

A man with short brown hair, looking down, wearing a red cape and a necklace with a circular pendant. He is standing in a misty, blue-toned forest with tall trees and hanging vines.

BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES

HUNT THE WOOD

ANNA FURY
USAT BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AMY PENNZA

HUNT THE WOOD

AN MM RED RIDING HOOD RETELLING

BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARES

BOOK ONE

ANNA FURY
AMY PENNZA

COPYRIGHT

© Anna Fury & Amy Pennza 2023

E-Book ASIN: B0BXBHMY5F

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9872657-4-1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

If you read this book ANYWHERE other than Amazon, it is a pirated copy and we are not being reimbursed for our work. Don't be that person. Please.

Cover - Miblar

Cover Photo - DepositPhotos

CONTENT NOTICE

Hunt the Wood is intended for mature audiences due to adult themes that might be triggering for sensitive readers. These include kidnapping of an adult, interrogation, mention of and visions of parental death, mentions of homelessness and hunger, knife play, bondage and dubious consent.

While the themes of this retelling feel dark, the deep love between our characters is a beautiful light at the end of the tunnel. This book ends with a happily ever after.

Take care of yourself, and email us with any questions.

author@annafury.com

amy@amypennza.com

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

1. [Ryder](#)
2. [Wotan](#)
3. [Ryder](#)
4. [Ryder](#)
5. [Wotan](#)
6. [Ryder](#)
7. [Wotan](#)
8. [Ryder](#)
9. [Wotan](#)
10. [Ryder](#)
11. [Wotan](#)
12. [Ryder](#)
13. [Wotan](#)
14. [Ryder](#)
15. [Wotan](#)
16. [Ryder](#)
17. [Ryder](#)
18. [Wotan](#)
19. [Ryder](#)
20. [Wotan](#)
21. [Ryder](#)
22. [Wotan](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[An Excerpt from Steal the Sky](#)

[About Anna Fury](#)

[Books by Anna Fury](#)

[About Amy Pennza](#)

[Also by Amy Pennza](#)

PROLOGUE

The Syndicate Ball is a place where people come to get what they can't find anywhere else. Love. Sex. Death. Power. Some combination of all four.

I stand at the edge of the crush in the old cathedral, surrounded by monsters in disguise. I'm hoping my disguise is good enough to keep them from realizing I'm not one of them. The environment is almost impressive enough to make me forget the danger I'm in. Beautiful people in beautiful clothes mingle around ornate pillars that support the soaring, vaulted ceiling above. This cathedral is one of the few buildings that survived the War That Ripped the Veil.

Once a year, the four syndicates of the Hallows gather here to keep the peace.

It hasn't always been that way.

Legend says that in the first century after the Veil collapsed, chaos reigned. The creatures of the Myth repaired the damage wrought by the humans' nuclear fallout, only to plunge the earth plane into a state of constant magical warfare. It was unsustainable, so the most powerful lords of the Myth agreed to share power. They settled in the very spot where the Veil had been torn asunder, and they built their domain on the burnt, decaying bones of New York City.

That name lives only in memory now. Today, the crumbling metropolis is known only as the Hallows. The monsters of the Myth carved it up according to the root elements that fuel their power: earth, air, fire, and water.

However, ancient monsters don't share power so easily. In their wisdom, the four lords agreed to meet once a year to settle grievances and sometimes form alliances. And so, the Syndicate Ball was born. Over time, it's grown from a simple meeting to a sprawling banquet punctuated by bouts of violence. But everyone fortunate enough to receive an invitation looks forward to the signature event: the Brawl.

I arrived just in time to see it. Which is precisely what I intended. I know better than to sample any of the food offered at the feast. There are far too many creatures who enslave their victims that way. I'm not looking for sex, either, since that's yet another route to finding oneself locked into a magical contract.

No, I'm here to gather intelligence. My grandmother hadn't put it that way. She hadn't put it *any* way, actually. But when I walked into my kitchen this morning and found an embroidered black mask sitting in the middle of the table, I knew exactly what she wanted—and what was at stake if I failed to deliver.

I resist the urge to touch the mask now. Instead, I stand as still as possible and focus on controlling my breathing. I can't be certain how I appear to those around me. That's the nature of the mask, which is infused with a glamour that keeps me—and everyone else at the ball—anonymous. For

creatures of the Myth, it's a form of liberation. For one night each year, they can fuck and bargain without worrying about betraying an allegiance to their sworn syndicate.

For lowly humans like me, the mask is protection. The little bit of magic in my veins is good for party tricks and making a quick buck, but it won't save me from the monsters born beyond the Veil. If anyone discovers who I am, I'll go from observer to prey in the space of a heartbeat. Humans aren't welcome at the Ball. No one checks under the masks because no one thinks a mortal would be stupid enough to trespass on a night the Myth fetes its own.

A murmur runs through the crowd as the last two combatants of the Brawl enter a cage positioned on an elevated platform in the center of the cavernous space. Like everyone else in attendance, they're masked. They could be anyone, but in this instance, it's what—and whom—they represent that matters. The first rounds of the Brawl are over, and now the final two fighters will battle to be named champion. The winner gets bragging rights and little else, but pride matters to Myth creatures. One of the downsides of being immortal and nearly all-powerful is boredom. So the Brawl is a big deal.

In one corner, a hulking, muscular combatant wears the aquamarine mask of Triton, Lord of the Sea Syndicate. In the opposite corner, an equally well-built man bears a mask of rich, dark brown. It's the color of Wotan, the Lord of the Earth Syndicate and Master of the Wild Hunt. Both wear nothing but a pair of shorts that hug their hips and cling to powerful thighs.

The lords themselves never fight. The cage has seen death, although not in my lifetime. It's difficult to kill an immortal, but it's not impossible. Unwilling to risk it, the lords appoint champions to fight in their stead.

Magic can't completely obscure the size of these men—at least not for me. It's a curious side effect of my power, the ability to peer behind glamour. There are better, more powerful seers out there. Witches who can worm under a creature's glamour with ease.

My ability is far more finicky and unreliable. As the fighters begin to circle each other, I catch mere glimpses of what lies underneath their wrappings. Like a reel of ancient film, the males' true forms flicker over their bodies.

But it's the male in the brown mask who holds my attention. His glamour doesn't flicker. It *smears*.

Under my mask, my brow furrows. I find myself moving closer as I strain to get a better look. The fighter representing Triton swings a meaty fist.

Wotan's champion catches it, then shoves the other man and sends him stumbling backward. Wotan's champion stands tall and imposing in the center of the cage, his lips curving in a menacing smile. In a blink, his mouth smears...and disappears.

I freeze. The crowd continues murmuring and stirring around me. Bodies brush mine as spectators place bets on who will win. No one seems to notice anything unusual.

The fight continues—and quickly grows brutal. Wotan's fighter deals Triton's champion a vicious backhanded blow across the face, then follows it up with a savage punch to the side of the neck. Bright red arterial blood sprays the crowd. A male in the line of fire chuckles and licks the blood off his lips. For a brief moment, his glamour flickers, revealing fingers tipped with long claws and a smile with far too many teeth.

Wotan's champion charges again. Odd glamour aside, he's...pleasing to look at. For one thing, he's just really fucking *big*. Massive shoulders and thick biceps. Washboard abs and muscular thighs.

It's not real, I remind myself. But the illusion is pretty irresistible. As I watch him turn and gesture to the crowd, my dick swells.

Which, of course, makes me look at *his* dick. Yeah, he's big there, too. His shorts are only a couple of shades darker than his golden skin, which gleam under the lights. Every inch of that skin

looks cut from solid rock.

My cock presses harder against the front of my pants. I glance around, grateful for the dim lighting. When I focus on the cage again, Wotan's champion is still pumping up the crowd.

Arrogant much? But he has a right to be. Triton's fighter is struggling to stay on his feet. Wotan's champion faces away, and I can't help running my gaze down his powerful back to his tapered waist.

Sweat prickles under my arms, but not from nerves or the press of the crowd.

I fight the urge to let my gaze roam lower.

And lose.

My eyes land on the tightest, roundest ass I've ever seen. It's a mouthwatering ass.

Fuck, my mouth is actually watering.

I jerk my gaze away. Movement in the shadows grabs my attention. I squint, grateful to have something else to look at. As my eyes adjust, I make out two figures in the darkness. A dark-haired male dips a much taller man like a groom might dip a bride. Even with a mask obscuring the second man's features, it's clear he gazes up at his companion with an expression close to rapture. The dark-haired male appears unmoved as he buries his face in the other man's neck.

A vampire, then. My heart beats faster. It's unusual for them to feed in public. Although, this is a night for dispensing with convention.

Distant sounds of the fight reach me, but I ignore them. There's something about this vampire... Supposedly, leeches ensorcell their prey. A vampire's bite is supposed to be pleasurable—almost sexual. And the exchange goes both ways. But this leech is abrupt, his demeanor almost angry. His fingers on the man's arm are white with tension. He lifts his head, and his glamour flickers. For a second, his brown hair lengthens and turns to glowing platinum. The rippling mass falls past his shoulders.

His body glows, too—a glimmering beacon in the darkness, as if someone captured the moon and placed it under his skin.

My breath catches. I'm a mediocre witch. To make up for it, I was an excellent student. I've read all the magical lore I can get my hands on. And the lore is very clear about what kind of vampires glow.

Siphons. Dangerous and powerful, they drain magical gifts as well as blood. They're thieves, all of them.

The male in the bloodsucker's arms is pale. Too pale. His head dips farther back. The vampire's skin dazzles more brightly, almost blinding me.

I wince, and a gasp slips from me.

He looks up sharply, his gaze colliding with mine. Something like panic flits through his eyes, there and gone so quickly I can't be certain I saw it. Before I can react, he straightens his mask. His glamour snaps back into place. He hauls his victim to his feet and shoves the other man away. The crowd shifts, obscuring them from my view.

My feet are moving before I realize it. I start forward, intent on following—

“YOU.”

The deep voice booms over the crowd and stops me in my tracks. Seconds later, a spotlight blazes around me.

I swing toward the voice and find Wotan's champion staring at me. He stands on the platform outside the cage, that same menacing smile on his lips. Behind him, attendants drag Triton's bloodied champion along the ground.

All thoughts of the vampire and his victim flee. My heart thunders in my chest.

Caught. I'm caught.

Or maybe my grandmother set me up.

Without taking his gaze off me, Wotan's champion raises his voice. "Earth wins the Brawl. We claim a boon." He points, and it's like an invisible finger jabs my chest. "And I choose this one."

Boon? What the fuck is a boon?

The giant steps down from the platform like it's an ordinary step instead of a ten-foot drop. He strides toward me, his bare chest sheened with sweat. The crowd parts like a sea cleaved in half.

I back up, my heart in my throat, but it's useless. In a beat, Wotan's champion is upon me. He ducks, and then I'm slung over his shoulder with the roar of the crowd in my ears.

"What the fuck!" I sputter. I'm not as big as my captor, but I'm big enough. Six foot one and two hundred pounds of mostly muscle. Yet he carries me like a doll or some kind of damsel in distress. Glamour or not, it's humiliating. I rear up, intent on fighting my way down.

A big palm lands square on my ass. Pain explodes and steals my breath.

The crowd cackles. Someone whistles.

Wotan's champion keeps his hand on my ass, his fingers sliding down my crack to briefly tease my balls before moving back up. His deep voice seems to echo in my head. "Fight me, and I'll claim my boon right here among the crowd."

I swallow my protests. The creatures of the Myth aren't known for making idle threats. Words have power, and the beings from beyond the Veil don't use them lightly. It's something humans learned the hard way.

The blood rushes to my head as Wotan's champion carries me away from the crowd. Dangling like I am, I can only see the stone floor. Thankfully, my captor moves quickly, and the noise of the crowd fades. He shoulders his way through a door, dips, and sets me on my feet. When I stumble, he steadies me with a big hand on my shoulder.

I lurch away, my hands flying to my mask. Thank fuck it's still in place. I dare a look around, but it's hard to see. We're in some kind of antechamber. I get the impression of more stone pillars and a couple of ancient-looking bookshelves. The arched windows are big, but the glass is so old and thick only a scant amount of moonlight spills in.

As if he read my mind, Wotan's champion lifts a hand. Immediately, a dozen candles around the room flare to life.

I picture a brick wall in my head. If he is a mind-reader, I don't want him anywhere near my thoughts. I don't want him anywhere near *me*.

But it seems my wants don't matter. With that same mocking smile, he prowls forward and brushes the back of his fingers across my cheek.

I take another stumbling step back. "Don't touch me."

"Is that what you want?" His voice rumbles so low I swear I feel the vibration in my chest.

"Yes." Wait. Did I get that backward? I frown. "I mean no. No, I don't want that."

His smile turns lazy as he advances, slowly walking me backward. His shorts are so tight I can see the plump veins that trace down his thick shaft. The bulbous head pokes out of his waistband. "That's hard to believe, given how you stared during the Brawl."

My heart thumps painfully. "I d-didn't—" My shoulders hit the window casing.

He crowds me, his chest almost brushing mine. "Liar," he whispers. He runs his knuckles across my face again, bumping the silk tie that holds my mask in place. "It's foolish to lie to someone like me." He brushes a thumb over my lip.

I shudder.

He makes a low sound, almost like a purr. Heat rolls off him, and that maddening smile fills my vision. He's even bigger up close—easily topping me by six inches or more. His glamour is firmly in place, his eyes shifting color so quickly I can't get a read on his true form. But I have a feeling his size is real enough. So are those abs and the broad expanse of chest glistening with sweat and blood. A wild thought has me wondering what it would taste like if I licked it away.

His eyes go heavy-lidded behind his mask. That deep voice curls around me again. “You like males, little human?”

My heart races. “You can't know whether I'm human or not.”

He puts a hand on the glass next to my head. “You just told me.”

“What are *you*?” I toss back.

He moves fast. In a heartbeat, I'm spun and pressed against the window. His erection nudges my ass as his lips brush my ear. “Your worst nightmare.”

Lust strikes like a whip. I'm already so hard I ache. That happened the second he tossed me over his shoulder. Then he spanked my ass, and I felt it in my balls.

Gods help me, I want to feel it again.

A hand comes around my hip and grips my cock through the only pair of dress pants I own.

My sharp intake of oxygen ends on a moan. “What are you doing?” My breath frosts the glass under my cheek.

“Claiming my boon.” He wrenches open my fly and pulls my dick out. Sparks shoot through me at the feel of his flesh against mine. My belt buckle jangles as he uses his other hand to shove my pants and briefs to my knees. He kicks my feet apart and pushes his hips into my ass. His erection nestles long and thick between my cheeks.

It's too much. And it's fucking dangerous. Whatever he is, he's not human. He beat Triton's champion to a pulp in mere minutes.

“Let me go,” I rasp. It's a struggle to keep my hips from thrusting forward. If I do it even one time, I know I won't stop until I come. My balls are drawn up tight. I'm already so close, I have to grit my teeth.

“No.” He squeezes the base of my shaft until my eyes water. Something hot and wet traces a circle under my ear.

His tongue.

The glass is cool against my front—a sharp contrast to his hot fist strangling my dick. I suck in a breath. “I d-didn't agree to this.”

“Not true, human. You consented to being chosen as a boon when you tied on that mask and entered the ball.” He moves against me, his big cock sliding up and down my crease. He presses harder, until his dick drags over my clenching hole.

My breath rushes out. “Fuck,” I whimper. “The way you're gripping me...”

“The way you need,” he rumbles. He maintains his brutal hold as he slides his fist down my shaft, wrenching a wanton cry from my throat. My hips jerk. Any second now, I'm going to beg.

His tongue swirls just inside my ear. “Such a slut. I could keep you as my pet, couldn't I?” He reaches my tip and squeezes until I can feel the precum dripping from me. He rubs a rough thumb over my slit, forcing it open until the entire head of my dick burns. “Be grateful I don't have time to train a new one.”

My head spins. Is this the boon he spoke of? He won the Brawl and now he gets to fuck whomever he wants? Why did he single me out?

He gives me another ruthless pump. Then another. And my questions fizzle to nothing. His grip

shouldn't be pleasurable, but it is. I dig my forehead into the glass and moan like the slut he called me.

"Answer me," he growls. Sharp teeth scrape over my jugular as his tight fist milks me. "Tell me this is what you need."

"Y-Yes." The demand—and the savage grip—crank my lust to impossible heights. There is nowhere to run. No way I can pretend. He holds the proof of my desire in his hand, which is growing wetter as I continue to leak precum.

He slicks my shaft with it, his big hand working me as he slides his dick up and down my cleft.

With a groan, I lift my ass, surrendering to the fucking he clearly wants to give me.

Warm lips nuzzle the underside of my jaw. He licks me there, too, and I wonder if he feels stubble or smooth skin. I have no idea how deep the mask's glamour goes.

