt her, lingering in my thoughts, so I added the last words for her to find within them. *And yet your son still lives, even though you tried to kill him.* 

'You are asking the wrong questions, Ernest of Ire,' Sofina said as she shifted around me. I attempted to turn, to follow her stalking movements, but the shadows woven around my body like hundreds of grasping hands kept me in place. 'Go on, ask it of me.'

There was a final question because Sofina forced it into my mind. She buried it into my skull, filling me with it, taunting me. Her influence forced the question onto the tip of my tongue, spoiling my mouth with its vile taste. 'What... are you?'

The shadows seemed to release a collective pleasured sigh. Then Sofina was laughing, filling the void of darkness with her madness. When she spoke again, it was not entirely with her voice. It was with the deeper, huskier tone of another speaker.

'I am Death. I am inevitable. I am Gorgana.'

### Chapter Forty-Three - Ernest

to the

It was believed the gods had forgotten about humans long ago. But, as I stared deep into the boiling red pits of Sofina's eyes, I knew that history had never been so wrong. Because here one was, standing before me, and I had no doubt left.

Gorgana, the Goddess of Death, taunted me with a laugh that wasn't entirely human. The sound scratched over my skin, flaying me from the outside in until I was confident I would never rid myself of it.

'My son was not the only one to enter a bargain with a god,' Sofina said, coming to a stop in front of me again, the shadows receding until the cave-like room came back into focus. 'I too gave my soul to aid Gorgana. A vessel to strengthen herself within, a place to call home whilst she gathered her power and searched for a way to finally destroy Karakos.'

'This is wrong,' I said, my entire body tense, but finally free to move. And yet something kept me standing still. 'Gods using humans. We are aren't toys, we don't belong to you.'

'He has not told you his truth, has he?'

My silence must have explained my confusion. That only made Sofina laugh harder, more feverishly.

'What do you know of Killian's bargain with Karakos? You lay with him, you hold feelings for him, and yet you do not *know* him.'

I finally braved a step forwards, nails and teeth ready to tear flesh at the mention of Killian's name from her mouth. 'Love. That's what I've learned from him. And what do you know about such a concept, Sofina? A mother is there to cradle her son, not draw a blade over his throat and bleed him dry.'

'Duty,' she spat. 'Not love. Sofina did what must be done for Gorgana, and look how well it paid off in the end. I see the way you look at me, the disgust, but I ask you, Prince Ernest of Ire—what do you know of duty? What have you done for your people except infect their minds and mould them to your own gain? Did you do that for love?' She tilted her head, unnaturally red eyes flashing. 'No, I don't think so.'

I inhaled deeply, prepared to debunk her claims. But she wasn't wrong. There was nothing I could conjure in response to prove otherwise. 'All this death and chaos to destroy a god who disappeared a long time ago?'

There was hardly a moment of silence. Sofina did not need to think before she replied. 'Karakos is here, as he always has been. You just have not been looking in the right place.'

There was something in the way she looked at me, a knowing enjoyment as she slowly gave me pieces to a puzzle, waiting for me to put them all together.

I strained towards her, eyes wide and lips drawn back over my teeth. 'I don't know how many times you need to hear this, but I cannot help you. I don't have my magic. It. Is. *Gone*.'

She waved her pale hand in the air as though dismissing me. 'Oh, Ernest. It is not your power I require anymore. I have not planned and schemed for centuries simply waiting for you to stumble into my path. Stupid human. You were merely a shortcut to what I wanted, but as always this situation is proof to never rely on another for something you desire.'

Her eyes dropped to my stomach, to the unmarked skin where the spear had penetrated me. Before I could move, she reached and brushed ice-cold fingers over my navel. Even when I tried to recoil, I was frozen in place by the pressure of her shadows.

'Don't touch me—'

'Has my son told you the story about his precious trident? Because its presence has clearly had an effect on you. The healing of your body... you have used it, haven't you?'

I had. It was the reason Killian hadn't healed on Thalasapoli, because I had kept it from him.

'Powerful, isn't it?' Sofina was lost to thought for a moment, nail tracing slowly over my stomach as though imagining the damage that had recently healed. A wave of sickness raced through me, passing across every inch of skin near her finger. Her touch was death. It was corpse cold, her

skin lacking the warmth of life. Whatever Gorgana had done to Sofina, it was universally wrong. I kept my lips sealed, unable to speak even if I longed to. She didn't seem to notice and continued speaking.

'Stories tell that Karakos and I were the ones to usurp Nyssa, Goddess of All. Mother. And we did. I wanted her gone, wanted her oppressive power removed from this earth. But what has been missed in the tales is that it was *I* who told Nyssa of Karakos's plans to trick her. The Great Betrayal, a name for a time which has more meaning than you could have imagined. Nyssa, in her fury at her golden child's betrayal, used her powers to strip Karakos of his and forge it into a physical, tangible item. The trident. It was both a punishment and a reminder that we are nothing without our power. Of course, Karakos did not know of my involvement in this, but winning is knowing one's enemies as well as their allies. Sometimes those lines blur.'

It was no longer Sofina who spoke with her lullaby tone, but the creature lurking beneath her skin. The voice was rasped and ancient. It was a sound that made sense to my ears, yet I knew it was not spoken in a language I used. What helped was the scene the goddess's shadows created around us. I watched figures spring from the darkness, moving in wisps of smoke, only to disperse as the scene changed. It was the same scene depicted in mosaic patterns deep in the Below. In the darkness of my mind, I saw it again, Nyssa pointing at Karakos, the trident... the weapon I had last seen wielded in Killian's hand.

'I'm not interested in your bedtime stories, Sofina,' I hissed, frustrated with how this woman toyed with me.

'Are you not listening, Ernest? I am offering you the truth, and you are far too slow to put it together.'

'You're playing with me,' I snapped.

Sofina smiled knowingly. 'I am.'

Something odd niggled at the back of my mind. I could not make sense of it yet, perhaps because I was too pathetic or maybe because I was protecting myself from the truth.

'Once I knew Karakos had a weakness, something I could use, I returned to his side as if I had no dealing with Nyssa. Furious with her punishment, I used my brother's anger, combined our powers, and cast Nyssa from this world into the aether beyond. Once she had been dealt with, Karakos and I were alone. But he too had plans of his own. He plotted against me with the minor goddess Luna. Together, they longed for a world

smothered by water, full of creations of their own, instead of Nyssa's humans. He was prepared to remove the potential of death from the world, thus making me powerless. Forgotten. So, like all stories of warring siblings, I too revealed yet another level to my plan. I lay in place of Luna and gave Karakos the *true* children of gods. Monsters. The Mer. All for the simple plan to distract Karakos long enough for me to sweep in and take his trident. With it, I would have his power and his control.'

My mind went back to the mosaic we had seen in the drowned city. How Nyssa's presence was heavy amongst the old world. Her memory had been substantial before The Great Betrayal, and now I stood before the very being who orchestrated it all.

Except one question remained. If Nyssa was truly banished from Ire, how did I have access to my magic? I was her blessed, she my patron.

'All this just for more power?' I asked, cringing away from the fingers of shadows toying with my hair, my face, my naked body.

'Of course,' the goddess within Sofina snapped, clearly furious with me for even suggesting there was another reason. 'When Nyssa gave us each of our reigns, she did not even contemplate what I may have wanted before she gave me Death. Although eternal, what good is death? No one reveres it and everyone fears it. My followers could barely keep me alive, so I had to find a new way to rule. Karakos was always driven by his ego. He believed he merited the oceans, ruling over most of the physical world, and what did he do to deserve that? He could not control the land, that was a domain left for the taking. But he was ready to do so, ready to swallow the world entirely if it meant keeping full power over everything. I could not allow him to do that.'

I smiled into Sofina's face, staring through the windows of her eyes until I regarded the goddess within, and nothing else. 'I apologise for being crass, but I cannot find a fuck to give about your games and wants.'

'You will. In time, you will. Because you, even without your power, are a very integral part of my final plan. Karakos would not willingly give his power over to me. But Killian, Sofina's son, is still human deep in his core. He has a conscience, and most importantly, he now has a weakness... *You*.'

I felt the world snap into place, like the click of a finger or the spark of a flame.

You

I was his weakness.

But why would Karakos give his source of power to Killian? Unless...

'Ahhh,' Sofina exhaled, the noise close to an organismic moan. 'Finally, you see the truth. Tell me, Ernest of Ire, how does it feel to lay with a god? I mean, I know the answer of course, since I have been with Karakos myself under a guise—'

All sounds ground to a halt as the realisation settled over me. The tattoo, the power. Karakos had not only given Killian life through a bargain, but he had entered Killian's body as a vessel, just as Gorgana lingered within Sofina.

'No,' I said to the dark, not speaking to anyone but myself. 'It can't be...'

'It can and it is.' Sofina's laugh bounced across stone walls. 'When I picked Sofina's body as my own, I knew it would taunt Killian's human side. That was why I used her. But you... you swept into this story and truly made it interesting. He loves you far more than he ever loved Sofina. Not that I blame him. But Killian knows what I would do to you, which is why he will willingly provide me with the trident. There will be no need for bloodshed and war. It will be a peaceful exchange...'

'And if he gives it to you, will you spare him?' I exhaled, not in response to Gorgana's words exactly, but that was how she took it.

'Actually, I was wrong. There will be death today. A god will fall, finally. And there will only be me left to rule over everything.' Her hand laid on my shoulder and squeezed. If I closed my eyes it would have been akin to bones pinching my flesh. 'Love is tragic. It is weakness, it is pain and torment. Love is far sharper than any blade or arrow. It cuts deep, it scars, and it kills. And this time, when I use it to take Killian's life, there will be nothing left to fill his body and bring him back. He should have entered my domain all those years ago, but Karakos kept him from me. After today, nothing will keep us apart.'

Footsteps sounded beyond the cavernous room. I was vaguely aware that all of the shadows receded, Gorgana's power hiding in the corners of the dark place as red-cloaked acolytes entered.

'Speak,' Sofina snapped, clearly displeased with the interruption. I was under the impression that these followers did not know that their Priestess was actually the goddess they worshiped in flesh and bone.

'It is the city, Priestess.' The speaker bowed, sparing a glance first to my naked body, then to the basin of blood and torn flesh that once was one of their fellow acolytes. 'Something is happening. The guards at the gates have abandoned their posts and left. The civilians are leaving in hordes, almost as if they're entranced.'

Out the corner of my eye, I caught Sofina wince. Seeing such a reaction pleased me, even amongst the roiling sickness that had settled within me after everything she had revealed. But I couldn't focus on that. I needed to focus on surviving this, on getting away before she could use me as bait for Killian... Karakos...whoever he was.

But it was something that the acolyte said that distracted me. People were leaving the city *entranced*. There was only one being with such power to control a city to do their bidding. I took a deep breath in, closed my eyes, and opened my hearing to the divine. And there, buried in the distance, was a song. Faint as a whisper on the wind, muffled by the layers of rock surrounding us. But there was no denying the three powerful commands woven amongst it.

Leave. Get out. Right now.

Aleanna was evacuating the city.

'It's time,' Sofina barked, fingers snapping around my wrists. 'Make him decent. Then take Ernest to—'

I jolted my head back, cracking my skull against her nose, giving me a moment to pull away. Gorgana was a powerful goddess, but in this form, she was still susceptible to human ailments like a broken nose.

The shift was quicker, focused only across my hands. I pounced on the two acolytes like a cat, leaping from the floor and landing on their bodies. The sound their skulls made as they bounced over stone was pleasant. One quick swipe of my hand and I tore their throats out.

More red shapes flooded into the room. There was no time to count. I slashed at them, ripped them to ribbons and left them in my wake. I didn't stop. I refused to allow myself a moment to think, only to fight.

If I could just get out and reach the water then Killian would find me. I could warn him.

'For every life you take,' Sofina's voice rose at my back, a wall of black shadows cresting over me. 'I become stronger. Death feeds me, you fool.'

The pressure of the goddess's power weighed down on my back, flattening me upon the corpse of the acolyte I had just killed. It was then that I watched the shadows rise from the bodies... not shadows, but souls.

Souls captured in Gorgana's power. And it was oppressive and smothering. I clawed at the stone, trying with everything left in me to get away.

But for the second time, my world slipped from me. This time, as the darkness overtook me, my conscious was still alive. I was simply drowning in the souls of the dead, being dragged into their imprisonment, while Gorgana's taunting laugh surrounded me.

It was the laugh of someone who believed she had already won. And perhaps she had.

### Chapter Forty-Four - Killian

the state

Regret burned like hellfire within me. I should have warned Ernest about my mother. I should have warned him about *me*, or the creature within me. It may not have saved him, but it would have at least prepared him if he'd known what he faced—*alone*, I reminded myself. He was alone, with the person who had ruined my life, the very person who had sent me into the open arms of a god who used the gash across my neck to fill me, to renew me.

My mind toyed with all the different outcomes of the past hours. Time had stretched to uncomfortable periods, each second strained by my separation from Ernest. Mere days of being beside him, and I had lost my focus.

It had been weak of me to keep the truth from him. Even if I wasn't entirely sure what my mother was now. Even if I wasn't brave enough to face it myself. Mother had haunted my mind since the day she had killed me. Her voice had followed me, taunting me from the shadows, infecting my mind with moments of uncontrollable anxiety. And no matter how much I told myself it wasn't true, I was wrong.

I had made guesses as to how her being alive was even a possibility so many centuries later. She was different, with piercing blood red eyes, a hollowed-out bone structure, and skin as pale as death. She had once been beautiful. Kind. Gentle. Before Gorgana had infected her mind—and now, it seemed, her very soul.

Karakos had seemed to recognise the entity that night as my mother stood above the oceans, watching down with eyes that were windows to the inhuman creature within her.

Gorgana was using my mother as a vessel, I was sure of it. As Karakos had wormed himself into me, burrowing deep, lurking in the corners of my body. No, not lurking... hiding, waiting. Biding his time.

I was nothing but a pawn, a pathetic human whose only use was his body.

Soon, he would come to the light. Soon, he would be free. And I knew the destruction that would follow, which was exactly why I had asked Aleanna to save as many of the humans of Ire as possible.

Aleanna had just ceased her song. She slumped over one of the rocks she rested on, strained from the continuous use of her magic. The air still rang with her power, echoing the soft whisper of her voice. It had bypassed me, slipping around any whose hearts had been infected by Gorgana. Her threads of power had woven amongst the city of Ire, urging the thousands of bodies to flee. The city was no longer a safe place, not with Gorgana occupying the land, and me, here, watching from the water, trident in hand, Karakos's power at the ready.

History told of what occurred when gods and goddesses clashed. These battles ruined lives, destroyed cities. I didn't want the innocents of Ire to be collateral damage when Karakos surfaced to take on Gorgana.

Movement on the shore caught my attention. With every passing second I expected to find Ernest and discover what my mother had taken him for. But it was the stoic bodies of Mer in human form who walked back towards the ocean. It was Aleanna's altered Mer, changed from the soulless creatures to beings with purpose. Although they still looked monstrous with their chins smeared with blood and their chests covered in rivers of crimson. Aleanna had sent her Mer onto land, using them to slaughter the acolytes at the gates and stations amongst the city, allowing for the humans to flee.

If I looked out across the distance, far beyond the city where the rolling hills spanned across the landscape, I could see the smudge of the fleeing wave of humanity. They climbed far from the city, closer to the cottage I had called home. It would be from there that they would watch as two divine beings warred.

'Killian, I've done what I can. The rest is down to you.'

I admired Aleanna's focus, the strength found in a person who was murdered by a king, only to find a purpose to keep her striving forwards even past death.

'Thank you,' I said, straining in every inch of muscle. 'Now would be the time to get the Mer as far away as possible. I cannot guarantee your safety going forwards.'

I was glad Aleanna didn't ask what I meant. Perhaps she recognised what lurked beneath my skin and the danger it would pose to everything around me, Mer or human, when it was unleashed. While I saw the Mer had changed, would Karakos recognise the same when he was finally free? Would he welcome their humanity and put the twisted past of the Mer's creation behind him?

'Good luck. And Killian? Save Ernest.'

'I would give my life for him.' I had never spoken such honest words before.

Aleanna looked at me, concern pinching her brow. 'Let's hope that's not the outcome.'

She leapt from the rock, slipping beneath the water only to resurface inches in front of me. I expected her to leave, but the defiance in her emerald eyes suggested I was very wrong. Her red hair was plastered to the side of her face, making the vibrant green of her eyes stand out. She wasn't the same person I had first followed through the city the night she attacked Ernest. Inch by inch, she had found her way back to herself.

'If you lose, the doom will not only stretch across the lands, but the sea too.' Aleanna refused to look away from me. At her back, heads popped out of the water, Mer of all ages and stages of their change. 'This is my fight too. Ours, together. Death has touched us both, and we were each given a second chance. No one is stopping you from saving your people, so don't ask me to turn my back on mine.'

My grip tightened on the trident, anchoring myself to its power. Winds picked up in the darkening sky, thick clouds billowing overhead until the sun was hidden from view. Not clouds, no.

Shadows.

We looked up in tandem, watching the unnatural darkness swirl around the peak of the castle, twisting into a cyclone which slowly stretched out over the city. It fanned out across the sky, like the gaping jaw of a demon who wished to swallow us up entirely.

The darkness spilled out of the familiar balcony far up in the castle's walls. I had been in the room it was attached to only once, but I knew it belonged to Ernest. So it wasn't a surprise when he was guided out onto it.

Everything stilled as Ernest's eyes met mine. It was as though the universe snapped into place, gathered together in a single moment that made everything else disappear.

Fury built within me as I watched the three hooded acolytes hold him, two on his side and one from the back. Even from a distance, I could see Ernest struggle. I watched as the acolytes held him tighter. One drew back a fist and smacked it into his face, knocking his head to the side. There was no denying Ernest's vicious smile in response, but that didn't stop me from reacting.

Lightning lashed through the swirling darkness, splitting it apart. I kept it far from Ernest for fear it would hurt him, but close enough that I knew the hairs would stand on his arms from the static. Most importantly, it stopped the acolyte from bringing his fist down on Ernest again.

'Can you stop them?' I said, refusing to remove my eyes from Ernest whilst speaking to Aleanna at my side. 'I don't have enough time to reach him.'

'No,' she replied, voice emotionless. 'Look at their ears, Killian, they've been—' Aleanna choked on her words, just as my eyes settled on what she saw. It was not the red hood of a cloak, but hair matted by blood. It oozed down the sides of the acolytes' faces, spilling from the mounds of ruined flesh that once were ears. 'Cut off. They're mutilating themselves to protect themselves against my power.'

Her power.

She was right. The acolytes had removed their ears, all to be free of Aleanna's power. There was nothing either of us could do to stop the acolytes from forcing Ernest over the stone bannister. He was held at an awkward angle, his torso dangling over the abyss whilst a new figure stepped out from the shadows of the room behind him.

I knew what was to come before it happened. As my mother walked into the scene, silver hair tugged around her face by the roaring winds, shadows of power spilled from her shoulders like wings. In her hand she held a knife I'd seen before. The rusted sacrificial blade that had sliced my throat open and sent me into Karakos's hands.

I was watching history repeat itself. A clear message from her to me.

My mother stepped in behind Ernest, threaded her fingers into his black hair and tugged his head back. He strained against her hold, his neck on display. The dull light caught the faded mark of the conch imprinted into his skin, the one which once glowed with golden light, now useless and empty.

Mother leaned into Ernest's ear, her crimson eyes not leaving mine for a moment. She taunted me and she knew it. When she drew back, my name rang over the distance between us. Although it was not her that spoke, but Ernest.

'Killian!'

Magic or no, I would recognise him in any life, in any world, during any time. That was how deep Ernest had woven into me. If I was not already full of a god, perhaps he would have taken that place.

Ernest was one being I would *gladly* bargain my life for.

'Killian,' Ernest said again, softer this time. His eyes filled with tears as the blade was brought to his neck. 'Do not give *her* what she wants.'

Mother's voice rose above Ernest's plea, drowning him out. As she spoke, her unnatural voice was amplified by the shadows around her. 'Shall we see if Karakos deems this soul worthy enough to keep from death? Or were you the only special one in Karakos's eyes?'

Her words pulled at the god within me, drawing it out from his concealment.

'Please,' I begged, to my mother, to Ernest, to Karakos, to the universe itself. 'Don't do this.'

Ernest's lips moved, forming two words beneath the roaring of the world. *Forget me*.

'I cannot,' I said, muttering beneath my breath, knowing he couldn't hear me. Thunder rumbled above. Lightning clashed against the roiling oceans. 'I will not.'

A hand rested on my shoulder, nail itching over my skin. I barely registered Aleanna from the horror of what was to come.

'Ernest must save himself,' she said, voice edged with something sharp.

I could not focus on why, not as my mother took that blade and pressed it to the soft flesh of Ernest's neck.

'You can save him,' Mother shouted, pure glee overspilling from her tone. 'It is up to you now, my son. I speak to you, not the god who stole you from me.'

I longed to scream at her and tell her just how wrong she was. Karakos didn't steal me. She had forced me into his many-limbed grasp. She was the one who stole my life. She was the one who put me on this path.

Her eyes fell on the trident. I sensed the desire in her eyes as though it was mirrored in mine. But she was right. If Ernest could touch the trident, it would save him from the blade. From death. It would regenerate any wound, just as it healed my neck when Karakos gave it to me, sealing himself inside my cage of flesh.

Blood pricked beneath the blade's edge. All thoughts and concerns fell away from me.