Strong fingers sink into my hip, stilling my desperate movements as he continues pumping my dick. My balls sway, and the sound of his hand spreading my wetness up and down my shaft fills my ears.

Heat floods my cheeks, but my embarrassment isn't enough to ask him to stop. Not that he would.

He releases my dick and carries some of that moisture to my hole. He circles it once and then sinks a finger—or maybe a thumb—inside me.

"Fuck!" I jerk as the burn melts into pleasure. My muscles clamp down...and then relax a second later. I open for him on a long, needy groan.

His dark chuckle stirs the hair at my temple. "Just as I thought. An eager little whore. Is that what you wanted to tell me when you couldn't take your eyes off me tonight?" He moves the hand on my hip to my dick and strokes as he works his thumb deeper. "You wanted me to bare this pretty ass and fill it up?"

I can only gasp, my body balanced on the edge of an inferno. My chest heaves. Pressure builds everywhere...in my balls, my lower back, my skull. My palms against the glass are slick with sweat.

"Tell me," he demands, pumping faster. "Tell me this ass is mine."

The filthy words are like a lit match on dry kindling. My mouth hangs open, my words spilling out in a semi-coherent babble. "Y-Yours. It's...yours."

"Come, then," he growls. He thrusts his thumb deep, forcing me onto my toes.

The command strikes like the lash of a whip. I come on a hoarse cry, the force of my ejaculation so intense my vision blurs. I spurt all over his hand and the window. On and on it goes, thick jets that wrench deep moans from my throat.

He loosens his grip but keeps jerking me. And gods, it's just the way I need it. Just the way I finish myself off when I'm alone and my shaft grows too sensitive.

He knows. He keeps his thumb where it is and fucking drains me, jacking my dick until I'm spent and sagging.

Lips touch the base of my neck. After everything, surprise stirs within me. His touch is almost...tender.

I lift my head—and catch an odd reflection in the window. It takes me a minute to realize there's a mirror on the far wall behind me.

But the image in it is all wrong. I stare at myself—at my bare ass and my spread legs and my heaving shoulders. All things I shouldn't be able to see with the hulking man behind me, his thumb still buried in my ass.

But there is no one else in the mirror.

I start to turn.

He stiffens.

All the candles snuff out.

And, suddenly, I'm alone in the dark.

CHAPTER I

RYDER

One month later

I stare at the trio of *mundane* females across from me and try not to think about murder. “Try” being the operative word. Because if they giggle one more time—

The brunette giggles. “Okay, okay, my turn.” She glances at her companions—one natural blond and one who clearly purchased a hair-lightening spell from a witch who hates mundanes—and grows abruptly serious. “I want to know if I’m going to meet a man tonight.”

I gesture to the crystal ball in the center of the table. “I can only see what the future holds.”

Her dark eyebrows pull together. “I *paid* for this.”

Right. Somehow, I forgot the first rule of fortune-telling: Most people only want you to tell them the fortune they want to hear.

“I’d like you to show me something really good,” she says, leaning forward and giving me a healthy look at her cleavage.

Sorry, babe. Your tits do nothing for me.

But she doesn't know that, and she's a paying customer, so I wink. “Of course.” I lean over the orb and make a few sweeping hand gestures. At the same time, I press the pedal hidden under the table skirt and say a silent prayer to the gods. Electricity doesn't always work in the Free Zone. Magic doesn't work at all—unless it's hunting for something.

The air crackles. It's just the building's ancient wiring, but it sounds good. Seconds later, green smoke swirls in the glass orb.

As one, the females lean forward, their eyes wide with awe.

Relief pounds through me. Unlike the women, I don't look at the crystal ball. It's merely a prop. Real fortune-telling doesn't require equipment. But humans—at least, the mundane sort—demand a spectacle, so I keep pumping the pedal as I call up my gift.

The image appears in my peripheral vision. The brunette and her friends stumble down a darkened street in the heart of the Hallows. In the distance, the towers of Lord Gothel of the Air Syndicate gleam with thousands of small, brightly lit windows. It's the only part of old New York City the lords of the Myth restored to their former human glory. Which, given Gothel's penchant for high places, is hardly a surprise.

He also has a penchant for luring humans into his clubs and casinos. As the vision unfolds, a dark shadow follows the women up the street. One of the blonds looks over her shoulder. The brunette grabs her arm and keeps her moving. The trio continues toward the lights of resurrected Brooklyn—and straight into Gothel's lair.

I blink, releasing the vision. Sometimes, it's best to leave the future alone.

Across from me, the brunette lifts intense eyes to mine. "Did you see anything?" she breathes.

"Yes. You'll definitely meet a man." *And if he's the one I'm thinking, you'll probably regret your night on the town.*

She turns to the real blond and squeals. "I knew it!"

They stand in a flurry of short skirts and a fresh round of giggles. The brunette pulls a wad of bills from her purse and tosses them on the table. "Thank you. I'll recommend you to all my friends."

I give her another wink. "I appreciate it, sweetheart."

She blushes. Her companions giggle. The three of them trip toward the door. As they leave, a slight male with silver hair and startling blue eyes holds the shop door for them on his way in. His skin shimmers in the afternoon sunlight. He's otherworldly beautiful. Which is fitting, considering he comes from another world.

One of the blonds gasps. "Are you a pixie?"

He smirks. "What do you think, doll?" He pulls the door wider. As he moves, the faint outline of wings rises above his shoulders. It's the briefest glimpse, but clear enough for even a mundane to notice.

Show off. I sit back in my chair and fold my arms.

"You *are* a pixie! Oh my gods, would you dust me?"

"Sure thing." He flicks his fingers at the trio, sending a flurry of sparkles into the air. The blonds immediately start sneezing.

"Thank"—the natural blond sneezes violently—"you."

"You're welcome, princess." He puts a hand on the small of her back and pushes her firmly onto the sidewalk. "See ya, ladies. Hope you get that dick you're chasing!"

The women stumble away.

He steps inside and lets the door swing shut behind him. "Ryder Connelly. My favorite witch."

I incline my head. "Jasper."

"Was I right about the dick-chasing?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Please. I haven't seen dresses that slutty since I went out last weekend. To clarify, I was the one wearing the slutty dress."

"I figured."

He strolls forward and tosses an envelope on the table. "Special delivery."

The hair on my nape lifts as I consider the parchment. There is no address. Just my name scrawled in elaborate script.

I know that handwriting.

Somehow, I manage to keep my voice light. "I thought messenger boys were more of a cupid thing."

He snorts. "What, those hookers? Sure, as long as you're okay with your mail smelling like strawberry lube." He buffs his nails on his T-shirt. "But don't worry your pretty red head. I'm still in the mischief and mayhem business." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. Outside, the brunette trips on the far side of the street and almost goes sprawling.

I raise an eyebrow at Jasper. "Glad to see you're diversifying."

"Whatever pays the bills, girl." He nods his chin toward the envelope. "You gonna open that?"

"Did my grandmother say anything when she gave it to you?"

"Yeah, she gave me a picnic basket and told me to be careful." He rolls his eyes. "Of course she

didn't, Connelly. When has Sybella Rathmore ever been one for small talk?"

He has a point, but I toss him a dark look anyway as I pluck the envelope from the table and open it. There's a single sheet of parchment inside, and it contains just one line:

Come in person. Alone.

A great communicator, my grandmother.

"Well?" Jasper demands. "What does the Bitch of the Wood have to say?"

"It's Witch of the Wood," I murmur without looking up.

"Same thing."

I place the sheet down so he can read it. "She wants a meeting. On her turf."

His pale eyebrows shoot up. "In the Wood itself? You'll have to cross Wotan's territory to get there."

"I'm aware." And so is she. The letter is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this is the only thing I've ever wanted: a chance to enter the Wood and see my mother's birthplace with my own eyes. Once upon a time, the tangle of trees was called Central Park. Now it's the exclusive domain of the Rathmore witches, who are powerful enough to hold it as their own territory, independent from the Syndicates.

But the Wood lies on the far side of the Earth Syndicate, which is ruled by Wotan. To reach my grandmother's lands, I'll have to cut directly through Wotan's territory. No one enters without his permission. Those who try quickly find themselves on the wrong side of the Wild Hunt. Capture means death...or worse. And the Master of the Hunt always captures his prey.

For the first time since he entered the shop, Jasper's tone loses its sarcastic edge. "You don't have to do this, Ryder. You can always say no."

I shake my head. "This isn't an invitation. It's a summons. If I ignore it, she might do what she's been itching to do for years and kill me."

"Sybella isn't one to hesitate when it comes to a strike. If she wanted you dead, do you really think you'd be talking to me right now?"

It's a good question, and one I've asked myself repeatedly over the years. My mother, Gwendolyn, was a witch of immense power. But she was also a woman of strong passions, and she fell in love with my father—a mundane human with zero magic.

To say my grandmother took it poorly was an understatement. She banished her heir from the Wood, forbidding her to return. If I was born female, perhaps Sybella would regard me more favorably. But the magic of the Rathmore Coven runs through its females. Traditionally, the Rathmore witches have little use for their male offspring, who are almost always born mundane.

I'm not powerless, but my mother's magic in my veins is more like a trickle than a flood. I inherited just one of her powers: the gift of foresight, also known as the "Cassandra" power. I've always assumed my meager ability is what stayed my grandmother's hand.

That, and my hair. My memories of my mother are hazy, but her rich auburn hair is a steady constant in my dreams. My crop of waves is the same shade. On the few occasions I've met Sybella, she hasn't struck me as sentimental. But maybe she can't quite bring herself to spill my blood and eliminate the last living link to her daughter.

And there is a potential third reason she permits me to breathe. After my parents died, I did what countless other orphans have done and fled to the Free Zone. It's the only place in the Hallows where a human can survive without accepting the mark of a syndicate lord. I read fortunes and scraped by—and somewhere along the way, I started trading in secrets. People who want to know their futures tend to be running from something. Or longing for something...or someone. When they spill their guts, I

sometimes discover others willing to pay for that information.

Whispers of my exploits reached Sybella, and she didn't hesitate to take advantage. For the past few years, her messages—and orders—have appeared in my shop. Sometimes, she wants to know which patrons entered my shop and when. On other occasions, she directs me to follow a certain human and report where they went. Over time, my assignments have become more dangerous, culminating in last month's visit to the Syndicate Ball.

My chest tightens. The thought of reporting *that* to my grandmother is enough to make me change my name and flee the Hallows forever. Unfortunately, that plan will never work. There's no hiding from my heritage, just as there's no pretending that night never happened. No matter how hard I try to forget, I remember everything Wotan's champion did to me. Every whisper. Every caress. Every hot, wet press of his tongue.

The feel of his big hand stroking my cock. The filthy confessions he wrung from me as surely as he milked my cum.

"You okay?"

Jasper's voice jerks me from my thoughts. His brilliant blue gaze is concerned as he watches me.

"Yeah," I rasp. Avoiding eye contact, I gesture to the letter. "Just thinking about what to make of this." I stand and walk to the window so I can get a handle on my arousal. Gods, *fuck* that guy, whoever he was. Fuck him and his boon.

Right on cue, the memory of his deep voice slides through my mind. "*I could keep you as my pet, couldn't I?*"

My nape prickles. It doesn't require much contemplation to imagine what that would look like.

And now I have to enter Wotan's territory. That doesn't necessarily mean I'll cross paths with his champion. But isn't that just part of the problem? I have no way of knowing who he is. Wotan rules his syndicate from a nightclub. For all I know, his champion is one of the bouncers. Or a bartender. Or the guy who mops vomit off the floor.

Jasper speaks behind me. "Too bad I can't lend you my wings. Wotan doesn't rule the skies."

No. But he rules the lands around the Wood. And the only way to my grandmother's domain is through those lands. Refusing her summons could mean my death. That leaves me with one option: Approach Wotan and ask his permission to cross. He's one of the most powerful lords of the Myth, and he rarely grants any favors for free.

My option sucks.

I shove a hand through my hair as I face Jasper. "What should I wear to a nightclub?"

He looks me up and down. "Assless chaps?"

"Try to be serious."

"You witches are no fun, you know that?"

"Yeah, I know."

He sighs and tips his head toward the stairs leading to my apartment. "Come on. There's got to be *something* in your closet that's not dreadfully boring."

"Thanks," I say dryly.

"And take this." In a blur of movement, he pulls something from his pocket and tosses it at me.

I snatch it from the air. It's a small velvet bag. "What's this?"

"Pixie dust. Duh." He heads to the stairs, his voice trailing behind him. "Just in case you need to hide that fire engine on top of your head."

CHAPTER 2

WOTAN

My club, Cauchemar, is wild tonight, its dark rooms filled with screams and sighs and every manner of noise in between. I adopted the French word for nightmare as its name because it's so fitting, and I love the way it rolls off my forked, deviant tongue.

Humans and monsters mingle here, indulging in shared vices, whether that be killing or fucking or a delicious combination of the two. It says so much about a person, and what they're willing to agree to in my club. There is always a price for giving and receiving here; that's the way it works.

Usually, the club's vibe satiates my own darker needs. I like watching the deals that are made when someone is willing to pay the price to get what they truly want. I love to see a soul revealed and ripe for the taking. And I relish the secrets I gather by being the meeting place between the human and monster worlds.

Secrets echo from every corner of this place, and I capture each one, holding them for the day they reveal information that proves to be useful.

Tonight, simply watching isn't doing it for me. I'm agitated, my mind continually taking a circular path back to the night of the Syndicate Ball. I shouldn't have entered the Brawl myself. As the leader of the Earth Syndicate, it was foolish to do so, not that anyone would ever know it was me. Still, I was drawn to fight that evening, drawn to make an absolute spectacle of the Sea Syndicate's ridiculous contender.

Triton thought he could send his champion to unseat someone from *my* syndicate? What a fucking joke he had been. Triton is a raging asshole, and taking him down a peg is one of my joys.

But during the fight, someone else caught my attention. A sensual vision who couldn't keep his eyes off me. Gods, I fought with my hard dick poking my leg because his eyes never left my body. I fueled violent, possessive lust into my fight and made short work of the other champion as a result.

And then afterward. The godsdamned aftermath, when I claimed that male as my boon? Perfection. I didn't take him like I could have. Not that he wasn't willing. But something about his true need called to me. I could have taken everything from him then, and I can't stop thinking about that. How I toyed with him, playing with his thick cock.

I didn't even fully undress him, jacking him off with my thumb in his ass. The way he clenched around me, the way he moaned, the way he fucking *gave up*? Once again, perfection. It's the rule of the Ball that we don't unmask other guests. It's the one night you can be and do whoever you want. But what I wouldn't give to unmask that human and chase him through my hunting room. Everything about him screamed prey, and I am nothing if not a hunter.

I'd like to run him to ground and toss him down into the dry leaves. The number of times I've fantasized about him writhing beneath me in the dirt... Gods help me. Given another chance, I'd take

everything I denied myself the first time.

But why? He was an enigma—a simple human who didn't feel simple to me at all. I've learned in my time as ruler of this syndicate that my intuition is not to be ignored. I am rarely—if ever—wrong in my assessment of a person. And something about the human just didn't add up that night.

It's a conundrum and the source of my current piss-poor mood.

I smile when a head peeks out from behind a dark curtain, my assistant nodding at me. "We're ready for you, Master."

Good. A little torture is just what I need to cheer myself up. Stalking across the club's full dance floor, I slide through dark hallways until I reach a back room. I fling the door open, letting it slam against the wall. In the center of the room, a gagged, blindfolded man shifts uncomfortably in the chair he's bound to.

My muscle, Rune, stands behind him, obsidian claws dug into the man's shoulder. "Sit the fuck down," he snarls.

The man whimpers as Rune tightens his claws, blood dripping steadily from the wounds.

"Did he say anything?" I question as Rune shakes his head. He drags his favorite curved blade up the prisoner's thigh, splitting his pants as blood seeps from the wound. The man howls and bucks in the chair as I grin.

Rune licks the blade and hums with deviance. "He's probably a werewolf, but a shitty one. I can barely taste the shifting magic in his blood. He was sneaking along the edge of the Wood, thinking about attempting a crossing."

"Fuck you, bitch," spits the man, rocking in the chair as I cross the room and rip his blindfold off. I drop my own glamour down enough for him to recognize me, and he does, dark eyes widening in horror as he slumps back in the chair.

"You," he whispers, his voice disbelieving as he scans my face and sinks as far away from me as he can. "Not you..."

"That's right, wolf," I croon. "Sneaking through my territory last night was the first of many bad choices. Calling my colleague a bitch was a second. You'll pay for those transgressions and more before I finish with you. Nobody has ever passed through the Wood without my permission. Why try now?"