I drew my hand back, putting all the power in my arm. The trident left my hand, spearing through the air, ripping the ocean up as it shot away from it. Ernest's eyes widened in horror, the cut across his neck spreading with the swift slice of the knife. If he could reach it, take the trident, it would save him. *Heal* him.

I did not see if he caught it, not as I focused on that swelling line of blood. The blade reached the middle of his throat, just as a bud of golden light spilled over the metal, refracting light out across the world.

Ernest opened his mouth, and the most incredible sound came out. It was pure power, destructive and beautiful all in the same breath. And it was full of magic. *His* magic.

The balcony split apart and crumbled beneath them, stone cracking as dust billowed up. It swallowed Ernest, as well as the acolytes and my mother. The only thing the dust did not hide was the glow of golden light.

Everything fell into the ocean, burying all the sound beside the demanding laugh of victory. The beast within me—Karakos—shivered to the surface, called up by the sound of another god. This time, when a whip of lightning thrashed across the sky, it was not me who commanded it.

My power was no longer in my grasp.

'At least...' sang the voice of Death. 'I shall rule.'

## Chapter Forty-Five - Ernest

the state

Strands of gold light had slithered from the ocean, flowing up towards where Sofina held a blade to my throat. I watched them, catching the faint whisper of a song carried on the currents of wind, a ribbon of magic-imbued threads which wove their way back home. Back to me.

It happened so quickly. I had barely caught a glimpse of Aleanna, only seeing her emerald tail flapping at the ocean's surface as she swam back into the depths. Anticipation had me gasping for breath, opening my jaw wide to catch the strand of power. And as I inhaled it, breathing the ribbon down into my navel, tucking the golden power back into the empty scar at my throat, I felt close to whole again.

Close. Not entirely whole, not as my eyes settled back on Killian as he drew his arm back, trident seconds from leaving his possession.

So, I opened myself up to the magic and did the very thing I had contemplated for years.

*'Break*,' I whispered as the blade continued to cut into my skin. *'Shatter. Ruin.'* 

I closed my eyes as my magic split my castle in two. From deep in the rocky base all the way to the tallest spire, it was as though a god themselves had brought a blade up from the belly of the earth and carved it in two.

Perhaps Nyssa herself had, using me to do so.

The floor fell from under me. Debris burst up, blinding me, filling my mouth with grit. I kept my eyes closed, aware of the absence of a blade at my throat as my world fell away.

As I hit the water, it felt as though I smashed into something solid. It knocked the wind out of my lungs, but that no longer mattered, not as my

human skin melted away, leaving the Mer beneath to rule.

My eyes flew open. Stones fell around me, spearing through the depths. Bodies too. Red cloaks billowed around the corpses of acolytes like freshly spilt blood. I swam down into the depths, my silver tail pushing at the water, dodging as chunks of the castle fell around me. The ocean shifted and surged with the force of the falling castle. As everything I had known crumbled around me, I swam vigorously away from it.

All that mattered was finding Killian.

Navigating the chaos of a sinking city, I continued pushing forwards. I was vaguely aware of the small cuts across my upper arms made from the falling debris, but like the mark across my neck they healed almost instantly.

Karakos's immortality lived within his trident while his spirit dwelled within Killian, two entities separated by Nyssa. That was what Sofina had revealed. I had to find him before Gorgana did the one thing she longed to do—destroy Karakos once and for all.

In the distance, through the murky depths, I saw the flash of orange tentacles. Seeing Killian, or what I hoped was him, made me swim harder. Faster. And it was him. Killian swam to the surface, a limp body held in his arms. It was a woman—not an acolyte, but an innocent person. I hadn't even contemplated if anyone was still left inside the castle before I'd shattered it. Chains were tied around her arms, dangling freely beneath her. She must have been imprisoned within the castle, the chains stopping her from following Aleanna's siren call to leave the city.

Killian and I both paused for a moment as we took one another in. There was so much to say, so much that we didn't have the time to speak of. But as I looked at him in a new light, seeing the man who housed a god, Killian also regarded me as something not lost but found.

Shapes broke from the darkness. Tails and teeth. Mer swam to Killian and took the woman from his grasp. As they continued to swim to the Above, as the castle continued falling into the ocean causing great waves to ripple overhead, all I could do was look at him.

'Ernest.' He said my name as though he never expected to hear it again. 'My Ernest.'

Within seconds of his hands being empty, I was in them. My face pressed to the cool flesh of his chest, the inked tentacles blurred from being so close.

'She's revealed my truth.'

Four words, and each one worked to break me open.

'Everything,' I replied, voice muffled around his skin. Inhaling deeply, I gazed up at him. 'I know *everything*.'

He gritted his teeth and nodded once. It was the type of silent confirmation that spoke a million words. Killian was alive because a god hid within his skin. His power was not only gifted from a god like the heroes of our past. He *was* the power—he was a god in flesh. Not only a Sea Witch, but God of the Oceans.

He was Karakos.

'I should have told you before,' Killian said, brushing damp strands of hair from my eyes. He shook slightly, deft hands trembling with unspent relief. 'You gave me your truth, and I kept mine from you. And for that I'm sorry.'

'There are many things I should have told you too, Killian,' I said, wishing I could sink my nails into his skin so I could never let him go. But I knew the price to finally save Killian. I just wasn't sure when to pay it. 'We should go now whilst we have the chance. If we can find Nyssa, we can ask the goddess to punish Gorgana just as she did with you...with Karakos.'

Stripping Karakos of his power, forging it into a physical item that could be taken and used by anyone.

'There's no corner of this world where we can hide from death. There is no place Gorgana won't find us.' Killian confirmed the very worry that haunted my mind. 'Nor is there a corner I have not searched for Nyssa myself. She's gone. Wherever the gods banished her to, I'll never know.'

'But my magic,' I spat, feeling the swell of urgency in the base of my throat. 'It had to come from a god, right? Larisa recognised the power as a tribute to Nyssa. If I have it, surely she's close or reachable in some way.'

Killian dropped his head, as though this was nothing he had not already considered before. 'We don't have the time.'

'Then we fight Gorgana,' I said, teeth aching, nails fixing into points. 'I refuse to give up. For you, Killian, I will fight any god.'

I was ready. I would tear through Sofina, gouge my way to the centre where Gorgana lurked and free the goddess with my fury alone. Nothing could stop me... nothing except the look in Killian's eyes.

'It's over,' Killian said softly, barely audible as more of the castle smashed into the water in the distance. A powerful force pushed at us, so strong it nearly tore us apart. 'Gorgana has the...'

It was in that moment I noticed what was missing. Perhaps a moment too late as another unseen force slammed into us again and again. It was a vortex of power spinning around us. Killian shouted my name, tentacles reaching out for me. If he didn't wrap them around my waist, I would have been snatched away from him. The water churned. Rocks spun, debris from the sinking castle torn in the violent current. The ruins of an old ship, sunk many years ago and forgotten, rode the vortex of water as though a crew manned it.

The water opened up like an eye to the Above. And there, billowing in the clouds of darkness, was a large and monstrous form of shadow and decay. Suspended in the midst was Sofina, nothing more than a puppet for the goddess which ruled her corpse now. And in the shadowy hands of the giant winged being was the trident, flashing gold as it was dipped into the ocean. It was no more than a spoon in a bowl, turning the contents around —except it was the oceans Gorgana now controlled.

It was the power of two gods.

It was our end.

Death ruled the world. Her laughter echoed across all of Ire, blending in perfectly with the menacing glower the shadow creature wore. Soon enough we were on the sandy bed of the ocean, surrounded by a rippling wall of water. I forced myself to shift partially, enough to gasp for air instead of the need for water to keep me alive. Killian was before me, tentacles whipping around as he faced his mother and the goddess who ruled her. I was behind him, stretched out across the sodden ground, knowing exactly how this would end.

'My son,' the shadows taunted as they continued to turn the trident around the ocean. 'Just as I brought you into this world, I too will bring you out of it.'

'You are no mother of mine, Gorgana' Killian shouted back, to the shadow's delight.

'No, Karakos, for we are kin.' The voice deepened and twisted into a knot of horrible sounds that grated across my skin. 'It has been many years since I have seen you, Karakos. Although I cannot sense you. Do you continue to hide from me because you know you have finally lost?'

Through the wall of water, I could see the Mer attempting to reach us. But it was no good. Aleanna was there, her red hair pulled to the side by the force of the current, flying over her face, concealing the horror in her green eyes.

We had no weapon to fight back against a goddess. Nothing to use. I could barely put myself between Killian and his tormentor in time to save him. Because this was what Gorgana wanted. She had Karakos's power in hand and was a goddess in flesh before him.

Time slowed as the trident was taken from the ocean and levelled towards Killian.

'It is over. I have won, just as I promised you I would all those centuries ago.' Gorgana's voice was everywhere, in every shadow, in the water itself.

'Killian, look at me,' I demanded.

Our eyes met. He offered me a smile and a knowing expression as he prepared to finally meet his end. Even over the victorious laugh that filled the dark skies, I could hear the final words Killian said to me. 'Thank you for being my freedom, Ernest.'

Power hummed around the trident's pointed tips. Killian closed his eyes. I reached for him, tail smacking against the sand, refusing to let this be our last moment together. It was as though his words had woken me and reminded me of what I could achieve. I had made a promise to Killian, and wasn't prepared for him to face death without my keeping it.

'You're wrong!' I shouted, desperate for him to hear my reply. I watched as my golden power reflected off the planes of his face, just as realisation finally settled over him. He opened his eyes, mouth parting as he worked out what I was going to do. Perhaps he sensed the shackles lessen, perhaps he recognised the return of his humanity as my mind filled with the only desire I had left. 'I promised you something. Killian, I free you from Karakos, from the bargains and deals and curses. *I free you*.'

Those final three words were woven with the threads of my magic. I wrapped my intention around each word as I said them. Killian's eyes flared wide. Somewhere above us, Gorgana screamed in horror and as the desperate bolt of power shot towards Killian, it was not human flesh it met. Killian smiled at me as the outline of his body wavered as though the light couldn't quite reach him. As he lifted a hand to his chest, still smiling brightly at me, he dissipated before my eyes. Like seafoam caught on a breeze, his body blew away. The trident's bolt passed right through where he had been, scorching the ground where he had stood, the heat of it turning the sand to glass.

Killian's form had faded from something corporeal to a cloud of seaform, melting over my tail and running back into the ocean until nothing was left. All that remained was the phantom press of his skin against mine, a reminder that he had once been real. But even that feeling wouldn't last long. It would fade, and he would be nothing but a memory.

Killian was gone—not dead, because he'd perished a long time ago, but simply no longer existing on this plane. And the truth of that, above anything else I had learned about gods and betrayals, was enough to destroy me.

I no longer cared for the trident and its power, or the goddess who controlled it. I didn't care for anything as I watched the final scrap of seafoam catch in the oceanic wall beside me. As quickly as Killian was standing before me, he was gone. I searched for him in the water, praying to find him. The broken pieces of my heart lodged in my throat. My breathing hitched as a world-ending sob worked out of me.