He opens his mouth, but it's fucking tiresome how slow the words are to come. Gripping his chin, I use my power, glaring into his terrified gaze. One after another, I show him his worst nightmares, pumping them to the forefront of his brain as if he's reliving them in the here and now.

First, he begins to tremble, and then the tears flow as a grin splits my face. I do love breaking a man's soul.

"Torture improves your mood," Rune quips, digging his claws further into the man's shoulder as he screams and scrunches his face up.

"Please, fuck, please!"

I let him beg another moment, pressing the nightmares harder into his consciousness as his pleas reach a higher volume. He trespassed on my territory, and I just can't have that.

Gods it feels good to use my power. Revisiting the male's nightmares alongside him has lust and need roaring through my veins. I could use a good hunt after this, maybe find someone in the club to fuck.

If only anyone interested me as much as the male at the Brawl.

Gripping the prisoner's chin, I hold it tight as I growl at him. "I won't ask you again. There are very few reasons a powerless werewolf might choose to cross my territory. Tell me. Now."

My mind goes again to the human Resistance. It's always existed, and it's always been feeble. But with the right connections, its power could grow. That's why I keep my nose to the ground and my eyes and ears open.

"I—I'm not part of the Resistance," he blurts out, tears streaming down his blood-streaked face as Rune drags his knife along the man's crotch, pressing the tip right up against his balls. My enforcer's face is a mask of lust at the smell of blood.

The wolf tries and fails to cross his legs, but he can't sink any farther away from Rune, bound the way he is.

"I just wanted to cross to the coast. I have family there," he rushes on.

I give him a bored look. Family at the coast. *Right*. Even if he is a werewolf, they don't congregate in the coastal plains. Most wolf communities live in the Fire Syndicate's territory in what used to be upstate New York. "Surely you know that nobody passes through my woods without being hunted? How did you imagine this playing out?"

The wolf begins trembling, the smell of piss filling the chamber as Rune scowls. He cocks the man on the back of the head with his knife handle before speaking. "This is getting tiresome. Nobody risks the Wood to visit their fucking family."

Our prisoner moans in desperation. "I do have a family, and they need me. I've been here for work, but I have to get back. They'll die if I don't!" He's practically shrieking at this point, glancing from me to Rune with a horrified expression.

Rune shoots me an exasperated look. Neither of us is buying this tortured family bullshit.

No. The only reason anyone would risk passing through this Wood is to get to the witches. This has Sybella Rathmore written all over it. I need to know for certain. I would rather the wolf have told the truth, but I'm not without the power to force his hand.

Turning back to him, I smile, knowing that my visage alone is enough to terrify him. "Your soul is mine," I tell him simply. "I'm taking it as payment for your trespass. You will never leave the Wood. Anywhere you go, I will find you, and I will control you."

Tears stream down his pudgy face.

I place my hand on his cheek, leaving an invisible mark there which indicates he's now beholden to me. Then I flay his mind open with my gift, sorting and picking through his memories.

To my surprise, there's no memory of Sybella Rathmore, nor the ridiculous human Resistance. Good. The Resistance cannot be allowed to take root. The humans nearly ruined everything in The War That Tore The Veil. They aren't responsible enough to manage their own fucking destinies.

I dig further into the wolf's mind to find there *is* a family, but it's been many years since he's seen them, and they left on poor terms. He wants to return simply because he misses a good lay.

Gods, why are men ruled so consistently by their dicks?

He'll pay with his life for that idiocy.

A knock at the door rips my concentration from my prey, my assistant poking her head in. "Master, a witch is approaching outside."

My brows curve upward. "A day for witches, then." Reaching out, I caress the filthy male's cheek, brushing the mark that only my people can see. My mark not only gives me his soul, it claims him as part of the Wild Hunt. He will never stray away from my club or the Wood, and I will be able to command him no matter where he is.

The wolf looks up at me with tear-filled, dark eyes. "Please." His voice is barely audible.

Moving quickly, I twist his neck until it snaps.

Seconds later, his milky white soul begins to seep out, hovering just above his head. My power

gives me the ability to capture the soul's energy and bind it to my own. Opening my mouth, I inhale his soul into my lungs, imprinting the man's entire life onto my consciousness.

A thread of power appears between us, his soul now inextricably tied to mine. Thousands of beings are tied to me like this—part of the Wild Hunt, part of the horde at my beck and call.

“Rise, wolf.”

At my command, his eyes flutter open, and a pop echoes around the stone room.

Rune shudders and rolls his shoulders as if he finds my power incredibly creepy.

It is, I suppose, and I like it that way.

The wolf's neck pops again, and when he lifts his head to look at me, his eyes blaze white for just a moment.

I smile and gesture toward the door. “Go. I will call on you if I need you.”

He rises on unsteady legs and hobbles to the door, not looking back as he disappears into the dark hallway.

Rune eyes me the way one might regard a bigger, badder predator. “You're a scary fucker, you know that?”

My lips curve into a smile. I certainly am.

CHAPTER 3

RYDER

Wotan's club is unremarkable from the outside. Like everything else about the Hallows, I know the plain facade is just an illusion. Power leaks from the brick, three-story building. As I walk to the entrance, shadows huddle at the edges of my vision. I've been observed since I ventured near Wotan's territory.

Sometimes, I envy mundanes. They move through the world unaware of the monsters that haunt their steps. Other times, I'm grateful for the magic in my veins. I like knowing what's out there—and what has me in its sights. I guess it comes down to what kind of person you are. If you're about to be eaten, do you want to know? Or do you want to brace yourself for that first bite? Maybe it's my Cassandra blood that makes me prefer a bit of warning.

But as I step through the club's door, ignorance is really fucking appealing. Darkness swallows me, and the deep, insistent thump of music fills my ears. There is light in the distance—bright flashes of neon that throb in sync with a bass beat that resonates in my chest. Shadows move in here, too, but they're not like the creatures that tailed me outside.

No, these are patrons: the poor souls who come here to beg for favors, and the opportunistic souls ready to feast on the formers' desperation.

I know which one I am.

Prey.

My throat goes dry. My heart rate picks up. Gods, it's like the Ball all over again. As soon as that thought enters my head, I can almost feel a phantom hand viciously squeezing my dick. A familiar mix of anger and arousal rises within me. I hate myself for thinking about it. For wanting it to happen again. I hate the knowledge that it almost definitely won't. At least I was anonymous. No one will ever know how I pleaded and squirmed. How easily I capitulated to a stranger's demands.

But I'm not anonymous now, and I feel naked as I move deeper into the club. Jasper assured me my jeans and black hoodie are “decent but nothing that's going to net you a selection of dick.”

Good. I don't want to stand out. I want to meet Wotan, ask for safe passage, and get the fuck out of here.

“Stop right there.” The deep voice rumbles just as an oversize hand slaps against my chest. I have to crane my head back to meet the gaze of a giant dressed in head-to-toe black. His brow is pulled low over brown eyes shaded with suspicion. The neon lights of the club glint off his bald head.

And he doesn't look happy to see me.

I swallow. “Are you the bouncer?”

He leans over me. His eyes flash an eerie, inhuman green. It's fast, but he makes sure I see it. His

fist curls in the fabric of my shirt. “What do you think?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. So talk fast, Red.”

Irritation flares. Everyone seems to think they’re the first to come up with that nickname. “I’m here to see Wotan.”

The giant smirks. “*You* want to see the big man?”

I force my expression to remain passive. “That’s right.”

He tugs me closer. Puts his face right next to mine. “Why.” It’s not a question. It’s a demand, and the unsaid part is clear as a bell. *Elaborate or prepare for pain.* The knuckles of his fist dig into my chest. I can only imagine what they’ll feel like slamming into my face.

“I—I’m a witch,” I say quickly. “I need passage to the Wood. Sybella Rathmore summoned me.”

His smirk blooms wider. Too wide. It’s not an expression that belongs on a human face. He cocks his head. For a moment, his features go slack.

My nape heats. *A telepath.* He’s communicating with someone. It lasts a few seconds, and then he snaps back to attention. “You’re getting your wish tonight, mortal. Follow me.” He releases my shirt and turns, adding, “This should be good.”

A dozen replies spring to my lips. All of them are guaranteed to get me tossed on my ass—or worse—so I clamp my mouth shut and trail after him. The bass swells as we near the main floor, where bodies are swaying and gyrating. A bar dominates the far wall. Behind it, bartenders sling drinks and gods know what else. Drugs, sex, witch-brewed potions. Wotan’s club is known to traffic in all of it.

The bouncer takes a sharp turn down a narrow hallway. Immediately, it’s clear this is the business side of the club. The flash is gone, replaced with plain black walls and dark marble floors veined with red.

I try not to think about the source of that crimson shade.

The hall twists and turns and branches into a maze of other, darker hallways. I couldn’t find my way back now if I wanted to—and I definitely want to.

Which is probably by design.

At last, the bouncer stops before a glossy black door. He tosses me another wolfish grin over his shoulder before knocking.

“Come,” someone growls from the other side.

The bouncer pulls the door open and steps aside. “After you, witch.” Condescension is thick in his voice, but he doesn’t matter.

Not anymore.

Remember how I said I usually like to see that bite coming? I see it now. I’m vaguely aware that I’m entering an office. But that doesn’t matter, either. The only thing that does is the male behind the big desk.

Wotan. It can’t be anyone else.

He wears a human glamour, but he doesn’t bother hiding the monster that lurks underneath. This is a male who devours the creatures he hunts.

Even seated, he’s a dominating presence. Long black hair is pulled back from his face, which is attractive but forbidding. Amethyst eyes glitter as he sits back in his chair and observes my approach. His crisp white shirt is unbuttoned enough to show the edges of swirling tattoos. More dark ink covers thick forearms bared by his rolled-up sleeves. A bloody knife sits on the corner of his desk.

He smiles, revealing the tips of needle-sharp fangs.

He's a scary motherfucker. Hot but scary, like an otherworldly crime lord.

Which is, you know, exactly what he is.

Power licks over me, tasting and testing as I continue crossing the room. It's not the first time I've been sampled this way, but it's definitely the most forceful. The abrasiveness of it stops me cold.

"No," he says, amethyst eyes narrowing. He points to a spot directly in front of his desk. "Come closer. I want to see the witch bold enough to ask for an audience with me without an invitation."

I force myself forward, and I can't help feeling like a hapless fly drawn to the center of a spider's web as I stop in front of his desk. His power continues its hunt, no doubt finding my own wanting.

My dick twitches. Because it's a pushy bastard with the worst fucking timing.

I drag in a breath. "I wasn't aware I needed an invitation." By some miracle, my voice is steady.

Wotan's purple gaze travels a languid path down my body.

Awareness prickles through me. I've been checked out by enough males to know when one is interested. His lashes are long, and they sweep his cheeks as his eyes go heavy-lidded on their journey down my abs to my hips. His gaze lingers there, and I hold my breath, feeling like a piece of meat on a menu.

At last, he lets his gaze climb back up. It settles on the unruly waves I shoved back from my forehead before I left my apartment this afternoon. "I've seen hair that color before. What's Sybella Rathmore to you, Ryder Connelly?"

"How do you know my name?" Gods, that lazy perusal of his has my dick perking right the fuck up.

His fangs flash. "It's my business to know things. Answer the question."

Lying is pointless—and stupid, given he probably already knows the answer. "Sybella is my grandmother."

He puts his elbows on his desk and steeples his fingers. "Yet you don't use her name."

"I'm..." I take a moment to clench my jaw. "My power is weak. She's never formally acknowledged me."

"Weak things can be useful."

I stare. I don't know what he means by that. In my experience, weakness has been nothing but a disadvantage. It's also been my experience that it's better to keep my mouth shut when I don't have anything to say.

He lets the silence stretch a bit longer. When he finally speaks, his voice dips into a register too low to be human. "What does Sybella want with you?"

"I don't know." It's true enough. She gave me no instructions when she left the mask at my shop. He doesn't need to know about the mysterious vampire I saw at the Ball...or how his champion pressed me against a window and made me come so hard I couldn't see straight.

Wotan rises and moves around the desk. Suddenly, he's in my space and, fuck, he's even bigger than I thought. Bigger than the bouncer and just as wide. His shirt strains across his shoulders. Dark stubble shadows his square jaw.

In a sudden move, he grips my erection through my jeans.

"What are you—?"

"Shut up," he orders, using his hold on my cock to force me against his desk. The edge bites into my ass. There's nowhere to go. I'm quite literally between a rock and a hard place, with the Master of the Wild Hunt palming my dick like he's trying to take my measurements.

And I'm hard as steel, so protesting seems a bit disingenuous right now.

His eyes gleam. The tip of a forked tongue slides along his full lower lip, leaving it wet and

glistening. It shouldn't be sexy. I should be screaming and pleading for my life. Instead, my balls tingle and my heartbeat throbs in my cock. At the bottom edge of my vision, the tattoos on his chest seem to undulate. The designs slide and spin, gliding over each other. I want to look, but I don't dare take my gaze off his.

"I'll consider giving you safe passage," he murmurs, "but every wish I grant in this club comes with a price. Are you willing to pay it?"

"What's the price?" Although, it's obvious what kind of payment he has in mind. He probably wants me on my knees. Or underneath him. Certainly not the other way around. Even if he wasn't towering over me, he'd have "top" written all over him. Gods, if his tongue looks like that, I can only imagine what kind of monstrosity he's got between his legs.

He leans in until our lips are almost touching. "A kiss."

A...kiss? That's all? For a moment, I'm speechless. And something else that feels dangerously close to disappointment.

Which is absurd. Seconds ago, I was prepared to get fucked over his desk. Now I'm looking at getting out of this without removing a stitch of clothing. It's a much better deal than I could have hoped for.

I lick my lips, and he tracks the movement. "One kiss," I say. "In exchange, you'll give me safe passage."

He nods once.

"To the Wood," I add. It's important to be specific when making magical contracts with creatures of the Myth. They don't hesitate to exploit loopholes.

His smile is pure wickedness. He moves his hand from my cock to my throat. He squeezes—not enough to cut off my oxygen, but enough to let me know he can crush my throat faster than I can scream. The power imbalance between us is laughable.

And damn if my traitorous body doesn't like it. I grip the edge of the desk until pain shoots through my palms.

His breath teases my lips as he speaks in a growl I feel everywhere. "Agreed. Do we have a deal, witch?"

"Yes," I rasp. "We have a deal."

He doesn't hesitate. Hand on my throat, he lowers his head and kisses me.

And it's...*soft*. Slow and sweet. A total contrast to his big hand wrapped around my neck. His hot tongue strokes over my lips, making me gasp in surprise. When I open, he presses his advantage, dipping inside and stroking my tongue, too. He glides and caresses like he's trying to seduce me. Or maybe worship me. He kisses me like a lover, slanting his mouth across mine. Pressing closer. Sucking on my tongue. Every draw echoes in my dick, and I moan before I can stop myself. It's a gentle onslaught—an indulgent, thorough exploration that leaves me breathless and aching.

Then it changes.

In one shivering beat, he goes from soft to savage. The pressure on my throat disappears, and his fingers tunnel through my hair on either side of my head. He holds me still and plunders my mouth, driving his tongue so deep I can only tip my head back and take what he's giving me. It's either that or choke, so I grunt and breathe through my nose as he fucks my mouth with his tongue. He's filthy and aggressive, each wet thrust a preview of what he'd do with his dick if given the chance. My mouth is going to bruise. A fang nicks my lip, and the coppery tang of blood hits my tongue.

He growls and tightens his grip in my hair. Heat blisters through me. I shouldn't want this, but I do. Gods help me, I want *more*. I'm suddenly aware that I'm clutching at his shirt, my fingers digging

into the hard muscle underneath. I pull him toward me, and there's no space between us anymore. Our chests are flush against each other. Our cocks are aligned, his rigid length grinding over mine.

As quickly as it begins, it ends. He breaks off the kiss and steps back so swiftly I pitch forward.

I grab the edge of his desk to steady myself. My lips throb. So does the pulse in my neck. My chest heaves like I just sprinted from one end of the Hallows to the other.

He looks as cool and collected as he did when I entered his office. Aside from some bunched fabric where I gripped his shirt, there's no indication he just face-fucked me. His amethyst eyes are flat and emotionless as he returns behind his desk.

I recover just in time to see him sit. "What was that?"

"Our deal is concluded," he says. "You don't have permission to cross my territory."

Anger flares. What the fuck? I lick my swollen lips. "You said you'd give me safe passage if I kissed you."

"I said I'd consider it." He lifts one meaty shoulder. "I considered it. The answer is no. Now get out."

As if on cue, the door opens behind me. I don't need to turn around to know the bouncer is back. His presence is like a bucket of ice water dumped over my head. I don't move. I just stand there, furious at myself for falling into such an obvious trap. Creatures of the Myth are like fucking lawyers—every word matters.

I've ruined my chances of reaching the Wood. If I don't show, my grandmother is unlikely to summon me again. She gave me a test, and I failed it.