I pulled myself across the sandy bed, tail slithering behind me. I cupped my hands in the puddle of seafoam where Killian had been only a moment ago. It was warm, real. And then it slipped through my fingers, dribbling down my stomach and tail.

Through the dim waters, a new shape emerged, a bulbous form that shivered into existence. It was born from the water itself, solidifying into something gargantuan, with tentacles large enough to wrap around the earth, and two purple-hued eyes.

This was not some monster of the deep come to protect its domain.

It was not a figment of my heartbreak or imagination.

It was a returned god reclaiming its power.

It was... Karakos.

### Chapter Forty-Six - Ernest

the state

As Karakos rose from the water, colossal tentacles reaching for the swell of shadows that was Gorgana, the vortex of water around me broke. It was a tidal wave of force, ripping up from my side and forcing me into a violent spin. I blindly reached out towards the place Killian had been, but it was lost to me.

His graveyard, his place of death, washed away forever.

I pushed away the aching sadness that threatened to crush my chest in favour of the pure, unbridled fury which forged the cracks in my heart back together, iron hard.

Killian had longed for freedom, but it had only led to his death. And I had *offered* that death to him, given it up to him without thought. But it was Sofina who had first taken the blade to his throat. It was Karakos who had imprisoned him in immortal servitude. It was Gorgana whose domain Killian now lingered in.

They would all pay. I would make them.

It took me a moment to find my bearings. Focusing on the halo of light from the Above, I swam for it. Once I broke the surface, I scanned the scene, turning upon the warring gods. Shadows and water-forged tentacles clashed together, causing the ocean to swell and ripple up and over the Kingdom of Ire. There was no knowing where the city had once been. It had been suffocated by the oceans as they rose over it, devouring it whole with astonishing speed.

The sky crackled with lightning as Gorgana pointed the trident towards Karakos. It lanced through the thick clouds, forks of white-hued power which sang with their own song of destruction. As the bolt broke away from

the sky and connected with Karakos, the lightning shattered one of his tentacles, breaking it apart with ease.

It didn't reform. This was Karakos's end, but there was something in that which made me jealous.

Every soul, dead and alive, would have heard the gut-wrenching cry of agony the god let out. It shook the oceans and sky, filling the whole world with his torment.

Gorgana was using Karakos's own power against him. His greatest power was now his greatest weakness. Just like I had been for Killian. Just as he had been for me.

Aleanna surfaced next to me, her red hair plastered across her face. I barely looked at her, but when I did it was to see her kind eyes overspilling with pity which solidified when she rested a hand on my shoulder. 'Ernest, we've got to leave if we hope to survive this.'

'Killian's dead,' I breathed, salt stinging the multitude of wounds across my skin. My response had nothing to do with what Aleanna had said, but it was all my mind could forge.

'I know, Ernest, I'm sorry. He was a good man. But your sacrifice might just save us all,' Aleanna said, her words puncturing me deep into my core. That was all Killian was. A sacrifice to free a god, one powerful enough to contest Gorgana. Except...

'The time of gods will end. I shall see to it,' I said, eyes falling back on the trident Gorgana was harnessing. The Goddess of Death was laughing, enjoying every moment of this. She was toying with Karakos, using his wrath and pain to swallow a city, threatening the lives of many. Gorgana didn't care if the world she ruled was inhabited by the dead or the living, for she had power over both now. She just wanted Karakos dead. 'He's weak in this form. Without his power, he'll perish and Gorgana will win.'

Aleanna's grip faltered as the water raged over Karakos, trying to drag him down to the depths. On and on, Gorgana threw more power at the god's form, leaving a trail of wounds in her wake.

'Then stop her,' Aleanna said, staring at me deep in the eyes. Her intensity trapped me, like a spider and a web of iron, and I couldn't look anywhere else. 'I know the power you have, its limits and capabilities. Use it.'

'I don't know how,' I murmured, fighting back the tears. My fingers reached for my throat, longing to wrap around it and suffocate the life from

myself.

'Nyssa didn't know either,' Aleanna said, so matter-of-factly I knew Killian must have told her. 'But she found a way of weakening Karakos. I have no doubt she would have done the same to Gorgana if she knew of her involvement in The Great Betrayal. Hindsight is powerful. Use history to fix this.'

'You're right,' I breathed, my mind spinning with the sudden influx of ideas.

I heard the smile in Aleanna's response. 'Of course I am.'

Nyssa had trapped Karakos's power in a physical form, his trident. It gave him vulnerabilities, something a god didn't ordinarily possess. If Nyssa was my patron, if she was the lost goddess who had given me her powers, had made me her hero, then what was stopping me from doing the same?

I left Aleanna and her words and dove down deep until my muscles burned, my tail forcing me faster and faster. I didn't stop until I reached the bottom, my webbed fingers clutching at the first thing I could find. It was a shell with an iridescent underbelly and a rough surface spiralling into a dull point. There was no ignoring how fragile it felt in my hands, but it would have to do.

Being breakable was not a weakness. In fact, it might just save the world.

I settled my gaze upon Gorgana. Karakos continued to thrash his tentacles down upon the city, ruining buildings and streets, levelling entire quarters. My castle no longer stood atop the cliffs edge but had completely sunk into the belly of his domain. And more would follow. Homes, more cities, entire islands. Innocent lives, destroyed.

I had to end this.

Sofina floated amongst the shadows, a heart of life at the centre of Gorgana's phantom body. I opened my mouth and wove my own magic around the shell in my palm, tying it to the goddess hovering far above. It wasn't a song of joy but instead one born from the broken parts of myself, the empty space left by Killian's death.

Death was inevitable. It came for us all. It wasn't something to be feared, but accepted. It was unkind, careless, and spiteful. And most importantly, just as Gorgana had boasted, it was *eternal*. So, I laced all

those intentions amongst my song, my throat glowing gold with magic, the sky brimming with the blissful sounds that slipped from my parted mouth.

Even from a distance, Sofina turned her red eyes upon me and smiled. She likely recognised the empty space left after Killian's existence, likely sensing the very thing the goddess within her ruled.

Death.

Did they not see their own end? As Gorgana's smile broke, eyes widening and mouth forming a scream, I supposed they hadn't.

Gorgana's shadows thinned, drawn down from the sky and gathered into a single thread. My golden power wrapped around it, capturing her power over death, guiding it into the fragile shell I held.

Karakos continued to fight as I evened the battlefield. Gorgana screamed, distracted for a moment. I saw the surprise across Sofina's face as the goddess within her was freed. Death came swiftly for Sofina as her body fell into the depths, no longer held afloat by power. She wasn't the only thing to fall, either. The trident tumbled, spinning wildly, gold metal catching the light. As it speared into the roaring ocean, piercing the waves, I was sure I felt the thud in my bones.

The Mer would be gathered around Sofina, pulling flesh from bone, devouring the corpse until nothing was left. Good.

As the final dregs of power were collected in the shell, my fingers shivered around it, prepared to break it into pieces. I waited with bated breath, watching as the two gods continued their fight.

When the trident rose from the water before me, I half expected Killian to be holding it. But I was met with the furious green of Aleanna's determined eyes.

'Finish it,' I said breathlessly, throat aching from the use of my magic. 'Show Gorgana exactly what death means.'

'I can't do it alone,' Aleanna had to shout over the building power in her flesh.

I threaded my hand in hers, grasping firmly. 'We won't ever be alone.'

Aleanna nodded and turned, water rippling around her as she levelled the trident towards the centre of the shadow body. She glowed with power, her eyes alight with it from the inside whilst her skin shone with bolts of conjured lightning.

I gripped onto the shell, holding the power of a god in my hand just as Aleanna held the other. It felt wrong, a twisted and dark force that didn't

belong in this realm. And it had a song of its own, a lingering melody that worked at my conscience, longing to trick me into harnessing it.

There were possibilities with this power, I recognised that. But I couldn't focus on it yet. Not as the magic of ocean and sky gathered across the three points of the trident. Aleanna's face reflected the power, the crackling lines of light enhancing the lines of her focused expression. Whilst she gathered the magic, I made sure the bolt of power was enough to end this all for good. I sang to it, weaving in the unending, unforgiving, alleternal end that was death, ensuring there was no coming back from this.

Aleanna roared as the bolt of power finally burst from the tips of the trident. A ball of pure force shot across the ocean, waves chasing behind it. It passed through Karakos' whipping tentacles and met its mark.

Gorgana's shadow-made eyes widened as a red spread in a neat line across her neck. But instead of blood, it was more shadow that spilled out, falling over the ocean in a storm cloud of darkness before dissipating.

Once the sky had been coated in the darkness of death, the air poisoned with the scent of it. But as suddenly as the shadowy force had revealed itself, it faded. Sunlight broke through the clouds, piercing rays that lingered across the world, dispelling any and all darkness from the realm.

Karakos was all that was left, a watery kraken looking out across a half-drowned city—or what remained of the city, which had been utterly ruined during the battle. The waters continued to rise like tongues of a pack of thirsty dogs, lapping up streets and buildings.

'Is it... done?' Aleanna gasped, her gaze renewed as the trident continued lending its power to her. I knew the feeling, the strength that came with touching it.

'Not yet.' My heart slammed in my chest, threatening to shatter ribs and sinew.

What good was a new world if Killian wasn't here to experience it?

I swam forwards, diving over the calming water, knowing Aleanna gave chase beside me. All the while, I did not release the shell. I held on tight, delighting in the unnatural power rippling over my palm.

'Karakos!' I screamed as I got close enough, filling my voice with command so the god couldn't refuse me. I felt it turn its enormous, vividly purple eyes upon me. There was a sense of knowing as we looked upon one another. I supposed this god had gotten to know me well as he'd watched from his hiding place within Killian's body.

'A deal!' I bellowed until my lungs burned with the two words. My throat hurt too as I knotted my gold threads around the god until he had no choice but to accept. 'I propose a deal!'

At first, all I heard was the booming chaos of the Below, the muffled song of waves breaking and currents hissing. Then it came, a voice as ancient and all-demanding as Gorgana's had been. Except this was familiar in some way, as though I knew the deep, rumbling tone as well as my own.

It was Karakos.

'For a life?' the god asked in return, the resounding voice rippling the water around me.

'Yes,' I answered, filling my mind with one image—Killian. His warm smile. His kind eyes and gentle hands. His scent of salt and sky. The way his fingers tapped five times over whenever he suffered mentally. I didn't stop until every inch of my skull was utterly full of him and only him. 'For his life.'

#### Chapter Forty-Seven - Ernest

the state

Karakos glowered down at me, water dripping from his form, cascading into the ocean surface until it thrashed around us. I was caught in the current, slowly drawn down into the depths, no longer in control of my body. The sounds of the world were muffled, everything unimportant as I waited for the god's reply.

He was playing with me, waiting to hear what I would do for this one, final thing.

As if saving him from death wasn't enough.

'You've done it before,' I said as the god encased me in his tentacles. It was familiar to feel the cocoon of his body, which I supposed made sense, since Karakos had been within Killian the entire time. 'You brought Killian back from death, and you *will* do it again.'

'Death is not my domain, child.'

A spike of anger rose within me at the god's patronising tone. 'Child?' I spat the word out like a bad taste. 'I am no child, and certainly not yours.'

'No, it would seem not. Nyssa's essence lingers within you. Does she forgive me for my sins?'

I ignored him, feeling my chance quickly fading away from me. 'Please, Karakos. Bring Killian back to me. Allow him a life without stipulations. His chance for normalcy was taken from him by his own mother, then kept away from him by you. Does he not deserve to experience freedom in life?'

A stream of water snatched the tears from my cheeks.

'Do not cry for him.'

I couldn't control my breathing. It was my turn to lose myself to anxiety, and this time, Killian wouldn't be here to save me. 'I—I need him.'

'A deal,' the god echoed my earlier offer.

'For his life?' I answered desperately.

Time stretched. All I could do was wait for the answer. As Ire continued to sink into the Below, the Mer gathered in the distance, watching and waiting too.

'No.' Karakos laughed mockingly, ancient eyes skimming over me. 'Not for life. For vengeance.'

This was rehearsed, as though the god had said these words to another before me. To Killian.

'And the price?' I screamed, mouth full of salt water, ears roaring with the swirling sea. 'Tell me the price and I will fucking pay—'

'You.'

The water around my scaled body hardened like hands grasping me. No, not hands, tentacles. Except this was not Killian's kind grasp, reassuring and careful. This was harsh and controlling, the hold of a god who believed anything with power was his to take.

'And what will you give me in return?'

Karakos answered, not with spoken words, but by filling my head with his price. He wanted me. Not Killian, but me. To use me as a vessel, access my power and...claim the world.

His plan had never changed. In all this time living within Killian, the god had not lost his thirst for control. If anything, his time away had made him famished for his ultimate goal.

But I was not all Karakos desired. He, like all gods, like Gorgana and the many who had fallen before them, Karakos desired more.

He desired... everything. And with my power, he would have it.

In my mind's eyes, I saw the world coated in ocean, the land flooded by his power. There, and only then, would Karakos truly rule. My heart hurt, my chest tightening. If what Karakos had done to Ire was terrible, this was nothing in comparison. He wouldn't stop until the oceans rose over every island, until the world was entirely submerged.

'No.' I pushed backwards, breaking free of Karakos's hold with the power in my voice. My fist tightened on the shell, concealing what it contained, until fractures raced across the surface. I couldn't do it. I couldn't give Karakos what he desired.

'Give it to me.' Desperate need filled the ocean, echoing the god's voice. 'I am the last god. I am the King. I shall rule the sky and sea, I shall

rule death, and with you, I will rule everything in between.'

Karakos was no different. How could I even think he was, when it was Karakos and Gorgana who had turned against Nyssa together?

The god gained on me, purple eyes growing closer. Through the pressure of his watery limbs, I sensed another familiarity. A beating heart. The canter was steady and firm. There was no escaping Karakos's grasp—I was in his domain.

Karakos swelled forwards, voice filling every crack and cavern within me. 'You will have your love back. You will hold him again. That is what you desire, is it not?'

There was no swimming away. No matter how I tried, I was lost to the draw of Karakos's reach. He grasped around my tail, dragging me back to him, catching both Nyssa's and Gorgana's powers.

I wanted Killian, but not at the cost of everything and everyone else.

'You will be mine—' Karakos ceased his demanding speech as though someone had cut him off.

The pressure around me lessened and I was suddenly free. I turned back to see why. Aleanna had sliced through Karakos' tentacle, the trident outstretched before her. She speared him, ripping him from the inside out, destroying him just as she had with Gorgana.

In one last ditch effort, Karakos rose his tentacles up, readying to smash the world with his power. But, like Killian, he dissipated before my very eyes. One moment he commanded the ocean with his sheer size, and the next there was no determining what was his body from the seafoam that melted off him.

Silence followed. Pure, heavy, and *suffocating* silence.

Karakos was dead. Murdered by his immortality and power that had been forged into a weapon, a weapon which Aleanna held aloft, a war cry etched into her lips.

'The time of gods is over!' Aleanna shouted, clutching the trident as though it had always belonged to her. 'The time of demanding power, of holding control and desiring more, has come to an end!'

Mer swam around her, hordes of scaled bodies slicing through the dark water. Half of Ire had sunk while the rest clung onto the shoreline just a stretch from us. There had been so much destruction, so much devastation, and still I didn't feel the relief that should have followed.

'It's over,' I gasped, a chill racing across my skin. The memory of Killian's touch was quickly fading, shifting away from me like a racing tide. No matter how I tried to sink my fingers into the feeling and cling on, I couldn't. 'He could have brought Killian...'

'The price wasn't worth paying, Ernest.' Aleanna's expression was a mixture of pity and sympathy. 'Karakos would have used you, just as he'd used Killian. Look at what's left of your city—'

I glanced at what remained of the Kingdom of Ire. The ruins of the city now belonged to the Below. Chunks from the castle were scattered across the deep seabed, littering it with rubble. When I looked to the Above, it was to see the amphitheatre crumbling into the water. It wouldn't be long until it was completely destroyed.

'It's over. No more hateful kings and vengeful gods. It's time for us to carve out our own futures.'

Tears continued to fall from my eyes, caught in the ocean's water. It was the hollow feeling of failure which captured me now. The knowledge that Killian was truly gone, and the potential of what he could have been. 'But what if I cannot bear to face tomorrow without the one person who was beginning to give my future purpose?'

There was so much more I longed to say. As though voicing the emptiness, bringing it to the surface and exposing it, would lessen the ache within me.

Aleanna reached towards me with a careful hand. When she laid it on my fist, I thought it was just to comfort me. But slowly, she uncurled my fingers, exposing the shell in my palm. Throughout the silver belly of the shell were veins of black shadow, twisting and shifting like living creatures. 'You hold death in your hands, Ernest. If Killian resides in that realm, you can call him back. It's your power now. You hold it in your hand.'

It's your power now.

I gazed down to my palm, knowing just how delicate the shell was. One wrong move and it would smash, destroying the power within.

'If I've learned anything, it's that power is dangerous, no matter whose hands it's in.' I couldn't take my eyes off it. 'It ruins cities, it ruins lives.'

'And yet, it's what you do with the power which determines if it is great or not.' Aleanna's hand tightened on the trident. The weapon suited her, as if she'd been born to wield Karakos's power. She had lost her life and found another, making it benefit not just her, but others who had perished before her. My magic, the innate ability which lingered in my throat, had only ever been used to give bad people bad things. Aleanna had proven that that wasn't the only thing my magic could do. She had taken it from me, just as I commanded her to do, and brought humanity back to the Mer. And they surrounded her now, bright eyes full of awe, respect, and above all else, hope.

Just as Aleanna had offered it to them, she handed hope to me too. 'The choice is yours, Ernest.'

I held her eyes, reaching into the soul within, one I felt intrinsically linked to. 'And what if the power corrupts me?'

She brought the trident between us, a knowing smile on her lips. 'Then I will be here to stop you.'

I knew Aleanna meant every word as she made a threat against my life. Relief came at the strangest of times.

I gritted my teeth and nodded, closing my fist over the shell. Perhaps it was selfish to play with death. Perhaps it was wrong. Gorgana's power should be destroyed, never to be harnessed again. And yet here I was, readying to use it for my own personal gain.

It was a shame I was never good at determining right from wrong. As Father had told me all my life, I was a selfish boy who had killed my makebelieve mother. I almost wished he could see me now, see how truly selfish I was capable of being.

The unknown was stretched out before me, and there was only one person I wished to face it with.

'Killian,' I said his name beneath my breath, grasping the power of death whilst weaving the magic of life around it. 'I need you.'

There was so much more I could have said, but words seemed to be powerless to capture exactly why I needed him. So I put all of my wordless emotion into the magic instead.

The water shivered as an answer seemed to bubble from within me, his voice as real as though he swam beside me and whispered it into my ear. 'Is that so?'

'Yes,' I sobbed. My eyes watered with pure happiness and my tight chest loosened with relief and hope. 'I do.'

'Then find me, princeling. Call me home. Call me back to you.'

# PART VII DAY NOUGHT OF FREEDOM



## Chapter Forty-Eight - Killian



Home.

It was one word with enough power to draw me out of the eternal shadows. One word which continued to ring in my skull, bounding across the constraints of bone until every inch of my body reverberated with it.

Where was my home? Was it the village on the cliff's edge where I had grown up? Was it Ire, with an ocean full of monsters and my body full of a god? No. I knew the answer. I knew it without the need to think.

Home was not a place, but a person.

Home was Ernest.

I woke to the languid fingers of light cascading across closed eyelids. There had been so much darkness, my awareness barely a spark. And then suddenly, I was conscious of everything. The heavy scent of salt and ocean breeze, the warmth of sun-baked wood, the tickle of soft sheets tangled against my naked body.

Slowly, carefully, I opened my eyes to a familiar ceiling. A web of fishing nets strung between worn beams, hanging bags of herbs stuffed with fresh citrus and lavender tones that permeated the already heavy air—bags I had hung by hand myself.

I would have recognised the cottage in any life or time.

It was no different to the last time I had been here. In the distance I could hear the gentle lap of waves against the shoreline, the song of gulls flying overhead, the far-off rumble of wheels turning, followed by the bray of donkeys trudging up dusty tracks.

But there was a difference, because I was not alone.

Rolling my head to the side, I was met with the thick dark crown of black hair. It belonged to a head which was lying on folded arms, the owner snoring peacefully.

Home. Ernest.

I reached out to him, my arms strained and awkward, the muscles numb as though I'd been lying on them for hours. Perhaps if I wasn't so focused on waking him, I would have noticed another difference. The lack of ink twisting up my arms, the tentacle shackles of a god... gone.

Ernest did not stir awake. He jolted from slumber, sitting up with wide, panicked eyes.

'Hello, princeling.' My voice was as rough as ancient stone.

I waited for him to speak, but it seemed he was unable to form a single word. He just stared at me, too scared to blink as though I would disappear if he looked away even for a moment. His mouth was parted, his beautiful blue eyes shining with tears.

My fingers found his face, tracing the curve of his jaw. Ernest's skin prickled with gooseflesh, spreading beneath his loose tunic to a place I could only begin to imagine. 'I'm sorry if I woke you...'

Ernest sprang across the bed, grasping me as though a simple breeze had the power to blow me away. In moments, despite the warning groan of the old frame, Ernest had straddled my waist, dove his arms beneath me, and clung on for dear life. 'It worked.'

It took a second to work out what he mumbled into the skin of my chest. I closed my eyes and smiled, wrapping my arms around his back. 'I found my way home, Ernest. You sang and guided me back to you.'