And got humiliated in the process.

Wotan regards me with the same flat expression. "You're still here. It's becoming a problem."

"Don't worry, I'm leaving." I let the *asshole* hang unspoken in the air. Fuck him. Anger and defeat are a potent mix in my blood as I turn and head for the door.

There's no bouncer there. Instead, a tall, young man with brown hair and a severe expression awaits me. As I meet his gaze, his glamour flickers—and I nearly lose my step as I recognize the vampire from the Syndicate Ball.

He's not glowing, but I'd know his cold, proud features and long fall of platinum hair anywhere. He's dressed in head-to-toe leather that hugs sleek muscle. He's handsome—almost pretty. But there's a sharp, brittle edge to his beauty. Before I can study it too much, his glamour snaps back into place.

"Rune," Wotan says behind me. "See our guest out."

"No need," I say, and I brush past the vampire.

There's no spark of recognition in his now-brown eyes, which means my mask did its job that night. Questions buzz in my head, but I ignore them. I can ponder the vampire's presence in Wotan's club later. Right now, I just want to leave with the shreds of my dignity intact.

My heart pounds so hard it drowns out the music as I navigate the maze of darkened hallways. No one follows me, and I make my way outside unmolested and undetected.

I'm halfway down the street when the reality of that hits me.

Undetected.

I stop and turn in a slow circle. No one's tailing me now. Which makes sense. I'm leaving, not trying to get in.

My heart rate picks up. What's to stop me from going to the Wood? If I stick to the shadows, no one will see me. I've spent my whole life laying low. I can move with stealth when I need to. And I *need* to get to Sybella. No one says no to my grandmother. If I blow this opportunity, I won't get another one.

I pull my hood over my hair, hiding my most defining feature. A second later, I lower it again. With another quick look around, I pull Jasper's pixie dust from my pocket and sprinkle it over me. The glittery grains twinkle in the air before disappearing. It's not long-term magic, but it'll allow me to move about without attracting too much attention. Immortals crossing my path will see me and immediately forget me. There's never been a better time to blend in.

I replace my hood and hit the road.

Time to visit my grandmother.

CHAPTER 4

RYDER

A half hour later, I'm deep in Wotan's territory and trying to remember why I thought it was a good idea to come here. It's late afternoon, but the streets are deserted.

Or at least they appear that way. I have to hope that's the case.

This place used to be called Manhattan. That was 180 years ago, before the Veil fell. Some of the buildings from the human era remain, but they've been altered. When magic takes hold of something, it wears it down. Warps and twists it. Compels it to bend and stretch in ways manmade things shouldn't be able to accommodate. As a result, some of the former skyscrapers are now blackened spires that stretch toward a gray sky. Other buildings drip with moss. An ancient-looking stone arch spans the entrance to a cobbled street. In the distance, a unicorn picks its way over the cobbles, pausing to tear at a clump of grass growing between the rounded stones.

Magic changes things. It was a favorite saying of my mother's.

One of the most enduring lessons she taught me is that magic was never supposed to exist on this plane. Or at least, it wasn't supposed to run unchecked.

Of course, there have always been leaks. Nights when the Veil was thin. Places where a person—or a creature of the Myth—could pass back and forth undetected. But the two worlds were always meant to stay separate.

"Even the ancients knew it, Ryder," she told me. It was why men had so often persecuted witches. They recognized something foreign and powerful in our veins. Some primitive part of their brains understood the threat we posed. The power of the Myth so terrified them, they swept up innocents in their purges.

As my mother told it, witches are the product of rare interbreeding between humans and creatures of the Myth. At various points throughout history, a monster strayed into the human plane and spotted a beautiful female. Those couplings produced humans with power we were never meant to possess. For better or worse, that power leeches into our blood and stayed there, passed down through generations—most typically from mother to daughter.

Or, atypically, from mother to son.

I can only imagine what my mother would say now, if she could see me walking alone through Wotan's territory without permission. When I was younger, I could picture her as surely as if she were standing in front of me. But with every year that passes, it becomes harder to recall her face. Over time, her features have grown blurry, with only her halo of deep auburn hair remaining as vivid as the last time I saw it at ten years old.

I suppose that's why I'm answering Sybella's summons. I want to remember Gwendolyn Rathmore. I want to know what she was like as a girl. I want to see photos. Sybella is known to

possess immense wealth, so it's not a stretch to think she owns one of the few precious cameras that remain—and still work—in the Hallows. If there's a treasure trove of photos of my mother in the Wood, I'll do just about anything to see them.

I don't kid myself into thinking there are any photographs of my father. I've seen Sybella on a handful of occasions in the nineteen years since my parents died, and she made it clear his name is to remain unspoken. The first time she visited me in the Free Zone, I was twelve years old and starving. She demanded I read her fortune. I told her to eat shit.

She flicked a hand, and I was thrown against the paper-thin wall of the vacant building I'd been squatting in. She advanced on me, not stopping until her long black robes brushed my battered shoes.

"You have the look of your father."

I lifted my chin—not an easy feat with her power wrapped around me like manacles. *"You know that's not true."* Except for the shape of my jaw, I looked nothing like Liam Connelly.

A faint, humorless smile touched her lips. Then she stepped back. *"You're weak. Death will claim you soon enough."* She whirled and walked away, her faded red braid wrapped around her head like a crown.

"He hunts for you," I called out.

She stopped but didn't turn.

"Death," I added, watching a gaunt figure draped in gray in the corner of my vision. It glided toward a shadowy copy of Sybella and hovered as she handed a piece of paper to a black-robed witch. As Sybella passed the paper, the figure wrapped a skeletal hand around her throat.

I stared hard at my grandmother's back. *"You should take more care when choosing your messengers. The one you'll trust tonight plots against you."* At the outer edge of my vision, the spectral figures vanished.

Slowly, Sybella faced me. The hint of a smile was gone, replaced with a coldness that chilled me to the bone. Power crackled around her. *"Don't play games, boy."*

"No games. Just giving you the fortune you wanted."

Her green eyes darkened. *"I could kill you with a word."*

"You won't. Not tonight."

She understood at once. *"My daughter should have warned you not to read your own future. Most Cassandras who turn their gaze on themselves see their own deaths and go mad."*

I smiled. My mother had indeed cautioned me not to look into my own future. She'd taught me everything she knew—including the knowledge that Sybella Rathmore did *not* possess the gift of foresight.

Despite the ironclad grip of my grandmother's magic pinning me to the wall, I managed to shrug. *"I haven't seen it yet. Maybe Death just doesn't like me."*

Silence reigned. I held my breath, waiting for her to strike. Fortunetelling was an imprecise magic. She wasn't going to kill me tonight, but she could still inflict pain. My mother had warned me about that, too.

After a few more tense seconds, Sybella turned and went to the door. At the threshold, she stopped and tossed a small sack at my feet. It landed with the unmistakable clink of coins. *"Stay alive, boy. I may find some use for you yet."*

A cold wind gusts across the street, pulling me from my memories. The Wood looms ahead. Like the unicorn and the moss-draped buildings, it's out of place. Magic has taken root here, too, transforming the landscape into an old-growth forest of trees that don't belong in the human realm. It's a dark, haunted-looking expanse. Gnarled black trees stand so close together it's impossible to

glimpse any light between them. Thorned vines as thick as my waist trail along the ground.

Thick, gray clouds obscure the sun, blanketing the Wood and the surrounding streets in deep shadow. There's no greeting party of witches. Sybella isn't standing before the wall of trees, ready to welcome me into the Wood with open arms.

A wry smile tugs at my lips.

Yeah, that's not happening. I saved her life that night in the Free Zone. I've been useful to her a number of times since then. But my blood is still tainted in her eyes. I'm not sure anything I do will ever erase that stain. I'll never be good enough for her to consider me a Rathmore. But I'm willing to try.

For my mother, I want a chance to prove myself.

I straighten my shoulders and start forward again.

At the same moment, a horse steps out from the shadows huddled at the edge of the Wood. Its skin is translucent, exposing the skeleton underneath. Its eyes glow red. One black hoof paws at the ground.

Seated on its back is the vampire—the one Wotan called Rune. His glamour is firmly in place, and his brown eyes are fastened on me. He's tall in the saddle, and there's a wicked-looking knife strapped to his leather-clad thigh. He must be highborn, to be out in the daytime like this. Only vampires of the purest, noblest blood can tolerate the sun. They're the ruling class of the bloodsuckers. And the strongest of all the leeches.

They're also mercenaries who hold themselves separate from the syndicates. Like the werewolves, the vampires are from beyond the Veil, but they've lived on this side of it for millennia. And like their wolfish counterparts, they don't align themselves with anyone, let alone accept magical marks of indentured servitude. They operate in just two factions: rival gangs that have been at war for centuries. In all my studies, I've never heard of either gang—or any vampire—serving a syndicate lord.

Which makes me wonder if Wotan knows just who he's invited into his club.

Rune smiles, and I stop giving a shit about what Wotan knows. The vampire's fangs are hidden, but something in his expression lets me know they're just as sharp with a glamour over them. "You're looking a bit out of place, Little Red," he says. There's a subtle flirtatiousness in his tone that triggers that telltale awareness in me. Unless I'm seriously mistaken, he plays for my team.

But he's not interested. My instincts tell me that, too. They also tell me he's probably just as dangerous as Wotan.

I hold his stare. I'll give him the *red*, but I'm far from little. We're of a height, and I'm bigger through the shoulders. Then again, I'm probably no match for him—especially not on that horse.

"I'll go," I tell him. "No one has to know I was here."

"I don't think so." He urges the horse forward. Steam puffs from its nostrils. "Lord Wotan doesn't tolerate trespassers."

I don't think. I just turn and run. The sounds of pursuit ring out behind me. I get no more than a dozen steps before a hand grips the back of my hood and jerks me off my feet. A low, dark chuckle echoes in my ears as the world spins and I land face down across the horse.

I try to rear up.

Rune shoves me back down. His thighs move against my shoulder, and the horse stops. As I struggle harder, the cold tip of a knife presses against the delicate skin behind my ear.

I freeze.

"That's the smartest thing you've done today, witch." He presses harder. Something hot and wet

trickles down my neck. “Now it’s time to make a decision. You can either answer to Wotan or I’ll wet my knife with your blood.” He digs just a little bit deeper. “You should know, the blade is thirsty.”

Well, when you put it that way...

I grit my teeth, remembering the last deal I made with one of the Myth. “I’ll talk to Wotan.”

The knife withdraws. “Good decision.”

On impulse, I make another. “I saw you at the Ball. You drained that male to death.”

He tenses. A second later, he yanks me up by my hood. His glamour drops, and fangs flash inches from my face. “I don’t like threats.”

“No threat,” I say, my heart hammering against my ribs. “Just an observation.”

His bright blue gaze bores into mine. He’s angry...but also wary. Which means my impulse might just pay off. “I didn’t kill him,” he says quietly.

“You did *something* to him.” I draw a deep breath and take another gamble. “Something you shouldn’t have.”

With a hiss, he tightens his grip on my hoodie until I’m almost choking. “I could kill you now.”

“Don’t,” I wheeze. “Keep my secret and I’ll keep yours.”

He stills. His eyes glitter with otherworldly light—and suspicion. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. You wear a glamour in Cauchemar. A good one. Wotan doesn’t know who you are. If he finds out, he’ll kill you.” I hold my breath, hoping I’m right.

Rune’s lips curve. Without warning, he shoves me hard. I tip off the horse and land on my ass. Pain shoots up my spine. Before I can move, he’s on me, hauling me up with superior strength. He produces a length of rope from somewhere. In a blur, he seizes my wrists and binds them so tightly my eyes water.

“Was that necessary?” I growl. Fear burns like acid in my gut, but he’s not going to kill me. The vampire gangs don’t let threats walk away. I lived on the streets long enough to know that much.

He grasps my chin in an iron grip and brings my face a mere inch from his. “I don’t make deals.”

“And yet I’m still breathing,” I say.

The knife is in his other hand, and he trails it down my chest, raising fire and a thin line of blood that stains my shirt. When he reaches my navel, he lifts the blade to his lips. But he stops there—and he keeps his gaze locked with mine. “He’ll want to taste you first,” he murmurs. “And he’ll decide whether you live or die.”

I hold my breath, braced for his next move. Wondering if I just made a huge mistake by attempting to bargain with a vampire. For all I know, Wotan is well aware he’s got a bloodsucker on his payroll.

Rune’s bright gaze wanders down my chest, lingering over the blood-stained rent in my shirt. “You’re pretty. Maybe that will work in your favor.” He keeps the length of rope in his hand and mounts his horse. Once he’s seated, he tugs sharply on the rope, jerking me a step forward.

I steady myself and then glare up at him. Blood trickles down my stomach and soaks the waistband of my jeans. I test my bonds, my biceps flexing. “I won’t tell him who you are,” I say.

He stares, his platinum hair stirring in the wind. Slowly, his glamour slides back into place, and he’s a forbidding-looking, dark-haired male once more. He faces forward and prods his horse into a walk. His voice drifts back to me. “Rest assured, Little Red, before Wotan is through with you, you’ll tell him everything he wants to hear.”

CHAPTER 5

WOTAN

My thoughts follow the handsome witch long after his scent has faded from my office. I perch on the edge of my desk, watching flames lick into the darkness of my fireplace. I haven't taken a lover in far too long, and I could easily have taken him. Instead, I kissed him and sent him away.

I let my mind wander to a fantasy of hunting him through the empty streets of old Manhattan. He would never hear me following, although he might sense it with the bit of magic running through his veins.

Truthfully, I'm curious to see what Ryder Connelly does next. First the werewolf from earlier, and now a summons from Sybella to Ryder. The ancient witch is up to some fresh new bullshit, and I need to know why. I have long assumed she'd consider aligning with the human Resistance, trying to drive a wedge between the syndicates. So far she hasn't made that last leap, but I'm always on the lookout for it.

Having never lived on the other side of the Veil, Sybella's unaware of what fucking with our power balance could do to this plane. She wasn't there right after the Veil tore and monsters were unleashed on humanity.

But I was. It was my heyday, honestly—Master of the Hunt is an apt title. I hunted plenty when the Veil first tore between my world and this one, visiting nightmares on the masses until we finally decided to place law and order over this plane.

My assistant peeks her head in the door. "Five bucks says the witch'll try to cross the Wood anyway."

"I'd love to see him try," I growl. Nobody crosses Earth Syndicate territory without my permission. And I never give my permission.

The pixie at my door titters and winks at me. "So...are you taking my bet?"

"Of course," I sigh.

"Good," she chirps, "because I hear Rune grumbling in the woods, and a red-headed witch is thrown over the front of his horse." She gives me a triumphant look as I spring up off the edge of my desk, fury lashing at my veins as my chest heaves. My assistant's face pales as she scoots quickly out of view, not stopping to close my office door.

I'm through it in moments, slamming the glossy door against the wall. It splinters as I stalk down dark hall after dark hall. I skirt along the edge of Cauchemar's writhing dance floor, the bass beat thumping in my ears as I round the bar and head through a set of double doors into my back courtyard.

It faces the pitch black forest, and true to my fucking assistant's word, I see Rune riding stiffly up the path, Ryder trailing behind him looking...fuckable. Green eyes meet mine and flash immediately

down, Ryder's cheeks a ruddy red as he studiously avoids my gaze.

Standing tall, I let the full weight of my fury roll off me in dominant waves, power licking at Ryder as he stops next to Rune. When Rune draws his mount to a halt, I grab Ryder's hair, fisting it as I yank his head up, sneering in his face. I tower over him.

Rune slides off his skeletal ride and slips off into the darkness. He doesn't need to be here for what's coming next.

Ryder watches him go with a look of desperation on his face, his pink lips parted as if he's about to beg for help.

With a growl, I force his attention back to me, watching the hope fade from his eyes when he realizes how well and truly fucked he is.

"Why?" I question simply.

Ryder sputters. "My grandmother summoned me. I have no choice." He protests from his place against the horse's saddle, hands clawing at mine as he attempts to dislodge my hand from his hair. He squints at the pain as I fist my fingers tighter through his waves, relishing the way he squirms uncomfortably.

"She was expecting you to *try*," I return, hopping up into the saddle and dragging him across the front of it, ass up. I turn the horse along the outermost wall of my compound and urge it forward.

I reach out to pinch the muscle where Ryder's round ass meets his muscular leg. He jerks and attempts to shift upright again. "Nothing happens in the Wood that I do not allow, and I did not give you permission to cross my territory."

Ryder sputters as he tries, and fails, to shove himself backward off my horse.

Somewhere, somehow, this witch got it in his mind he doesn't need to follow my rules, and that just will not do. I lead this syndicate for a reason. Nobody transgresses here without paying, either with their life or their soul. I have yet to decide which of those things Ryder Connelly will be giving me.