There was no need to voice the third change, how deep in the cavity of my chest only one heart beat. Yes, the rhythm was odd after all this time, but what mattered was that my heart was my own again, captured by no god.

Karakos was gone. I remembered everything until the darkness had overcome me. I remembered my mother, her body a vessel for Gorgana. And I remembered Ernest looking at me, the pain across his face as he offered me my freedom.

There were missing parts. Parts which would no doubt be filled in with time. But nothing mattered now. Nothing at all but Ernest, his body, his proximity, his touch, the thump of his heart which rippled over my bare chest.

I took my hand and slowly ran it across Ernest's back. If he hadn't moved to sit up, I would have painted circles across him, smoothing my touch into him until he would never forget it.

'How do you feel?' There was no denying the concern across Ernest's expression. In a way, there was a hint of expectance lurking in the furrow of his brow and the pinch of his pink lips.

How did I feel? Normal. That was one word that I could have used to encapsulate the entire feeling. My body was tired, exhausted even. Each movement, no matter how small, took effort. There was a tingling in the ends of my fingers and toes, as though blood was returning to a place it had vacated for a while. But out of all those things I could've said, I chose another explanation.

'Whole. I feel whole, Ernest.'

His shoulders sagged, relief immediately smoothing out his features. 'I'm glad.'

'I'm glad?' I echoed, cocking my head on the pillow. 'You've clearly had some time to think about what you are going to say to me, and "I'm glad," is all you could muster?'

The hint of sarcasm worked to draw Ernest out of whatever cavern of anxiety he was trapped in. Something bothered Ernest, but I just couldn't place my finger on it yet. He clutched at the loose material of his tunic, balling it up until his knuckles stood out through the skin. I placed my hand on the ball of tension, praying I could undo it for him.

'I thought I'd lost you,' Ernest said softly, his lips quivering.

'You freed me from Karakos. You saved me. But I know everything comes at a price,' I said, just as Ernest settled his eyes back on mine. He released his tunic slowly and lowered his hand. It gave me a chance to work open the buttons, revealing his chest beneath.

I knew I had died. Without a doubt, the darkness I was in had been death's domain. I had met that darkness once before, so I was familiar with the eternal stretch of nothingness, how it embraced one's soul—unless their soul was then claimed by another. In my case it had been Karakos who had healed my slit throat and kept me reanimated, all so he could complete his task of eliminating the Mer. But this time, the darkness hadn't been the end, not completely.

It had been nothing but a waiting place for someone or something to guide me to a place of rest. But then I had been drawn back from it, like a moth to the light at the end of a tunnel. There was only one god who had done the same thing to me before. So I had convinced myself that I knew the price Ernest had paid. But as I peeled back his tunic, letting it fall over his shoulders until every inch of skin was on show, I found no markings. No black inked tentacles wrapping around his chest. No face of a god etched into the skin of his back.

'Did you expect to find something?' Ernest asked in a whisper, eyes cautiously drinking me in.

'I did.' I expected to find the mark that proved a bargain with a god. Karakos.

'Sorry to disappoint,' Ernest replied.

I paused, making sure I looked over every possible part of him. 'How... how am I here?'

Ernest took my hand and laid it over his heart. My fingers splayed over his small chest, my palm brushing his erect nipple. 'There's only one heartbeat, Killian. You don't have to worry about that.'

And I felt it, confirming yet again that Ernest had not made a deal with Karakos to save me from death. But that still didn't explain how this was possible.

'Karakos and Gorgana have met the same fate that they condemned many gods before them to. I wouldn't call it death, but an eternal imprisonment, a place of non-existence, somewhere they cannot reach us or each other. Now they truly are nothing more than names on the pages of myths and stories.' Ernest's eyes glazed over as he spoke. He seemed to physically be here, but mentally walking the same planes he spoke of. 'It's over. The time for gods has come to an end.'

'And the time for their heroes to forge ahead,' I answered for him, 'has begun.'

Ernest nodded, although his worry still didn't fade. 'Ire is left in ruins, the people displaced. It will take years to rebuild, and that's if we have the resources, if sister islands don't send their soldiers over to seize what's left of Ire.'

'None of it matters.'

Ernest's mouth dropped open. 'Of course it does.'

'To someone, maybe. To you, it doesn't matter. Unless it's your choice to care. To help. Because this is the era of choices, of making decisions for ourselves, not because of duty or bargains. So if you told me you wished to fix the world, then I would be there at your side, handing you the tools to do so. If you told me you wished to dive into the ocean and swim until we find the edge of the universe, then I would jump in the sea and swim besides you.'

The words flowed out of me, one by one, without room for a breath in between each. Ernest simply sat on me, unmoving, as he listened to what I had to say. When I was finished, we both took a deep inhale in tandem.

'Killian, you're finally free,' Ernest said. 'I don't need to be your new captor. You too can make decisions for yourself.'

'Princeling, *you* are my choice. My decision. I don't say any of this because I'm in debt to you. I say it because I *can*. Because I *want to*.'

Ernest was still for another moment, then leaned down over me and pressed a tender kiss to my mouth. I watched him flutter his eyes shut, felt the breath leave his nose in a long exhale. Then, before he could pull back, I ran my hands up his spine and grasped onto his shoulders, anchoring him in place.

The kiss deepened just as I desired. I parted his soft lips with my tongue, weaving myself into him, tasting him, drinking him in.

He groaned into my mouth, singing his pleasure into my throat where it sunk down deep inside of me. If I'd believed it would only be this, a kiss full of unsaid things and actions we were going to restrain ourselves from experiencing, I was wrong. Ernest began to rock upon my groin, rolling his ass over my hardening length beneath the sheets.

He wanted more, as did I. I wanted *everything*. But in the next moment, Ernest drew back from my mouth, lips swollen and spoke, 'There... there's something I should tell you.'

This was it. The moment Ernest revealed the secret he was continuing to hide from me.

'Talk to me,' I encouraged, knowing at any moment Ernest could backtrack. My fingers caught a strand of his black hair and brushed it behind his ear. I wanted to see all of him, not a single inch hidden.

He took a deep breath in, his chest swelling. 'Do you not sense the difference? You... you are no longer—' Ernest fought to find the right words, but I knew what he was referring to.

'Like Karakos?' I said, finally voicing the reason for the empty space within me. My own personal monster. 'Because I can sense that. My body is my own. It's mortal.'

There was no kraken to reach for, nothing to shift my body into the half-beast that I had been before. Once I would have always reached for the trident, relying on it. Now, I didn't bother to search for it amongst the room, not when my focus was entirely captured by Ernest.

'Mortal and free.' Ernest pouted, a wave of sadness rushing over his face. I reached for his cheek, brushing his skin tenderly.

'Are you sad because you'll no longer get to experience the feel of my tentacle swell inside of your—'

He clapped a hand over my mouth, muffling my laugh. 'No... well yes, but... I will live on and you will not. Aleanna has secured my humanity back to my soul, but that doesn't stop me from belonging to a new realm. The Below is as much my home, my calling, as the Above.'

'Ernest, I have no intention of staying in this mortal form.'

His eyes glowed as the hidden meaning between my words sunk into him. 'Do you not?'

I shook my head. 'No, because you are going to bite me.'

'No, I can't do that. I won't.' Ernest pulled back, hands flying to his sides. But I caught him, wrapping my arms around him and forcing him to hold steady.

'You shall. Despite Karakos no longer hiding within me, I am sure there are plenty of Mer inside the ocean who would enjoy a chance to rip their teeth into my flesh.'

I began to roll my hips beneath him, rubbing my cock against the curve of his ass once again. Ernest stopped withdrawing. I could see the wheels turning in his mind as he too began to match my movements, rolling like a ship across the waves.

'You really are persistent, Killian Metropoli,' Ernest said, reaching beneath him. I thought he was going to grasp my cock, but instead I heard the tear of material. When he pulled his hand back, there were pointed nails at the end of webbed fingers. The ripping material turned out to be him tearing a hole in his trousers, allowing for the bare skin beneath to be free.

'I take it that you'll bite me?' I asked.

Ernest leaned forwards, a spark of control returning to his eyes. It made my stomach jolt up in my chest, my heart skip a beat. 'Take me. Bury yourself deep inside of me and then I'll bite you.'

'Look who's being demanding now.'

'It's called compromise.'

'I can get behind that.' After a little manoeuvring and shifting, there was no longer a sheet between my cock and his ass.

I told him about a vial of lubrication I kept hidden beneath the bed. He looked at me and laughed, although I saw the jealously behind it. How did I tell him it was not for fucking others, but pleasuring myself during all those lonely years? Lonely years I would never have to experience again.

With honesty, that was how. 'I haven't taken anyone else in this bed,' I said as I tipped the contents across my length, working it in until it was completely coated.

'Then why the vial?'

'Feels better when I'm pleasuring myself.'

Ernest's breathing hitched once at my reply, then again as I eased my thickness within him. A wicked smile curved his cherry-red lips. The spread of his tight ring across my cock was bliss incarnate. It was heavenly. I inched in slowly, making sure to take my time, allowing his supple body to grow used to me within him.

Ernest threw his head back, singing to the ceiling, throat glowing with the golden aura of his magic. It lit the room, bathing everything in his enjoyment. I joined in too, finally releasing a growl. With my lubricated hands, I spread each of his cheeks, allowing me to fit every single inch in. Then, just to really show him what pleasure was, I allowed one of my fingers to work inside too.

That was enough for Ernest. In a good way. His eyes opened wide, light oozing from his parted mouth, until I was wrapped up in his pleasure. It weaved around me, cocooning me as I began to thrust.

'I'm ready,' I said as I built my pace, thrusting with vigour as energy rushed back to me. 'Although... will you still love me without my tentacles, or is a tail a dealbreaker?'

'I did rather enjoy your tentacles.' Ernest's jaw rippled as his teeth sharpened to points. He was monstrous. He was deadly. And yet I was far from scared.

'And I do not like to disappoint you, my love.'

'Haven't you learned yet, Killian Metropoli? I have the power to achieve anything I desire.' Ernest leaned in with those sharp teeth and

devilish eyes. 'As much as I would love you with a tail, I'll be ensuring the tentacles stay.'

It didn't take much for me to know why. That moment between us, beneath the water, would forever be ingrained in me. And although those eight limbs reminded me of Karakos, that form had also been a part of me for more years than I had been mortal. I owned it now.

'Then do it, you little witch,' I murmured, 'Make me into the image you so desire.'

'I will, but only if you can grant me one wish.'

'Anything,' I breathed, 'for you.'

'Fuck me harder,' Ernest said with a slight lisp as his tongue was forced behind those pointed rows of teeth. A Mer was not created by Gorgana to have a voice, but then Aleanna had used magic to give them one. Ernest now used that same power. Golden light built in the base of his throat, flashing through the curled conch imbedded into his skin.

'Your wish is my command,' I replied as I exposed my neck, giving Ernest room to lower his mouth upon it.

I fucked him harder, just as he'd asked. The bed groaned with each deep pump of my cock. He slammed himself down on me too, working the lower part of his back to move for added pleasure. As his teeth slipped into my flesh, his mouth wrapped around where my neck met my shoulder, and there was no pain. Ernest must have used his magic to smother it, and it worked. He spread the poison of the Mer inside of my mundane flesh, as I worked deep inside of his tight ass, thrusting, pumping, fucking... I found that we were connected in more ways than I ever knew possible.

I almost complained when Ernest drew back. He used the back of his hand to clear the blood from his mouth. His face was flushed, eyes roaming over mine to see if I was in pain. If I had the energy to speak, I would have told him I was fine. Instead, I used my thrusts to prove it. I took his cock in my hand and used the spare lubrication to play with him. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, his ring of muscle tightening.

Gods, I was close. We both were.

It was quick, and I didn't want it to be. But he was just so ethereal, so delicious and deadly and demanding.

'I'm... I'm going to cum,' Ernest moaned, breathless and lost to the sensation of me inside of him. That was enough for me to break down the floodgates and allow me to follow him over the edge.

'Do it. Cum for me, princeling.'

Did he feel me grow more inside of him? Did he feel the quickening pace of my wrist, or the slowing of my thrusts as I too raced to my end?

It was a shattering. It was an explosion. Warm seed splashed over my stomach, just as mine buried deep inside of him. We slowed in pace, laughing breathlessly, eyes hardly able to stay open.

I still didn't feel the bite on my neck. Beside the tightening of the skin and the dribbling warmth of blood running down my chest, there was no discomfort.

Ernest fell to the side, my cock popping out of him. It continued to throb on my lower stomach where it rested, the final dribble of seed smudging across my flesh, mingling in with his.

'Well, that was one way to celebrate this second chance we've found.'

'It was.' Ernest choked on a laugh, his fingers brushing over the skin of my neck, testing if it was okay.

He allowed himself a moment to lay next to me then got out of bed, moving to a basin of water on the cabinet side and bringing it over. He cleaned us off, using the damp cloth to wipe my cock clean and the cum from my stomach as it dried. When he was done, to my surprise, I was still hard. Ernest noticed it, grinning to himself as he joined me back in the bed.

'There are *other* ways we could celebrate,' Ernest said, nestling into my side. 'But lying here, in this room, with no thought of anything beyond the walls, is admittedly all I can think about right now.'

I wrapped my arm around him, bringing him as close as I possibly could

'You never did tell me how you brought me back,' I said, smiling up at the ceiling as the burning ache of his bite began to spread across my shoulder. The threads of his infection would feast on the blood in my veins. It would fill me from the inside, overtaking this mortal body just as I had asked of him. I could give up my power. I could give up Karakos. But I couldn't turn my back on the Below. The endless blue, the maze of deep caverns, seas of sand and underwater cities. There was so much I wished to explore with Ernest, so many more memories to make now we were both free.

'Nyssa is my patron. Her power lingers in my throat.' Ernest leaned up on his elbow, face flushed from sex, blood smeared over his lips from the deep bite. I didn't quite believe him, because he was shit at lying. But I respected that if there was something he was not ready to tell me, in time, he might. And we had time now, plenty of it.

'How could I possibly forget,' I groaned, reaching a hand behind his neck and pulling his throat to my lips. 'Your throat is good for many things.'

I liked covering the birthmark with the flat of my tongue.

'Is that so?' Ernest said, although it came out in a breathy moan. 'What else is it good for?'

I drew back. 'Taking my cock.'

'Oh gods,' Ernest stammered, lips glistening.

My eyes burned with lust, my body buzzing with the need for a second release. My cock hadn't softened after being buried deep inside of Ernest, and nor did I believe it would. I could take him again, and again, and again.

'Do you think you can be a good boy and get on your knees for me, princeling? Show me exactly how magical that throat is?'

Ernest practically flew off me, pushing to the edge of the bed where he settled himself on his knees. 'I can be good, bad, and everything in between.' When he replied it was with a prayer-like devotion, his hands clasped before him as though he pled with me.

I sat up and placed my legs on either side of him. With his jaw clasped between my fingers, I worked his mouth open and forced two fingers inside. Only when they brushed his wet, plump tongue did I allow him to close his lips around them and suck.

A burning started in the pit of my stomach. It was as hot as the midday sun baking stone streets. 'I warned you that mouth of yours would get you in trouble.'

Ernest nodded enthusiastically, working his fist up and down as he continued to pleasure himself. Like me, he too was as hard as rock. Gods, the tip of him winked in the dull light which caught the seed leaking prematurely from the end. 'Punish it then,' he said, words muffled by my fingers.

A growl eased out of my chest, curling my lips up as I tore my fingers out of his mouth. I released his jaw and allowed him to dive between my thighs and take my length. Pleasure erupted out of me, intensified by the sensitive tip of my cock. I threw my head back, facing the ceiling as I shouted out with delight.

'Good boy,' I moaned, shaking the very walls with my voice. 'My good boy.'

Ernest stopped. It was so abrupt, I looked down at him, the command for him to continue lingering on the tip of my tongue.

'My?' Ernest echoed, holding my cock before his mouth as though he spoke into it.

'Mine.' The word was final. It was full of meaning and power. 'You are mine. I am yours.'

It was exactly what he needed to hear. I saw that in the way his face softened, the way his eyes glimmered. We were strangers. Two men who had known one another for days. And yet I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that I was falling for him. Lust burned as hot as the sun for him, but beyond that, it was fuelled by the possibility of love. I was not simply falling, but throwing myself off the edge of a cliff, willingly this time, not pushed by a mother who had slit my throat. Ernest had the power to give me wings, to make me fly. I could soar up to the sun itself and remain airborne. That was how powerful his love was to me.

'I think I could love you,' Ernest stammered, eyes glittering as he echoed a statement he had said to me before. I never believed six words would have such power over me. They sparked something powerful in my chest, almost as if Ernest had woven his magic alongside them. But he hadn't. It was simply the honesty of his declaration, the glow of his eyes, that affected me so powerfully.

I smiled down at him, brushing black strands of hair from his forehead, sweeping them back with my fingers. 'I do not *think* I could love you, Ernest of Ire. I *know* I can. Slowly, there's no need to rush it. We have all the time in the world now. And there's so much I want to show you, so much I wish to experience with you.' I stopped myself, knowing there was one more word that I had not said. A word that, for the first time, truly meant something to me. 'So much I get to *live* with you.'

*Live*. Because before I existed, not lived. But Ernest had freed me. He had freed us all, and I would make sure that he would receive praise every day for the rest of our lives together. Our lives of freedom and choice.

Ernest was both. He was my freedom. He was my choice.

And this time, I was going to take it and never let him go.

#### Chapter Forty-Nine - Ernest



Killian was... alive. Was that the word for it?

Shadows clung to his body, an aura of darkness like strings being pulled by an unseen hand. It was the same shadow which lingered within the shell storing Gorgana's magic. The shell I had held in my hand as I stood on the cliff outside this very cottage. The shell which spilled shadows out across the ocean, determined fingers that searched for wisps of Killian within the water.

And I had found him.

Harnessing the power of death, I'd not only controlled it but claimed it. As waves rippled over the shore far below, a body formed. With every cascading crest of sea, it solidified. Bare to the world, splayed out across the sodden ground, it was him.

It had worked.

I had run to him, practically throwing myself down the rocky path etched into the cliff's edge. Stones tumbled beneath my feet, clouds of dust billowing out behind me. Once I had reached him, I could hardly see through the tears in my eyes. I had cried and cried over his limp body, expecting Killian to fade away again. But he didn't leave me.

At first, I had believed to have done something wrong. No matter how I called his name, no matter how I shook his shoulders or sang for him to open his eyes, nothing happened. I would never forget the feeling of defeat that overcame me as I clutched his body to mine. Until... it was faint at first, barely noticeable as I laid my head on his chest. A heartbeat. A perfectly mundane rhythm that thumped against my cheek.

It had taken a further day for him to truly wake up in the bed of his cottage. When I had closed my eyes to sleep, I had only intended to rest for a moment, but when I woke to his wide purple eyes and handsome smile, my world felt complete once again. Perhaps even for the first time ever.

But the joy came at a cost.

I could not tell him how he had been brought back from the planes of death. At least, not yet. If he knew I harnessed the power of the goddess who ruined the first chance he had at a normal life, I believed he would not forgive me.

So, as he slept after I rode him, sucked him, exposed my feelings to him in a moment of vulnerability, I took the shell containing death's power and hid it. I swam to the furthest depths of the ocean, down through a trench that lacked light and life. The water was so cold against my skin it was like swimming through a field of needles. However, I didn't stop. Not until I met the ground far below. I clawed at it, digging a hole deep enough that I could place the shell inside a small jewellery box and bury it.

No one would find it here. Gods, I didn't think I would even remember the exact place. But I had to do this. Not only to protect the world from the deathly power, but to protect Killian.

Because this shell and the magic it stored was the only thing keeping him... alive, yes. Alive, that was what I would call it. What else could describe what I had achieved?

Gorgana had ruined Killian's life, so it was only right the goddess's power gave him a proper chance at one. One by my side. Was I selfish? Most likely. I would have walked into the fields of death just to find him myself if I could.

I faced not one, but two gods for Killian, and I would do it again if I had to.

At the end of the day, I always got what I wanted. And what I wanted most in this world, and the next, was Killian Metropoli.

#### Epilogue



#### Knock, Knock, Open.

A STORM RAGED over the Above. Lightning forked down upon the rough ocean, dispersing in snakes of stark-blue light. Aleanna was somewhere close, likely dealing with pirates from nearby islands who were attempting to claim rule over Ire and its unprotected waters. She was Queen of the Seas, harnessing Karakos's power with an army of Mer at her back.

Even far down in the depths, I could sense the growing storm as a song across my skin. But it was another feeling that I focused on, one that overwhelmed my senses and captured me in a trance.

'Tell me what you hear,' Killian encouraged, eyeing me with intense interest as I laid my ear against the undersea tree's bark.

I closed my eyes to concentrate. 'A thumping, like a knocking, but from within the tree itself.'

It had been weeks since Killian had first brought me to the forgotten city beneath the water. I had dreamt often about the strange tree of life which still thrived in a place where it should have died. There was no denying that this place held the key to my origin. I longed for answers as much as I wanted to forget it, to pretend like nothing else mattered but the new life I carved out for myself with Killian. But something continued to draw me back.

'Do you not hear it?' I asked as I ran my fingers over the rough skin of the tree. Beneath my hand the thumping continued. A regular beat, as though a heart was hidden far within. 'No,' Killian said flatly. His powers had not returned when I dragged him from death. They were currently being wielded by Aleanna, and Killian had no desire to have them back. Where he once could see the mark of magic, an aura around anything touched or blessed, now his vision was—as he'd put it—plain.

Which was good, I supposed, since he would've seen the shadow-like strings tugging at his reanimated body, just like I could.