I smack his ass hard. "Behave." It's a simple command which he follows, although anger radiates from him as he hangs over the front of my mount. I have to wonder what Sybella has over him that he's willing to risk losing his life.

He remains silent for just a moment before glancing up at me from my lap. "We had a deal. I kissed you and you agreed to let me pass safely. I was very clear."

There's hurt in his tone underneath the anger.

"You should never have come here," I remind him. "I don't grant requests to witches."

"I thought I could make a case, but you gave me no choice," he growls. He freezes as I run a hand over his ass. I silently dare him to move, because I'm itching to spank it again. I'd like to see more of his outrage at my unfairness. I'd like to stir his ire even further, if for no other reason than seeing how adorable it is when he's infuriated.

He falls silent for several minutes, muttering under his breath with his arms crossed against my horse's shoulder. I rest my hands on his ass, relishing the way he works himself up from irritated grumbling all the way to anger, which bursts forth as he turns to me with a glare.

"Let me down!" He's outraged, and all I can think about is stuffing my fat cock into that traitorous mouth and forcing him to suck on it until I come. He has no idea what he's in for, and that has him unnerved enough to spew whatever he thinks right out of those pretty lips.

Laughing cruelly, I hop off my steed and drag Ryder down by the back of the neck. He falls to his knees as I hum with satisfaction. Having this handsome witch on the ground before me is giving me ideas about how I'll pry Ryder's secrets from him.

I could torture him and make it quick, but I think instead I'll fuck him until all his secrets spill from his pretty lips.

"Up," I command, chuckling when he stands with a scowl. He's every bit the delicious, delicate prey I fantasized about in my office. Leaning into his space, I shove my hand into his red hair. I use it to yank his head back, and then I push him up against the side of the horse. Dragging my fangs up his neck, I inhale a deep breath.

"You smell like dinner," I purr into his ear, biting his pale skin as goosebumps coat him from head to toe. "I could eat you alive right here, and Sybella Rathmore wouldn't do the first thing to save you, isn't that right?"

Ryder trembles, his body tense between me and the mount. Laughing, I breathe in another hit of him. Gods, he smells good.

A soft whine leaves his throat as I imagine the dozens of ways I'll take him to get the information I need. I can't fucking wait.

I step back with an evil smile as he looks up at me with a mixture of apprehension and lust swirling in those green eyes.

"Time to go, little witch," I purr, reaching out to cup his cock and give it a hard squeeze.

Ryder grunts and hunches over, but I sigh with anticipation. He's hard after being manhandled, sniffed, and bitten. Prying the secrets from him is going to be the highlight of my week.

I think better of how fully clothed he is. I rip his shirt open, reveling in the smooth, pale skin presented to me.

"What the hell was that for?" he gasps, his voice low and angry.

I shrug, letting my gaze drift down to his chest. "I do what I want, witch." Placing a finger under his chin, I tilt his face up, forcing him to look into my eyes. "And I think you like me looking at you."

"I don't," he retorts quickly. Too quickly.

A lie. I wonder if he's even allowed himself to realize how attractive he finds me.

"Lie to me again and I'll take the pants next. Perhaps I'll drag you to my dungeon trussed up like a hog. Would you like that?"

My quarry hisses in a breath but shuts his mouth, shaking his head.

Grinning, I urge him forward, around the side of the club's exterior until we reach a small shed. Shoving the door open with my foot, I push him through into the musty darkness. His footsteps are quiet in front of me as we pick our way down into the depths of Cauchemar's underbelly.

Eventually, we reach another door. I shove Ryder through, reveling in the way he falls to his knees again, fear evident on his handsome features.

He's my prisoner, I'm making that abundantly clear.

Ryder glances around the guest room, licking his lips as he shifts from one foot to the other. "Now what?"

Hooking my thumbs into my belt, I lean against the wall and watch, but I don't respond. He rubs his hands together, betraying the anxiety barreling through him right now. Moments drag into minutes as I observe him, watching his muscles betray him as he wilts under my predatory gaze.

Breaking him is going to be so fucking fun.

"I require information about your grandmother, and what possible reason she could need you. You took your life in your hands trying to cross my territory. So tell me why," I command him.

The witch lifts both hands in supplication. "Truly, I don't know anything, that's why I answered her summons. I can't say no to her."

"You know more than you're letting on," I press.

“I really don’t.” Ryder’s smile is humorless. “She hates my guts.”

“Because you’re weak,” I clarify.

His voice is quiet when he looks at me, sighing. “Yeah, I suppose that’s part of it.”

I give him a wolfish grin as I cross the space between us, bringing my fangs close to his parted lips. “Weak things can be useful weapons, witch. I love weakness.”

Ryder’s lips part in a soft snarl, but his fear is evident in the sour scent rolling off him. It’s a scent that calls to the instinctively predatory side of my nature, so I press closer to him.

“I’m going to break you, Ryder. Pick you apart until you tell me what I want to know.”

Green eyes go wide as he scans my face, the trembling picking up as I laugh and turn from him, striding out of the room. I leave him with ominous parting words.

“Welcome to the Hunt, little witch.”

CHAPTER 6

RYDER

A guest room is the last place I expected to end up when Wotan dragged me back to his club like an animal he'd caught.

Seriously, fuck him.

He tricked me. Then he put his hands on me. *And you liked it*, a little voice whispers in my head. *Fuck you, too.*

Great, now I'm arguing with myself. Although, it's not like I have anything better to do now that I'm Wotan's prisoner.

I still haven't gotten my shirt back. I guess I should be relieved I haven't been tortured or forced to participate in some kind of depraved spectacle downstairs. So far, the worst thing I've had to contend with is boredom.

That, and the anxiety of waiting for Wotan to return. I guess that's part of his strategy. He's going to string me along. Wear me down without lifting a finger. Now that I'm caged like an animal, he can take his time making good on his promise to break me.

Goosebumps lift on my arms. Restless energy stirs in my gut...and in the air. Needing a distraction, I rise from the bed and study my surroundings for what feels like the thousandth time. Even as I gaze around, I know it's useless to look for an escape. I combed over every inch of this place when I first arrived. If there's a way out, it's well hidden.

I have no idea how long I've been stuck here. The room is nice enough, but it's windowless, which means I can't even count on the sun to help me track the hours. Or, hell, maybe it's days at this point. Wary of Wotan's return, I fought sleep as long as I could. But exhaustion claimed me eventually, and I passed out on the black silk sheets.

Of course, my dreams were plagued by a pair of amethyst eyes and a mocking, fanged smile. I woke in a puddle of sweat with my dick like a ten-pound weight between my legs. I stumbled to the ensuite bathroom and took a cold shower with my jaw clenched and a hundred curses hovering in my throat.

And I jacked myself off with the memory of a deep, sensual voice purring in my ear.

When I emerged, food awaited me. Another meal appeared when I slept again. At first, I was reluctant to eat. Then I considered what probably lies ahead of me. Whatever Wotan has in store, I'll need my strength to endure it. Starved and dehydrated isn't the smartest way to face off with the Master of the Hunt. For all I know, he plans to set me loose in his territory and run me to ground.

And then... Well, I don't have to think too hard about what's likely to come next.

My groin tightens. Wicked tendrils of desire creep through me. I want to smash my fist into Wotan's face...but not nearly as much as I want to feel his tongue sucking on mine again.

And how fucked up is that?

“Very,” I mutter, my voice echoing around the dimly lit room. I shove a hand through my hair, trying to tame the unruly waves. It’s the best I can do without a mirror, which is the one thing missing from the otherwise well-appointed bathroom. In fact, there’s not a mirror in sight anywhere in this place. I can only assume that’s by design. Wotan wants to reinforce my isolation. There’s no one to talk to and no one to look at. Not even myself.

The door opens without warning, and Rune strides in.

Not exactly the answer to my prayers.

His glamour is up, and his brown gaze travels down my body. He’s attractive—even with the glamour—but his perusal does nothing for me. It doesn’t heat my blood the way Wotan’s does.

Rune’s lips curve in a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “You wear your emotions like a mask, witch. Wotan is going to eat you alive.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say he’s one to talk about masks, but I swallow the comment before it can spill out. He delivered me to Wotan, but I haven’t been brutally murdered yet. So maybe he and I have a deal despite his protests.

Or maybe I’m just delusional. I can only imagine what Jasper would say right now. “*The second one, bitch.*”

The vampire is waiting for a response, so I dart a look at the open door. “Where is Wotan?”

“Eager to see him? You’ll change your mind soon enough.”

Apprehension slides down my spine. “And why is that?”

His gaze wanders over my bare chest. “Such pale skin. He’ll enjoy that.” He goes to the door. “Come,” he calls, like a haughty prince summoning a servant. Or a master beckoning a pet.

I bristle. “Where are you taking me?”

He turns at the door. “In case it isn’t clear to you by now, you’re in no position to ask questions. Follow or I’ll put a collar around your throat and lead you on a leash.”

He will. There’s no question in my mind. He’ll collar me and deliver me to Wotan that way. I can just imagine him handing over the leash.

I’m at his side in a heartbeat, and he smiles and cups my cheek. “Good boy.”

My face heats. I jerk from his touch, which just makes him laugh. His glamour flickers, and I get a glimpse of needle-sharp fangs. The sight of them makes me want to ask what kind of monster Wotan is. He’s not a vampire. He’s not anything I recognize.

Before I can speak, Rune is moving, his footsteps eerily silent on the marble floors. He leads me down a flight of stairs and onto a catwalk that overlooks the club’s main floor. He pauses at the railing, and we survey the seething crowd. It’s like a living, breathing thing—an alien entity comprised of a thousand individual parts. It’s an arresting sight to take in from above. Music thumps loudly, shaking the floor beneath our feet. Sweat-slicked skin gleams here and there among the crowd.

At least I’m not the only half-naked person in the room.

The vampire addresses me without taking his eyes off the crowd. “Do you know what Wotan was before the Veil fell?”

I stare at his profile. “Master of the Wild Hunt.”

He observes the dance floor a moment longer before turning to me. Slowly, his glamour recedes, uncloaking all his glowing, blond beauty. All at once, I realize I’ve never really seen his true form before. The glimpses I’ve caught haven’t done him justice, because he’s gorgeous. Beguiling. A being to covet.

No wonder he hides from the world. His is the kind of splendor others want to steal and keep for

themselves. I can only imagine he's showing it to me for a reason.

His eerie eyes reflect the club's flashing lights. "You parrot titles without understanding the meaning behind them. Wotan is justice. Evildoers can't outrun his mount."

Evildoers. Immortals and their bombast. I want to roll my eyes, but I'm afraid he'll slit my throat, so I lean on the railing instead. "You sure you don't have that the other way around?"

His eyes narrow. "Speak plainly, witch."

You're one to talk. "Your boss kidnapped me and is holding me prisoner. If there's an evildoer here, it's him. I don't have the information he seeks."

Silence falls between us, the only sounds the thump of music and the indistinct hum of the crowd. Rune watches me intently, as if he's trying to gauge the veracity of my words.

I wait for him to probe my mind. Some vampires have that ability. If this one does, he's not using it. There are no flutters deep in my head. No nudges at the edge of my consciousness.

But I'm not taking any chances. I picture a brick wall. A skilled—or determined enough—mind-reader can obliterate it, but not without some effort.

After a minute, he pushes away from the railing. His cold, proud beauty is sharp enough to cut glass. "Evil is the best judge of evil, witch." In a blur of movement, he's behind me. Strong fingers grip my arms. The railing bites into my abs, and then I'm dangling over it, my toes barely touching the floor.

"Don't," I gasp, blood pounding in my ears. On the floor below, the club's patrons continue dancing, oblivious to the drama unfolding above them.

"Everyone has evil in them," the vampire says behind me. "We like to think we don't. But my, how that changes when we're pushed to the edge."

I grit my teeth. "You've made your point."

He lets me hang for another moment, then hauls me up. Sweating, I stumble away from the railing. He observes me with cool detachment, his glowing eyes tracking my movements as I shove shaking hands through my hair. "You've kept your mouth shut about me," he says tightly. "I dislike being beholden to mortals, so I would settle the debt."

My heart pounds. *He's going to help me escape.* That's why he brought me up here. I dart my gaze around, looking for an exit.

If possible, his expression grows colder. "Make life easier for yourself and tell Wotan what you know about Sybella's involvement with the human Resistance. If you lie, prepare to suffer his judgment."

My jaw drops. That's...it? A friendly word of advice? It takes a second before I can summon a response. "And what are you? His executioner?"

An icy blast rolls off him. "I'm not his anything. Nor anyone's."

He barely finishes his declaration when a vision forms behind him. A tall, winged figure drifts forward, its face obscured by a dark hood. The wings are interesting, I think, studying them. The creature is obviously of the Myth, but the hood prevents me from knowing exactly what kind of monster it is. But it's a *heavy* one. Its footsteps shake the ground, making the club appear to rock from side to side.

The vampire senses none of this, of course, leaving me to ride out the vision alone.

The creature wraps a ghostly hand around one of Rune's wrists. Then the vision fades and disappears.

I meet Rune's gaze and smile. "You belong to no one? The male who seeks to claim you might say otherwise."

His lips part. For a second, surprise flares in his eyes. Just as quickly, it's gone and he's back to glaring. "You're a Cassandra," he says, something of an accusation in his voice.

And nothing else. Not for the first time, I long for another power. Something useful. Like, say, the ability to stop vampires with attitude problems from dangling me over catwalks.

"Keep your predictions to yourself," he says. He turns and walks away, and it's clear I'm supposed to follow.

"You shouldn't worry," I call out. As I intended, this brings him to a halt. "The future is never set in stone. Each of us has the free will to change it." I could add that my interpretation of the vision could be wrong, but I don't. I've lived with this gift for twenty-nine years. I'm usually right.

Also, he's threatened my life several times over the past half hour. Let him stew in angst.

He speaks over his shoulder. "I'm not worried, witch. But you should be." He continues on, his glamour melting over him once more.

I muffle a curse and follow. His words buzz in my mind as we descend another flight of stairs... then another. When Wotan dragged me here after Rune brought me back from the Wood, he said he wanted information about Sybella. Now, this vampire speaks of the Resistance. It doesn't take a genius to think Wotan suspects my grandmother is helping the humans.

If that's the case, it's news to me. But resistance groups are nothing new. Dozens have popped up here and there since the War That Ripped the Veil. The creatures of the Myth repaired the human world, yes, but they imposed their rule over it. There have always been humans who pushed back. There have always been humans who seek to return to the way things were before the Veil fell, and they typically use old human technology in their pursuits. Guns, bombs, old military equipment—most of it made of iron, which the creatures of the Myth can't abide.

It makes no sense for my grandmother to be part of such an effort. Before the war, witches were something of a joke. No one believed we had any real power. Now that magic runs rampant, we're taken seriously.

Well, Sybella is. The Rathmore Coven is. And I know all too well how much my grandmother despises humans.

My musings end abruptly as Rune descends yet another staircase. This one is stone, and it looks like it was carved by hand. The air is damp and chilled. Fresh goosebumps rush across my skin. I want to ask where we're going, but some part of me already knows.

We enter a narrow passageway lined with torches. The vampire leads me to a wooden door studded with metal. He pushes it open, and my heart skips a beat.

It's a dungeon, but not the kind for housing prisoners. It's the kind for sexually tormenting them. Everything is stone and black leather. Torchlight flickers over the smooth flagstone floor which, to my horror, is equipped with a drain. Various whips and floggers hang from the walls. A giant St. Andrews cross dominates one wall. A cage and several other contraptions are suspended from the ceiling. There's a glossy black pillory and a big four-poster bed with chains and cuffs attached to each post.

Wotan sits on a—there's no other word for it—*throne* positioned against the far wall. He wears nothing but a pair of black leather pants. Like I suspected, dark tattoos cover his chest and shoulders. As our gazes meet, his lips curve. "Bring him," he tells the vampire without breaking my stare.

Rune grips my arm and drags me to the center of the room. He leaves me there and goes to Wotan, who rises at his approach. Wotan listens intently, his purple gaze locked with mine, as Rune leans forward and murmurs in his ear.

The hair on my nape lifts. We're deep underground. No one is going to be able to hear me scream.

Not that anyone would come to my aid if I did.

“Thank you, Rune,” Wotan says in his deep voice. “That will be all.”

The vampire leaves. “Be a good boy,” he murmurs as he passes me, a knowing smile touching his lips.

Fuck you.

When he’s gone, Wotan strolls toward me. Torchlight plays over his golden skin, which makes his tattoos seem to move. Or hell, maybe they’re actually moving. They did before.

He circles me, and it shouldn’t be possible, but I swear he’s even bigger now, all that sleek, hard muscle rippling and flexing. I want to turn with him, just to keep him within sight, but I don’t dare move. I focus on breathing. On keeping my heart rate steady.

“Are you happy with your accommodations?” he asks.

It takes a minute for the question to sink in. “Uh...yeah. Thanks,” I tack on stupidly.

“You slept comfortably?”

I swivel my head as he rounds me again. What the hell is going on? His tone is downright conversational. Like he’s running a hotel and I’m a guest he’s eager to please. “I slept fine.”

He nods. “I’m glad you like your room.”

“I’d like my freedom a lot more,” I blurt.

He stops in front of me, and I’m forced to tip my head back to meet his gaze. He smiles, his fangs bright white and sharp as a blade. My skin tingles with the memory of them dragging down my neck.

“You have a chance to earn it,” he says. “Now strip.”

CHAPTER 7

WOTAN

There's a moment where Ryder pauses, and I sense anger simmering under his pale skin. I'd laugh if I didn't relish just how much I'm going to enjoy punishing him when he pushes me.

Pink lips part to say something, but he keeps his gaze straight ahead. He seems to think better of whatever he was about to say and grits his jaw instead. I watch the muscle flex as I lean in and breathe my way along his neck. So clean, so pure. I can't wait to tarnish him.

"I'm going to thoroughly enjoy breaking you," I growl into his ear, nipping it hard as he startles, muscles trembling as his breath quickens. My predatory instinct kicks in at the way he seems almost poised to run. A fantasy of him sprinting through the forest ahead of me assaults my mind. I want to run him down and tear him to shreds.

I set that aside to focus. There's a strength in this witch that underlies his prey-like demeanor and unassuming nature. Ryder appears weak, but there's more to him than that. It's possible, however, that this is all a ruse, and Sybella has planted him to fuck with me. I need to sort that out immediately. The feeble human Resistance cannot be allowed to take hold. I'll root it out, no matter who I have to kill to do so.

Even if it's the delicious little witch in my dungeon.

I reach out and grip his cock through his pants, squeezing it tight as I bring my mouth to his ear again. "I told you to strip, and I won't ask again." Yanking his cock roughly, I chuckle at the way it hardens under my fingers. He's long and thick, his pulse throbbing in a vein that runs alongside his shaft. His blood runs so hot and hard, I can feel it through the thin fabric of his pants. I trace it with my claws as his stomach clenches.

Ryder lets out a low growl but reaches for the button on his jeans, undoing it. His dick slips free immediately, wetting the front of his briefs as I slide my grip down to his heavy balls.

Goddess, I'm going to enjoy picking him apart. I release my hold on his cock, turning for my ropes. Tied up and helpless is an excellent place to start. It's amazing what beings will share when they lose all power over their bodies. I'm going to tease this little witch until he's leaking and desperate, and then maybe I'll have him a few times before I kill him or take his soul.

"I'm willing to earn my freedom," he says in a soft tone. "But I want to be clear if we make a deal, because I got the raw fucking end of it last time."

Unusual choice of words. It's almost enough to make me laugh, because he didn't get it nearly as raw as I'd like to have given it.

Whirling around, I stalk across the space between us and slam my chest against his hard enough that he stumbles backward. Green eyes fly open wide, but he composes himself and lifts his dimpled chin.

Snarling, I thread my fingers through his red hair and yank his head back. His neck is exposed, and he whines but doesn't back down.

"You think you got the raw end of our deal, witch? When beings attempt to pass through my Wood, they never survive. You're alive for the moment, so I can assure you, you got a better deal than most."

Drawing a dagger from a holster strapped to my thigh, I press the edge of the blade to the side of his neck. "You presume that because I did not kill you, I won't do so now. That's a dangerous assumption, little one. You sure you want to take your life into your hands that way?"

Before he can respond, I drag the tip of the knife down his neck just enough to pull blood to the surface of his skin. That's when I smell the first hint of fear, Ryder's throat bobbing under pale skin, blue veins visibly thrumming.

Good. I'm the Master of the Hunt, and I am hunting right now.

Leaning closer to him, I grip his hair tighter and drag my forked tongue up the cut on his neck. He cries out and shudders, but he's utterly caught. The taste of his tangy blood stirs my desire to strike.

"You are nothing but prey to me, witch. But you know that already, don't you? Tell me everything about your grandmother."

Releasing his hair, I turn but glance over my shoulder meaningfully at his unbuttoned pants.

Ryder shucks them off quickly, his half-hard cock bobbing against one pale, muscular thigh. He's warring internally with fear, desire, and a healthy dose of desperation.

Grinning, I cross the room and grab a length of rope, knowing he won't even bother attempting to flee from me. When I return, I yank his arms behind his back and bind him tight, wrapping the rope around his broad chest.

Green eyes are wide with fear as I drag him backward with the rope's end, tossing it through a ring buried in the black, stone wall. I tie the rope off and kick Ryder's legs out wide.

Exposed. He's so fucking exposed like this. Arms bound behind his back, his chest heaving as his most intimate parts dangle between his thighs. His cock springs out from a nestle of auburn curls, precum already leaking from the tip. Beings may say a variety of things here in my dungeon, but the body doesn't lie. Below his hard length, his balls are pulled tightly to his body. He's horny as fuck, but terrified.

Perfect.

I want a taste of him. "I can do anything I want to you." I lean down and hover my mouth above his stomach. My eyes meet his as I lick a path along the valleys of his abdominal muscles. When I bite, he gasps and bucks, but can't back away from me. I repeat the move until my bite marks cover his thick muscles, blood dripping from dozens of wounds as desire burns in my gut.

Dropping to my knees, I sink my fangs into the flesh of his upper thigh, dangerously close to his groin.

"Fuuuuck!" He screams out, his head falling back against the cold stone wall.

I suck hard, relishing the taste of his coppery blood in my mouth. He doesn't know this serves more than one purpose. The taste of magic is faint in him, so he's not lying about that, at least. Biting harder, I let his blood fill my mouth and spill down my chin before growling into his thigh.

Ryder's cock leaps, swinging heavily as I release the bite and lick a path up the underside of his hard length. His scream falls off into a needy whine as blood coats him.

Chuckling, I stand and turn from him, crossing the dungeon to a large armoire. When I open it, dozens of torture implements line the tufted velvet interior. I hear Ryder gasp softly as I select a set of small knives and return to him.

"Tell me of your grandmother," I say.

“She hates me,” he whispers, his voice trembling as I step back, a knife in each hand while I observe him. “I’ve only seen her a few times since my parents died. That’s the truth, I swear.”

“And yet she summoned you... To what end, witch?”

“I don’t know.”

I slap the side of his thigh hard. He screeches and jolts, but he’s caught in the ropes. His pale skin blooms pink where I struck him, the firelight dancing across his flushed skin.

I keep my tone light, although I send waves of possessive energy barreling into him. He shudders under the weight of my power’s violent dominance. “It’s hard to believe you’re a witch of the Wood. You’re much better suited to the fire and depravity of my dungeon.”

Striking his thigh again, I growl as he takes the beating, his cock leaking for me, dripping sticky cum onto the black stone floor.

“This turns you on, doesn’t it?” My voice is low-pitched as Ryder stares straight ahead. He is glorious in my ropes, but I want to mark every inch of his skin. I want to unravel every layer of this curious little witch with no power. Except he’s not quite as powerless as he claimed.

A Cassandra. Sybella must be aware. It’s the only explanation I can think of for why she’d bother with a relative in possession of no other magical assets. “Does Sybella know of your power?”

“Yes,” he whispers, refusing to look at me as I drag the tip of my knife blade along his stomach, goosebumps following my blade. He hisses in a breath and glances at me. “She visited me right after —” His voice falls off as he grits his jaw, green eyes narrowing. It’s clear he’s revisiting a terrible memory, something I could ironically inflict on him at any time. Something I probably *will* use to pry his mind open and read all his secrets.

“After what,” I demand, pressing the knife to his ball sack as I grip his chin, forcing him to meet my steady gaze. “After *what*, witch?” When he doesn’t speak up immediately, I grip his balls and twist, reveling in the way he screams.

“After my parents died,” he yelps. “I was young. We were in a car and it exploded. That old technology was so unreliable. I crawled out and...oh gods!” I press the knife harder as tears fill his eyes. My meaning is clear. Tell me the fucking truth or lose your manhood.

Ryder barrels on, his voice terrified and tremulous. “My mother called to me, she tried to tell me something, but she could barely even whisper. But she was horribly burnt, and my parents died, right in front of me.” Tears stream down his cheeks as something akin to sorrow hits me square in the chest.

I cast it aside and sneer. “And then what did your grandmother do?”

“She didn’t help me,” he says, slumping against the wall. “She visited me once after they died, testing me for power. When I didn’t have it, she ignored me for the most part. She’s visited me in the Free Zone a handful of times, and sent me tutors to learn base magic. But she’s never summoned me. Not until now.”

I don’t get the impression he’s lying, but why would Sybella suddenly summon a blood relative with no power unless she’s planning something? My senses are pinging that something is coming, something wrong.

That sours my gut.

I grab Ryder’s shoulder and turn him to face the wall. Shoving him hard against the cross, I reach around and cup his balls, stroking them with both hands as he gasps.

“There are too many holes in your story, little witch,” I murmur, biting my way along his muscular back. “I will pull every secret out of your brain, no matter what I have to do. Do you understand?”

He pants, his head falling back against my shoulder. “Yes,” he moans. I don’t think he even knows what he’s agreeing to, but I move my hands to his cock and stroke once, twice. I’m not gentle. I never

have been.

And something tells me this witch would never want to be handled gently anyhow. Growling, I thrust my hips hard against his naked ass, slapping it with enough force that he hits the wall with a grunt. He whines as I lay a series of slaps so hard, his skin blushes red, swollen from the force of my beating.

I reach around his front to find proof that this mistreatment turns him on. His cock is a hard, bobbing length, jutting proudly into my hand. Precum leaks in a sticky stream from his tip, and I use it to tug him as his cries turn into desperate pants, and finally pleas for more.

I'm losing control, which is absurd. Normally I'm happy to torture my quarry for hours. To slice and cut and bite until they're bleeding and desperate and willing to agree to anything. But having Ryder at my mercy has my restraint frayed to the point of snapping.

Digging my fingers into his hips, I rub my hard cock all over his ass. My little witch's scent blooms, his obvious arousal sending my own need into overdrive. All focus narrows to him, to the veins that throb in his neck, to the redness of his skin from my brutal attention.

"We both know you want this," I growl into his ear, sucking in a jagged breath. His scent is clean and pure and natural, and I want to fuck him until it's all dark and nightmarish, until he's marked as mine.

"Ask me for it," I command as I thrust against his naked figure, dragging my claws down his back. Ribbons of red follow my claws as he screams.

CHAPTER 8

RYDER

I've never been this hard. It's like all the blood in my body has rushed to my dick.

Well, except for the rivulets I can feel dripping down my back. If Wotan can't wring information from me, he seems determined to rip it from my veins.

But he wants me. For all his threats and bullshit, he can't hide his desire. And, suddenly, I've had just about enough of his games.

I thrust my ass back hard. "Fuck you," I bite out. "If you want me, fuck me and get it over with."

His dark chuckle tickles my ear. Once again, he uses his body to shove mine into the dungeon wall. I turn my head just in time to avoid a broken nose. Even so, the rough masonry scrapes my cheek. My dick doesn't fare much better. It's trapped between cold stone and my stomach, which still stings from Wotan's blade.

"That would be far too easy," he says in my ear, and the tip of a knife pricks my sac. I squeeze my eyes shut. Gods, if he's going to geld me, I might start making shit up out of desperation.

The knife presses harder.

I drag in a breath. "Listen—"

Cold steel skims my wrist. All at once, my arms are unbound. Before I can move, I'm whirled around and my shoulders meet the wall. Wotan tosses his knife to the ground, then slaps his palm on the stone next to my head. He looms over me, his amethyst eyes dancing with light from the torches. His free hand cups my cock, which is deflated now—a response to his unspoken threat to my manhood.

He keeps his gaze on my face as he fondles me, stroking and massaging. He's not rough this time. On the contrary, he's touching me like he wants to pleasure me, his wicked fingers sliding up and down my length. He runs his thumb around my leaking tip as my breath shudders out.

"There you are," he says softly. "You went away there for a minute."

I don't know what to say to that. I don't know how to react, either. Not with the way he's touching me. I'm aching and semi-hard again, my body trembling with need. It didn't take long at all, which is almost as confusing as his abrupt change in demeanor.

"Why do I want this so much?" I mutter before I can stop myself.

His eyes glitter with something that looks like satisfaction. He's so much taller, I have to tilt my head back to meet his gaze, so I lower mine, focusing on his tattooed chest so I don't have to see his triumphant expression while he strokes me back to the edge of an orgasm.

He sinks to his knees.

My mouth falls open. I can't look away now. Judging from the smile that curves his lips, that's exactly what he intended.

Without a word—without so much as a warning—he wraps his lips around my cock and sucks gently at my tip.

I gasp out a string of incoherent, breathless babble as pleasure grips me. My hips buck off the wall, and my fingers tangle in his hair before I know what I'm doing.

If he cares, he doesn't let on. He simply holds my stare as he flicks his forked tongue over my head, lapping up the drops of precum that have gathered there. Then he moves up my shaft, swirling over my length in long, wet caresses.

A thick wave of molten bliss rushes through me. My heart stutters. Goosebumps break out over my skin as I stare at his tongue working up and down my dick. My hips move of their own accord, thrusting forward and falling into a rhythm. I tighten my grip in his hair, which has come loose from its queue. He looks like pure sin now, the black locks falling over the thick mounds of his shoulders.

Just when I think things can't get any better, he proves me wrong. He opens wider and *swallows* my dick, taking me all the way to the back of his throat.

"Gods!" I shout, my cry echoing off the stone. My legs are shaking. Fuck, my whole body is shaking. I'm going to come.

He pulls off and shakes his head. "Not yet," he says in a voice like gravel, and I realize I said the last aloud. He leans forward and lets the tip of my dick bob against his mouth. Purple eyes filled with challenge, he speaks with my cock tapping his lips. "You want to fuck my mouth, Ryder?"

My heart pounds. My fists are balled at my sides. This is worse than his knife...or the blows he rained on my ass. Because I know he's not going to let me come. Not right away. Maybe not ever. He's going to edge me over and over, until I'm out of my mind. Fuck, I'm halfway there already.

"No answer?" he murmurs, his tongue snaking out to capture another drop of the moisture I can't stop leaking. He purses his lips and drags them back and forth across my tip, glossing them with precum. Even on his knees, he's still in charge, topping me from the ground. He's so ripped it's insane, his body all tatted skin and hard angles. If I survive this, I'm never going to be able to jack myself without thinking of this—of him kneeling before me with his plush lips glistening from my dick.

His hot breath flutters over my tip. "I think you do." Slowly, he guides my hands back to his head. "Go ahead. Fuck my mouth." He takes me even deeper this time, until his lips brush the red curls at the base of my cock. He turns his gaze up, his black lashes spiky as he slides his tongue along the underside of my shaft.

"Fuck," I whimper, letting my head thunk against the wall. I claw at his hair as I battle the urge to thrust. But it's a battle I lose. In the space of a heartbeat, my hips are moving. My ass flexes as I pump in and out of his mouth, which is hot and wet and so fucking perfect I can't breathe. He takes every stroke, his jaw wide and his gaze locked with mine. The sounds are unreal—my harsh pants and the wet thrust of my dick nailing the back of his throat. I'm shaking again, my quads burning with the effort of maintaining this pace. But it feels too good to stop. I'm going to come. I need to come. My balls draw up tight. My orgasm coils like a snake ready to strike. I pump harder and grit my teeth, prepared to bliss out and shoot my load down his throat. Almost...fucking...there...

He pulls off at the last second, and I chase his mouth like an idiot, my dick flailing wildly. He stands, his mocking smile filling my vision.

Frustration burns my insides like acid. "Fuck *off*!" I shout, swinging.

He catches my fist before it connects. When I sputter with rage, he laughs in my face. In another inhuman burst of speed and strength, he spins me around and shoves me against the wall. This time, though, he stretches my arms over my head and flattens my palms against the stone. "Don't fucking

move,” he growls, his stubble scraping my neck.

Having my orgasm snatched away yet again has me shaking like a junkie. I dig my forehead into the stone as he runs his palms up and down my ribs. Over my nipples, which he pinches and rolls between unforgiving fingers. My dick is so hard it’s numb.

But my balls aren’t.

The fucker knows it, too, because he dips his hand under my ass and gives them a rough tug.

“*Ungh.*” I jerk and try to come off the wall, but he pulls harder, and I stop struggling as my eyes water.

“Good boy,” he breathes against my neck. Any reply I might have been brave enough to mutter is stifled as his fingers push into my gasping mouth. A warning enters his voice. “Bite me and I’ll fuck you with no prep.”