'Here.' I took his hand, placing it on the tree and pressing my palm atop his. 'What about now?'

He paused, drinking in the silence. 'Maybe. Something faint, like far-off banging, like knocking on a door.'

'A door,' I repeated, the notion strange but then what wasn't? I had a tail, scales, and a jaw full of teeth powerful enough to shred flesh with ease. I could walk on land during the day, breathe in air, and yet return to the Below when the moon rose over the sky. I had the power of a goddess in my throat and had brought Killian back to life with the power of another.

Knock. Knock.

Killian was right. It did sound like a door. The thumping was no different to knuckles rapping on the other side.

We held one another's gaze for a moment, a beat of silence. Killian knew me well enough to guess what I was about to do. There was no surprise spoiling his handsome face as gold light spilled from my throat. It bathed the intricate patterns in the bark, exposing every groove and wrinkle across the tree's flesh.

Killian took my spare hand and held firmly as I opened my mouth and gave a command.

'Open.'

The knocking ceased. It stopped abruptly, as though the universe held its breath. Killian's grip on my hand tightened, grasping harder, tentacles flaring in anticipation. Then, as suddenly as it went, it returned.

A force knocked against my stomach, sending us both back by inches. It was a ripple of water, like air trapped in a band that raced outwards from the tree itself. Then there was another. And another. Again, and again, the ripples were cast outwards, mirroring the frantic beat in my heart.

'This is what happened when I found—' Killian couldn't finish as the pushing force became a pulling one and we were not drawn away from the tree, but into it.

Water crashed and thrashed, sucking us along in a wave of tangled limbs, tentacles, and fins. My hand was ripped from Killian's as I was snatched away. The force was so great it blinded me. We could have been dragged for an age, the feeling of no control endless. Then it stopped. I barely had a chance to put my hands out before I crashed into something... hard. I took in a deep breath of water but choked when it was air that met my lips.

The shift to human was partial. My gills flattened, allowing my lungs to accept the crisp air. It was sweet, almost, lighter than what I was used to, with a bit of autumn and spring woven together.

I took in enough breath to scream Killian's name. But when I looked up to find him, it was the point of a spear I was met with. The stranger was garbed in tapered armour made of silver and gold. Beneath the leaf-shaped helm, I caught the glimpse of eyes so vibrant in colour they were like jewels hidden within a cave. I thought the points of either side of their head were yet more designs to the helm, but quickly realised they were ears. Fleshy, tall points—ears that I had seen on no human before.

Where were we?

'Send word for King Faenir,' the armoured guard managed before we were swept from the side, cast into the wall of a... tree. The same tree we had just swam before deep in the ocean, except far larger, in a room made out of its bark.

Killian was there, swinging his powerful tentacles around like wrathful weapons. Each one met another guard as they raced forwards, spears drawn, orders being screamed. As he was protective over me, I too lost myself to the need to fight. One of the guards attempted to overwhelm Killian, until I swung my tail beneath his legs, knocking him to the ground. Then I was on him, nails peeling back the metal of his armour, tearing it back in strips, revealing the otherworldly face of a strange being beneath.

'Who are you?' I hissed, sea salt and spittle falling across the frightened face of the guard.

But before he could answer, or I could ask again, ice pressed against my throat. No, not ice, but the cold kiss of a blade followed by a sickly-sweet voice. 'I would prefer if you didn't harm my people.'

In the reflection of the puddle of sea water beneath me, I caught a face. Piercing red eyes, pale skin, and hair the hue of sand. Immediately, my heart stopped. Because I was looking into the face of Sofina all over again,

except this time it was a man, as handsome as he was beautiful. Killian noticed it too, because the shock of seeing the crimson eyes stopped him for a moment, long enough for the guards to overwhelm him.

A deep, rich voice came from the shadows. 'Now, now, Arlo, that's no way to greet our visitors.'

The blade at my neck withdrew, enough for me to swallow without fear of being cut. Every set of eyes snapped to the corner of this strange room, where the shadows gathered like a knot of material. Then a man stepped out from the darkness. He was tall and imposing, with a wave of obsidian hair falling down his back, threaded with red lace and jewels. Eyes of pure gold scrutinised me, flickering between my tail and the man who clung to my back like a parasite, a man he called Arlo.

Every guard bowed, beside the ones still holding Killian steady beneath the points of spears.

'Release him,' I spat, tail kicking beneath me, making it harder for the man to hold on. I knew my scales cut through his trousers, slicing his skin in thin lines. But it was as though he was immune to pain because he only held on tighter.

'Retract your claws, little kitty,' Arlo hissed in my ear.

'Kitty?' I couldn't help but spit. 'What the fuck is a kitty?'

His chuckle made the hairs on my arms stand on end, made the patches of silver scales shiver. I watched him out the corner of my eye stepping cautiously around me, moving to the taller man's side... the man who wore an intricate crown which held back his mass of dark hair from his sharp face.

'Arlo, my darling, I think it is best we send word to Castle Dread. Jak and Marius will need to hear of this. They would be rather interested to know that Nyssa has just spat out some *incredibly* strange creatures.'

One of the guards took this as a command and peeled out of the unusual room, footsteps fading into the distance.

'Nyssa?' I shouted, drawing the attention of those golden eyes once more. 'The goddess?'

The banished Goddess of Life. The one who was my patron, who gave me my power. A power I had yet to reveal to these strangers, saving it for the right moment.

'Faenir,' Arlo said to the taller man as he stepped forwards, one sharp brow raised. This was the King the guards had called for. 'Be careful with that one.' Arlo used his blade and pointed at me.

'Forgive my darling.' Faenir placed a hand on Arlo's shoulder. 'He is rather distrustful of new people. Which, from the looks of you both, I can see you have in common.'

Killian's deep voice boomed across the space, echoing across every shadow. 'You spoke of the Goddess Nyssa, is she *here*?'

'In a sense,' Faenir said, gesturing to the wall of bark at our side. 'We are currently standing within the tree Nyssa planted—a physical form of the once-great goddess.' He smiled, a genuinely warm and kind expression that seemed to pull down my defences for a moment. 'I am sure you both have many questions, as we also do for you. If it helps, I can assure you that we mean no harm, nor are you in any danger.'

'Well, that depends on how they act next,' Arlo said, drinking me in with his boiling red eyes. His tongue traced his lower lip, flashing points of two sharp teeth. I smiled, showing mine, letting him know that he may have had two, but I had an entire mouth full. If we were in a competition, I would have won.

'Where are we?' Killian demanded, unbothered by the spears still aimed at him.

'You are currently in the realm of Neveserin. A crossroads, a place where all worlds and realms connect like the threads of yarn. And you both have just entered through a portal that has been closed for almost thirty years.'

'Twenty-seven,' I corrected, not caring if I interrupted this strange man with his pointed ears and golden eyes. A man who oozed authority, such a concept I would recognise on anyone.

Faenir looked to Arlo, who nodded in surprised agreement. 'Yes, twenty-seven years since it was last opened.'

Arlo's nose twitched, nostrils flaring as he inhaled deeply. Something passed over his face, creasing his brow in concentration. He then leaned into Faenir's side and spoke whilst pointing a manicured nail at me. 'He's one of the Halflings.'

When Faenir looked at me, it was with a new gleam in his eyes. 'So they did survive.'

'It would seem so,' Arlo responded. 'Jak will need to hear of this.'

Faenir waved a hand, a large red gem gleaming on the back of his gauntlet. 'Guards, please lower your weapons and take our guests to more

comfortable dwellings. See they are... well, I am unsure if we have clothing suitable for your forms...' He tilted his head, inspecting my tail and Killian's tentacles which, now he was free, were already positioning themselves around me in protection.

'We are going nowhere with you, not until you explain to us what is going on here.' Killian's command was born from a deep growl, one that rippled over my skin.

'I would prefer if we waited for our close allies to arrive, they will be able to explain things better. Jak Bishop, he is at the helm of this...project.'

I laid my hand on the tree and gold light spilled from my throat. It was rather enjoyable to watch shock crease over Faenir's and Arlo's faces. 'It would take little effort for me to open this so-called portal again and flood this world with an ocean on the other side. And trust me, the creatures which lurk inside it will not be as patient for answers as we are.'

'I like that one,' Arlo said, nodding in my direction.

'Of course you would, my darling.'

Killian straightened, growing taller if that was even possible. 'Ernest asked you a question. Trust me when I say you should answer it before he makes his next move. He's a man of his word.'

'No doubt he is,' Faenir said, eyeing us both with evident concern, whilst fighting back a grin at my magic. 'I will explain as much as I can, and then we will see about those comfortable dwellings and continue the conversation over some wine.'

'What is a Halfling?' The question broke out of me, like water held behind a weakened dam.

'You, Ernest, are a Halfling. In another world you would be called a witch. Twenty-seven years ago, we sent the first group of Halflings through that portal, in search of a world where they could live and train without fear of hate. There was a problem, however, with the transfer. We made a mistake. It was believed all those who travelled through had died as we did not expect the portal to open in a body of water. But, as your being here proves, not all of you died.'

Fixated on his words, I pulled free of Killian's tentacles. My tail melted across the floor, revealing the pale legs beneath. Both men's eyes widened, but their surprise no longer impressed me.

Yes, I was naked, but that hardly mattered.

'You... you mean you put me through the portal?'

'Yes, amongst many others.'

I looked around, searching my mind for any familiarity to this place. 'Then you are responsible for the death of my birth parents.'

My magic built again in my throat, casting beams of fresh gold light across every inch of the room. One word, and I would bring it all down. Gods knew the fury in me longed for that destruction.

But that all faded when the king spoke again.

'If it makes you feel any less murderous, your assumption is, in fact, only an assumption.'

Arlo stepped forwards, grinning devilishly. 'Allow me to put it plainly. What Faenir is saying is you are wrong.'

'Yes. Halflings are the product of an elf and a human. We were only permitted to send Halflings through the portal, their families were not required to follow. So, if you truly are one of them, which my Arlo believes you are, then your birth parents would still be on this side of the portal.'

My worlds stopped. I was vaguely aware of Killian's anchoring hand resting upon my shoulder.

At that same moment, the heavy footsteps returned. The guard who had left entered the room. He bowed to Faenir and then spoke. 'The message has been received. Jak and Marius request a meeting at Castle Dread.'

So many names were being said, but I couldn't focus on anything but the weight of the knowledge Faenir had just dropped upon me.

'It would seem the wine and lodgings must wait,' Faenir sighed. 'We must make haste and leave as soon as possible.'

Killian spoke for me because I could hardly breathe beneath the weight of what I had just learned. 'Leave for where?'

Arlo answered, chewing on the word as if it displeased him. 'Darkmourn.'

If you enjoyed Prince of Endless Tides, please consider leaving an Amazon review. Reviews are so helpful to all authors, especially indie authors like me. Thank you for taking the time out of your day to read Ernest and Killian's story. Lots of love, Ben x

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