I understand what he wants. I suck at his fingers, tasting my blood and the precum he milked from me. It’s as hot as anything he’s done, making me wet his fingers like this. Prepping his fingers so he can prep my hole. My dick tightens at the prospect of finally—*finally*—getting some relief, and I release a less than manly whimper.

His lips graze my nape as his booted foot kicks my legs wider. “You want me stuffing you somewhere else, don’t you.” It’s not a question.

I grunt in acknowledgment, too desperate to lie at this point.

He pulls his fingers from my mouth. A second later, they’re between my cheeks and teasing my hole. “You’ve done this before?” he murmurs.

I shudder in a combination of need and anger. “Gods, fuck *you.*”

He chuckles and strokes slow circles around my entrance, probing...gently, actually. He’s been so rough with everything else, I expected him to be rough with this, too. But he takes his time, keeping up those lazy circles until I relax and thrust back against him. Only then does he push a finger inside. As he does, he moves his free hand to my dick and gives me a couple of easy, languid pumps.

I groan as sparks fire across my skin. The burn from his entry dissolves into a sweep of pleasure so intense I sag against the wall. “Fuck,” I moan. “Oh fuck. More.”

His answer is deep and smoky. “You’ll get it. I’m going to give it to you the way you want it.” His grip on my dick tightens. “The way you need.”

My eyes fly open. The way he’s gripping me...

And those words...

“*The way you need.*”

I’ve heard that before, the night of the Ball.

When Wotan’s champion pushed me against the window in the old cathedral and clamped down on my cock like a vise.

Wotan’s champion.

No.

Wotan. I don’t need to see through glamour to know they’re one and the same.

But does *he* know? Has he known the whole time? The question burns so brightly, I almost turn around.

He pushes another finger inside me and strokes over my prostate.

My spine turns to liquid. The speculation in my head dissolves as I groan and arch my back, my ass thrust out in blatant invitation.

“Yes,” he growls and pushes his groin against my ass. He continues fingering my hole as his free hand fumbles behind me. There’s the rasp of a zipper, and then his dick prods my cheek. He adjusts so

his length is flat against my ass, his dick burning my still-tender skin like a brand. "Move," he orders. "Show me how much you want this."

I obey. I curl my fists against the wall and roll my hips in a slow grind, fucking myself on his fingers. Heat floods my cheeks as I imagine what I must look like, naked with his fingers buried to the second knuckle in my ass—an ass that's probably starting to bruise from his blows. But I can't stop, not when he's stroking inside me, hitting that magical spot over and over again. My dick is like a metal rod between my legs, and the head scrapes the stone every time I move.

It's not a bad thing. The discomfort is the only reason I haven't lost it yet. My heart hammers. I'm covered in sweat and his scent. I grunt and thrust back harder, my balls swaying.

He squeezes my hip. "Slow down, baby."

Surprise flutters through me. The endearment is a far cry from everything else he's called me. I'm still trying to figure it out when he pulls his fingers from my body. A moment later, he brings them back, and this time they're slick with lube.

And...oh *fuck*. He circles my hole again as his other hand finds my cock.

Lube coats those fingers, too. His fist glides easily, and my eyes roll back in my head as I groan, trapped between two intense points of pleasure. My body can't decide what it wants more: his grip on my dick or his fingers spearing my hole, opening me wider.

"What do you want?" he asks, as if he knows the dilemma I'm grappling with. He abandons my hole and drags his slick fingers down the furrow of my ass, rubbing firmly over my taint and balls before moving up again. He pushes back inside, giving me more this time. I'm loose and open, and I take him easily.

"You," I gasp. I'm sweating and shivering at the same time, like my body is just as confused as my brain. There's no reason I should want this—want *him*. But I do. Probably more than I've wanted anyone. I want him inside me so badly I think I might die if it doesn't happen. Swallowing the last remnants of my pride, I turn my head enough to catch his eye. "Please fuck me. Please. I'm begging."

These must be the magic words, because his purple eyes glint as he withdraws a bit and then works three thick fingers inside me. He goes slow, grazing my prostate in a way that has cum streaming from my dick. I can hear it splatter on the ground. The burn is minimal. Almost immediately, it frazzles into pleasure that threatens to blast me apart.

"Fuck," I whisper. "Oh...*fuck*." My voice cracks at the end. My ass clenches around him. It's insane to ask for more, but I'm ready to.

His lips are parted, and he's breathing as heavily as I am. Gods, our mouths are inches apart. His gaze dips to my lips, and for a second I can almost swear *longing* flashes over his features.

"Face the wall," he growls suddenly.

I do, and I can't help wondering if I saw more than he wanted. Once again, the knowledge that we've been in this position before pounds through me. He didn't like me looking at him that night, either.

"Bear down," he orders just as his fingers find my prostate again. He sinks them deeper.

Bliss. Mind-blowing bliss. I make a sound that's going to embarrass the fuck out of me when I think about it later. But right now I'm wild. Uninhibited. I widen my stance and arch hard, offering myself. Showing him exactly where I want him. I need his dick, not his hand, and I'm beyond begging. Lamentations fall from my lips. It's like he's a god and I'm a suppliant. The only thing I can do is pray and hope he answers.

His lips touch my neck...my shoulder...and then he pulls carefully from my body. A second later, the blunt, spongy head of his cock prods my hole. When I try to push back, eager to take him, his other

hand squeezes my hip and holds me still. He must have a tight grip on his dick, because he rubs the head around my hole a few times, almost but not quite entering me.

“Please,” I moan, empty and loose and wanting. “I need—”

“Now,” he rasps, and he seats himself to the hilt in one swift thrust.

My shout echoes around the chamber. All that prep paid off, because I’m not hurting. I’m so fucking full, but there’s no pain. Just exquisite pressure. He’s as big as I anticipated, and I relish every inch. My chest heaves as I clutch at the wall, my inner muscles squeezing hard around the fat cock spearing me.

He murmurs something I don’t catch, and then his hands grip my ass and pull it apart. “Fuck, that’s hot,” he says, and if I didn’t know better I’d swear that’s reverence in his voice. His thumb skates down my cleft and rubs the tight ring where our bodies join. He pushes inside just a little, opening me that much wider, and all I can do is hang onto the wall and moan helplessly.

He slides his other hand from my hip to my chest. He splays his palm flat, his fingertips grazing my nipple.

“Need to come,” I mumble. There’s no way I’m going to last. The second he thrusts, I’m going to blow.

“Mmm.” He smooths his hand over my chest, his touch possessive and somehow more intimate than his cock filling my ass. “Not quite yet, Red. I’m not done with you.”

Another endearment. Just what the fuck is happening here? But I’m in no position to complain, and I lose the ability to speak when he starts moving. He eases out almost all the way before pushing back inside. Then he does it again, withdrawing so slowly my breath hisses out and I tense in anticipation. When he slams home, I curse and clench around him.

“Yeah,” he growls. “Keep that up. Fuck, you’ve got the tightest ass I’ve ever had wrapped around my dick.” He thrusts faster, and I’m not sure how I know, but I *know* he can’t help himself this time. Whatever kind of control he’s been exercising is gone. His breath hitches, and his hips pump harder, shoving me forward so my dick slaps the wall.

I can’t bring myself to care. Pressure builds in my balls, which are so heavy and swollen they feel ready to split. My mouth hangs open, my breath reduced to rhythmic grunts that sync with his dick railing my ass. Every thrust hits my prostate, stoking the bonfire inside me higher. The flames lick over my skin. I can’t hang on.

His growls fill my ear. His cheek is pressed to mine, his stubble scraping my skin. Our sweat mingles. Even that’s sexy. He’s a manipulative asshole, but he’s hot as sin and his cock feels so good I might come like this, with nothing touching my dick.

Just as I think it, his fist finds my flailing erection and strokes hard. “*Now* you can come. Let’s see it, baby.”

The command is like a tripwire. My body goes off, my release spurting all over his hand and the wall. Thick globs of cum paint the stone. I give a hoarse cry, my hips thrusting wildly.

He jerks me through it, his grip fast and loose. As I begin to shudder with aftershocks, he releases me and lifts his drenched hand to my mouth. “Open,” he gasps, and I do what he says, letting him shove his cum-covered fingers between my lips as he continues pounding my ass. I taste myself and moan, utterly lost.

His thrusts lose all rhythm. He’s disjointed and imprecise now, pumping so hard he makes me lose my balance. But it doesn’t matter because he’s got his hands all over me. One muscular arm drapes around my chest, anchoring me against him as he thrusts one last time and unloads deep inside me.

I'm wrecked. There's nothing left of me, not even the little bit I need to stay standing. And that's good, because it gives me an excuse to keep my mouth shut as he pulls out and picks me up. He lifts me effortlessly, the muscles of his thick chest bunching under my shoulder.

I shouldn't let him carry me this way. The thought buzzes around my head as he crosses the room. Whatever we are, we aren't lovers. And this is another thing he can taunt me about later.

Just as I muster a protest, he drops me on the bed and steps back. The sheets are cool on my flushed skin. My chest is still heaving, my heart thumping painfully hard. We stare at each other.

What the hell do I say after something like what just passed between us? *What* exactly just passed between us? Because I'm willing to bet it's more than he planned.

He frowns, his eyes growing shuttered. "Stay here for now."

He leaves so quickly, the torches dance in his wake. And I'm alone.

Just like the first time we met.

CHAPTER 9

WOTAN

I stalk to my office at the far end of Cauchemar's dungeon. Seating myself behind my desk, I stare at a small fire that burns in the fireplace across from me. The flames dance around the dark room, my mind spinning as I remember how firelight cast across Ryder's skin when I tortured him.

Tortured isn't really the right word. If torturing a male in my club means teasing and fucking them until they come all over my cock, then I have fallen pitifully far. I got information, certainly, but the witch is getting under my skin.

I recognize him, too. He is the male from the Brawl, the one I touched in the same way. That in and of itself is shocking. I don't believe in coincidences. It's entirely possible that's precisely what Ryder is supposed to do. This whole thing could be a setup, and it makes sense—something about Ryder doesn't add up. Not the good and kind persona, not his obvious strength but lack of power. Definitely not my depthless attraction to him.

A sob story about dead parents and a wicked witch of a grandmother? I scoff to myself, shaking my head. Where have I heard that before?

Fucking *everywhere*.

My heart pangs when I think of Ryder as a child, pulling himself out of the car's wreckage only to watch his parents die in front of him. Combine that with a loveless relationship with his grandmother, and it's amazing he grew up to be good and kind—if that's who he really is.

I don't believe it for a godsdamned second.

Alone and naked in my office, I can admit that somewhere in my dark heart, I'm craving companionship. I'm craving something different. Not even the wickedness of Cauchemar excites me anymore. That's why I fought as my own champion. And that's why, no matter how hard I fight now, I can't seem to stop thinking about how Ryder came around my cock. How prettily he cried. How good he felt underneath my claws.

My cock twitches remembering how hard I got off from Ryder Connelly submitting so beautifully to me. What might it be like if I had him in my bed all the time? Would he crave me at my best after seeing me at my worst?

I shove that sentimental train of thought aside. I need to remain focused. Whether Ryder was placed in my path purposefully or not, I cannot be distracted by him.

Grabbing a knife, I pick it up and flip it blade down, dropping it on the desk. It embeds into the ash wood with a thud. I yank it out and do it again, over and over as I mull over what just happened in my dungeon.

I am not some untested male to fall under the spell of a handsome witch with a pretty face. The

sex wasn't enough to get him off my mind—it wasn't the palate cleanser I hoped it'd be. I need to exorcize him completely from my brain and body. Even if I do crave someone to spend time with, a relatively powerless witch is not the right choice. He could never survive the court of nightmares I've built here in the Wood.

Maybe I can use him to another end.

I nod as I arrive at a decision. I'm going to do what I should have done from the very beginning. I'm going to hunt Ryder Connelly through the Wood, because there are only a few possible outcomes. When he's either dead or through my territory, I can go back to not thinking about him every fucking minute. I'll force my own hand, because as powerful as I am, some rules still cannot be broken.

At the very least it'll free up brain cells for me to focus where I should—rooting out the threadbare human Resistance and squashing it before it has a chance to spread. Sybella plays a dangerous game, and I suspect Ryder is a bigger part of it than he knows.

Reaching for a button inlaid into the top of my desk, I depress it. Minutes later Rune slips through the door with a knowing smirk on his plush lips.

I glower at my current enforcer, daring him with my scowl to say a single fucking word about what he no doubt heard in the dungeon just now.

“Didn't bother to put pants on, Wotan?” He cocks his head to the side, his grin growing broader. I clear my throat, returning my gaze to the fireplace and ignoring the comment about my nudity.

When I remain silent, Rune begins to play with the dagger strapped to his chest. “What if he's not hiding anything? What if who he showed you is who he truly is?”

I rise and lean over the desk. Then I turn the full force of my power on him. “Do you really believe that? Does that seem the slightest bit likely?” The witch tried to sneak through my territory. That's not the action of an innocent person.

My power fills the office. For a minute, Rune looks like he wants to flee. But he stands his ground, and his features resume their typical detached expression as he shrugs. “The witch seems genuine to me.”

I glare at him. “Your opinion is duly noted. Make yourself useful and ask around about him. Find out everything you can.”

Rune's mouth tightens. “As you wish. I'll return with answers.” He leaves, and I'm once again left to my thoughts.

Ryder Fucking Connelly. I find myself wondering if he remained in the bed where I told him to stay. I gave him no indication of if or when I'd come back. I try not to think too hard about why I want to know everything about him. I tell myself it's because I need to get to the root of the Resistance, on the off chance their power is finally growing. But deep inside, I know there's more to it than that.

CHAPTER 10

RYDER

The thing about being a prisoner in Wotan's guest room is it gives me a lot of time to think about all the bad decisions I've made since I decided to enter his club.

In fact, self-reflection is just about the only activity available to me right now—or for the past day or so. Once again, I don't know how long I've been locked in my room. After Wotan left the dungeon, I must have passed out, because the next thing I knew the bouncer from upstairs was shining a light in my face and growling at me to “put some fucking pants on.”

Not my first walk of shame, but definitely the most humiliating.

At least Wotan is consistent. Humiliation is clearly one of his kinks, along with torture and domination. But he didn't truly harm me. Without a mirror, I've spent a fair amount of time contorting my body in an attempt to view the marks on my back and ass. I'm bruised and scratched in a few places, but I know it could have been worse. If he'd wanted to hurt me for real, he would have. I don't doubt it for a minute.

I can't figure out why he didn't—or why he decided to fuck my brains out instead of finishing what he started.

And I'd rather not think about how much I liked the way he decided to end his little dungeon routine.

One thing I can't stop thinking about, though, is how that dungeon encounter isn't the first time he's made me come until I can't see straight. He chose me as his *boon* the night of the Syndicate Ball—right after he fought in disguise. I know it was him.

What I *don't* know is whether he realizes it was me. If I had to guess, I'd say no. Because when has that asshole ever refrained from taunting someone?

I huff at the ceiling as I lay sprawled on my back in bed. It's a beautiful ceiling—all ornate plasterwork and fancy swirls I could never afford—but I'm sick to death of looking at it. Worse, my stomach is cleaving to my spine. Unlike the last time I found myself locked in this place, I haven't received any meals. For all I know, Wotan has decided to starve me to death. Maybe there's a whole wing of rooms just like mine with human skeletons in them. He probably decorates his personal space with their bones.

I scrub my hands over my face. “Fuck,” I mutter.

“Not enjoying your stay?”

I bolt upright and find Rune leaning against my door. My *closed* door. He entered without me hearing a thing. His glamour is down, and he looks as stunning as ever. The fucker.

“Rune,” I say, my voice gruff from days—or however long it's been—of disuse.

He pushes away from the door. “It *sounded* like you were enjoying it.”

Instantly, my face is hot. And I know color is flooding my cheeks—one of the curses of being a redhead. “What do you want?” I ask, standing. I’m no match for him, but I’m not going to make things easier for him by remaining in bed.

He stops at the footboard and sighs. “What do any of us want, really?”

I’m in no mood for mind games. “Getting the hell out of this room would be a start.”

“You sure about that?”

“Not really,” I say bluntly.

His crack of laughter startles me, as does the way his eyes crinkle at the corners. It’s a genuine laugh, and it mutes some of the glow of his alabaster beauty. Far from tarnishing him, it only adds to his appeal. He’s less intimidating this way. For once, he radiates warmth instead of cold. He’s not my type, but he’s probably literally *everyone* else’s.

I’m not going to think too hard about what my type is—or if it’s dark-haired psychopaths with amethyst eyes.

Because it’s fucking *not*.

“You’re smarter than I thought,” Rune says. “Sometimes it’s safer to stay in prison than face the ones who keep us there.”

Something in his tone gives me pause. “You sound like you speak from experience.”

His smile vanishes as quickly as it appeared. In a blink, his glamour is back in place. He goes to the door and opens it. “If you want a change of scenery, you’re in luck. Wotan would like to have you for dinner.”

“As a guest or a menu item?”

“You were funny the first time, witch. Don’t push it.”

I follow him because there’s nothing else to do—and because I know I have no choice.

But I’m also curious...and more than a little irritated. I don’t know how many meals I’ve skipped, but it’s more than one. Now Wotan wants me to eat dinner with him? Or maybe this is just another game. Anxiety prickles down my spine as I walk in Rune’s wake. Maybe there’s no dining room on the other end of this.

But when he ushers me into yet another beautiful room, that’s exactly what I find. The table is big enough to seat dozens. It’s decked out with wine glasses and fine china. Wotan sits at the head of it. He’s wearing business attire again, looking like some kind of cross between a CEO and a pagan god.

Which is pretty accurate, actually.

His purple eyes sweep down my body in a possessive glide that makes my heart beat faster.

I stay in the doorway, unsure of what to do. Giant candelabra cast a soft glow over everything. The place settings and crystal glasses reflect the light.

He crooks a finger at me, then points to the chair to his immediate right. “Sit.”

“Have fun,” Rune says quietly behind me before disappearing as silently as he’d entered my room.

A big part of me wants to turn around and follow him. But I’ve been *summoned*. Wotan has issued a command. I already know what happens when I try to ignore his orders.

But that doesn’t mean I have to be graceful in my obedience. I cross the room, jerk the chair back, and sit. “I’m not a dog,” I say tightly.

He gives me a considering look I feel from the top of my head to my semi-hard dick. “You could be.” His amethyst eyes move to my neck. “I kept hounds in the Old Country. Some with two legs instead of four.” His voice dips to an octave well below human range. “I could collar you and make you sit at my feet. Feed you directly from my hand.”

Unbidden, an image rises in my head: me on my knees at his side, nude except for a gold collar circling my neck. It could happen. He's depraved enough to make the vision a reality.

My dick swells and pushes painfully against my jeans. What the fuck is wrong with me that I find the prospect of this scenario insanely appealing?

Stockholm Syndrome. It's the only explanation. Also, the early stages of starvation.

Right on cue, the doors open and servers enter with food and wine. They fill our plates and glasses. A male with mottled gray skin and black eyes snatches my cloth napkin from the table and settles it over my lap. I half expect him to cut up my food and feed it to me, but he and the others leave as swiftly as they entered.

Steam curls lazily from the food, which looks normal enough. It's some kind of roasted meat garnished with greenery I can't decide if I'm supposed to eat or admire. Either way, my mouth is watering. But I hold myself back.

"It's not poisoned," Wotan says. He sips his wine and then holds my gaze over the rim of his glass. "There are far easier ways to kill you, Ryder. And more enjoyable ones."

"Enjoyable for you, maybe," I mumble as he sets his glass on the table. Wine dots his lower lip, reminding me how he looked on his knees with the tip of my dick painting precum over his mouth. Lust crackles through me. In a clumsy attempt to hide it, I shovel a forkful of something into my mouth.

Mashed potatoes. That's nice and ordinary, right? And he has a point. If he was going to poison me, he wouldn't go to the trouble of an elaborate dinner to do it.

The second the food hits my stomach, my body reminds me I'm starving—and unsure when Wotan will grant me the privilege of eating again. So I take advantage of the opportunity now, focusing on nothing but my fork's journey from my plate to my face.

He eats, too. Not all creatures of the Myth need to, and I find myself wondering if he does it as a way to put me at ease. Or perhaps fit in.

Except who am I kidding? He's made it clear he cares nothing for my comfort. And he has no need to impress mere mortals. He's basically a king in this syndicate.

He certainly lives like one. The dining room is as lavishly decorated as the rest of the club. I've never seen fine china, but I have no doubt I'm eating on it right now. Human luxuries like this are hard to come by, and I push the remnants of my dinner around my plate so I can examine the pattern that runs around the edge. Few delicate things survived the nuclear fallout that ripped down the Veil. The fact that Wotan has them in his possession means he's even more powerful than I thought.

He pours us both another glass of wine. It's my third or fourth, which is probably why I feel bold enough to ask, "Why did you do it?" I look up from my plate. "Why did the Myth creatures help rebuild after the war?"

"Maybe we're more altruistic than you think."

"I don't think that," I say flatly. Every Myth establishment in the Hallows exists to prey on humans.

Wotan runs a fingertip around the rim of his glass, his expression contemplative and his eyes downcast. He's quiet for so long, I think he's going to ignore me. But then he speaks, and for once the bite of sarcasm is missing from his voice. "No one ever thought the Veil would fall. We never planned for that possibility. When it did, we quickly realized we had enough power to either mend it or leave it and repair this world." He lifts his gaze to mine. "We couldn't do both."

Surprise parts my lips. "If you had raised the Veil again—"

"This plane would have perished, along with every human in it."

It's a heady knowledge to swallow, and I have to wonder how many people know it. I clear my

throat. “Why not let us die? You could have lived behind the Veil as you always had.”

A smile touches his lips. “Mortals are irresistible to us. Annoying, but irresistible. Your lives burn briefly but brightly, like a burst of fireworks in the sky.” He hums low in his throat as he gazes at me. “Impossible to look away.”

Heat prickles across my nape. With my stomach full and my head buzzing with alcohol, it’s hard to remember I can’t trust him—or that I don’t even like him. At the moment, the only thing I can remember is how he made me feel. How he took his time prepping me before he fucked me. How he chose me at the Ball.

“We lack for entertainment,” he rumbles now. He pushes his plate back and gestures toward me. “You read fortunes, yes? Is that not what a Cassandra does?”

“Yes,” I say cautiously.

“And you’re good at it.”

“I... It’s an unreliable power.” Although, my ability has grown stronger over the last few years. It’s not information I’m interested in volunteering. Not to him, anyway.

He sits back and unbuttons the top button of his shirt. It’s a sexy gesture—and a power move. His pulse throbs in his thick neck. His tattoos gleam and appear to writhe in the candlelight. “Read my fortune,” he demands. “Let’s see what Fate has in store for me, hmm?”

It’s not a request. And of course my gift doesn’t spring into action. No visions come forth, as they sometimes do. No shadows huddle just out of reach.

But there are ways to force my second sight to cooperate. “Give me your hand,” I tell him. “Please,” I tack on hastily.

He extends his arm. A silver cufflink winks at his wrist.

“May I?” I murmur, touching it.

“Go ahead.”

I unfasten his cuff and roll his shirt up his forearm, exposing more tattoos. Then I turn his palm face up and rest it in mine. His skin is warm...and soft. I don’t dare look up. I’m afraid of what he might see in my gaze.

And what I might see in his.

My heart’s pounding, which isn’t a good way to start a reading. Drawing a deep breath, I force my surroundings away. I push my circumstances away, too, letting my fucked up relationship—or whatever it’s called—with this inhuman creature fade from my mind. I push until the only thing left is the air I breathe in and out.

In...and out.

I let my vision go blurry.

And then I draw a fingertip down the center of Wotan’s palm.

At first, there’s nothing. Just the sounds of our breathing and the occasional candle sputtering.

Then I see it. I’ve seen it numerous times over the years. The figure in gray robes glides forward and stops just behind Wotan’s chair. As always, its hood obscures its face.

But now it does something it’s never done before. Slowly, it lifts two skeletal hands and grasps the edges of its hood.

I hold my breath. This can’t be happening. My mother warned me about this.

“Death only shows its face when it’s about to kill.”

My heart thumps painfully. I have to warn Wotan. I can’t just let him die.

I seize his hand in a tight grip and look up. Death still stands behind him.

Wotan tilts his head. “What do you see, witch?” His voice seems to come from far away.

“M-Move,” I rasp. I try to tug him toward me, but I can’t. I’m locked in place, my mind and inner eye seeing more than I can handle. But I still have my voice. “Get up and—”

Death throws back its hood. Where its head should be, there is only an inky, seething blackness.

“*RYDER.*” Wotan’s deep voice jerks me out of my trance. Death evaporates in an instant, the vision turning to wisps that flutter out of sight.

I release Wotan’s hand and sag back in my chair.

“What did you see?” he asks. He’s not like the humans I typically read. There’s no nervous energy about him, no morbid curiosity making him aggressive. His tone is casual, as if he’s inquiring about the weather.

“Death,” I gasp, my heart pounding. I start to rise—

“Sit down.”

“But—”

“*Sit.*” The command is accompanied by a force that slams me into my chair so abruptly my teeth click together.

I glare. And I fight the invisible bonds he’s thrown around me.

His lips curve, revealing the tips of his fangs. “So determined,” he murmurs. “Do I need to teach you another lesson about what happens when you disobey me?”

The threat should scare me, maybe even anger me. Instead, it makes blood pound in my cock. His arm is still stretched out on the table, his thick forearm decorated with all that dark ink. His long, elegant fingers are golden tan against the immaculate white tablecloth. He’s had those fingers inside me. Around me. In my mouth.

My breath hitches. And I realize I want to continue struggling so he’ll punish me again. It’s pathetic—and definitely unhealthy. I stop fighting.

He rolls down his cuff. “You’re a good boy, Ryder. Now, tell me exactly what you saw.”

Dammit. The way he says *good boy* is so dirty. Loaded with filthy promise. Like he knows he can snap his fingers and have me up against the wall. Or over the table. Or his knee.

Fuck.

“I’m waiting,” he says quietly.

“Death.”

“We’ve established that, yes.”

I shake my head. “This was different. It showed its face. Or at least where its face should have been.” I swallow. “This time, there was...nothing. Just a void.”

“It frightened you.” If I didn’t know better, I’d think that bothers him.

“Not for myself,” I say. “I’ve seen Death so many times I’ve lost count. And my mother told me what to expect when it lowers its hood.”

“Mmm. The face of the person it intends to claim.”

My lips part. “Yes. How do you know that?”

He leans forward, and his voice lowers to a rumble. “Death can’t sneak up on me, Ryder.” His voice curls around my name, lifting the hair on my arms. “If you summoned your visions a thousand times, you would see the same.” He settles back in his chair and shrugs, a hint of a smile teasing his lips. “My future is unchanging. I’m death to so many, I might as well be Death in truth.”

Not to me. The thought materializes in my head, each letter blazing with electric light.

His smile fades. And for a moment, some of that electricity arcs between us. We’ve never just... talked like this. Right now, we’re almost like equals. Two people sharing a meal. Flirting. Dancing perilously close to fucking for the pleasure of it instead of a form of punishment.

He holds my stare a second longer.

Then he stands abruptly.

And just like that, the sparkling, electric tension is gone.

“I’ve grown tired of you,” he says, his voice raised like he’s making a formal announcement. “I propose a deal.”

“A deal?” I repeat stupidly.

“I’m going to do what I should have done from the beginning. I’ll give you a chance to cross my territory and enter the Wood. If you make it, I’ll never bother you again. But if I run you to ground, I’ll get the truth from you about Sybella. And if I discover you’ve lied to me, I’ll kill you or take your soul.”

It’s a speech that should sound melodramatic and over the top, even for the Myth. But it’s hard not to take him seriously as he looms over me at his full height. I’ve just seen Death slide up to him like they’re old friends—and then leave him unscathed.

No, Wotan is exactly what he says he is. He told me the night of the Ball. I just wasn’t listening.

“Your worst nightmare.”

My pulse leaps in my throat. “You’ve already questioned me about my grandmother. I told you everything I know.”

He puts two big hands on the back of his chair and leans over them. “I didn’t really question you, witch. Not in the way guaranteed to produce answers.”

I stare at him. We’re back to “witch” now. Whatever I thought I sensed between us is gone, if it ever existed at all. I can blame it on alcohol and my own stupidity.

“I’ll get the truth from you whether you will it or not,” he says. “When I hunt you tonight.”

CHAPTER 11

WOTAN

I watch Ryder's expression morph from disappointment to sadness to anger in the span of moments. He was so open just now, so conversational, as if we were lovers and equals, not prey and Master of the Hunt.

Now his pretty features are screwed into an outraged expression I've seen any time he feels wronged by me. It's irritating how utterly endearing I find that look to be.

In fact, I saw that look the night of the Ball when I claimed him as my boon and stroked his cock against the wall. Even thinking of it now gets me hard. I could have had him that night but I didn't. I thought about it for weeks afterward.

Ryder balls his fists at his sides. He's had several glasses of wine, and I suspect I'm about to hear more sass out of him than I'd like. I've killed men for less snark than this witch looks poised to deliver. "You don't have to hunt me, Wotan. You could just let me go."

I grin. "It doesn't work that way, witch. There are rules. There are *always* rules." Somewhere in the depths of my mind, a helpful devil whispers that I should have been following the rules all along. Instead my lust for Ryder Connelly is getting in the way of answers. I've toyed with him long enough. I don't develop feelings. I can't. And I certainly can't develop feelings for a powerless witch who's being used as a pawn.

A dalliance with Ryder puts not only the Earth Syndicate at risk, but all of the Hallows as well. The Resistance could be a threat with the right backing, and Sybella could easily be that backing. To put a cherry on top of this shit sundae, there's the awful fact that Ryder is too good to be true—too kind, too sensual, too sweet.

All of that realization smashes its way through my brain as I sneer down at him. Having him here, sharing a meal, it bordered on domestic, a word that's never been used to describe me.

Ryder leaps upright and smashes an angry fist on the table. The bone china shakes as a fork clatters to the floor. "Why didn't you just let me get to Sybella in the first place? Maybe you'd have answers, Master of the Hunt. Why even play all these fucking games?"

He has an excellent point. Why drag him back and forth and play around with torture? The reason is simple—I wanted to. There's a secondary reason that lingers below the surface of those predatory thoughts. If I'd hunted him earlier, I would have either killed or killed and enthralled him. But I wasn't ready to end Ryder's life.

He's angry, so angry, and it causes my dick to rise in my pants, pressing painfully against the back of my zipper. I cross the small space between us and shove him into his chair. Sliding onto his lap, I grip his chin so he's forced to look up, but unable to move under my heavier weight.

I lean in to brush my lips across his. Ryder's mouth falls open, his breath hitching—I'm absolutely

certain he's thinking of the times I've pleased him with my own lips and teeth and fangs. I need to dash his hopes for good. Entanglements in my line of work are dangerous, and I need to be sure what Ryder's presence in my world means. The safety of my syndicate hangs in the balance, and syndicate power is delicate at best.

"You crossed my Wood without asking, witch. You took your life into your hands. It isn't just my duty, it's my pleasure to do whatever the fuck I want with those who try to undermine my authority here."

"I was summoned." His tone is defensive, but there's an undercurrent of anger in it, too. That's the wine talking, but it sounds good on him. I can almost imagine us drinking together, and fucking our way through his anger for hours before we simmered into something slower, deeper. Gods I want to fuck him like that.

The reality is I need information about what Sybella is doing, and Ryder has that information. Torturing him didn't get me what I needed. So tonight I am forcing my hand. When I hunt and catch him, my magic will demand I either kill or claim him. And if I claim him, I will read every memory in his mind. I'll put my mark on him, and he will never be able to leave.

My answers are somewhere in Ryder's subconscious, and I will have them.

I adopt a bored tone. "I wanted to fuck you, witch," I let disdain leak into my voice. "I took you. I tasted you. And now I'm done with you."

"But..." The look on Ryder's face tells me how deeply my words cut him. I might as well slide the knife between his ribs now. He wears every emotion on his face, lips parted as green eyes focus on me, begging me to say something, anything. To give him any indication that I'm not serious.

Instead I let out a disdainful laugh, hopping off his lap and leaning against the edge of the dining table. "If you got it in your head that I'd keep a powerless witch around as anything other than a pet, you were mistaken," I press. Stepping my thighs out wide, I taunt him with what he'll never taste again. "Do you know how the Hunt works, witch?"

Ryder's mouth snaps shut, but he slowly shakes his head.

I click my claws together as if this conversation bores me. It's clear from his posture that Ryder is clinging to the edges of both his sanity and a desperate need for self-preservation.

"When I hunt you, there are only two possible outcomes. The first is that you make it through the Wood to Sybella's coven. It's unlikely on a good day, and you have already failed to do so once. The second is that I will run you to ground and take your soul."

I don't bother to mention the third option—claiming him as a mate.

It's not a real option for me because it can't happen.

Ryder grits his jaw, lifting his chin a little higher. I'm shocked anew at the depth of strength he exhibits when faced with almost certain death. Just as I was surprised when he read my future and tried to help me.

Shaking my head, I cast aside the warmth that generates in my chest. I grab him by the back of the neck, yanking him out of the chair. He falls against my chest, a devastated expression on his handsome, angular face. Even now, there's a hint of hope in the way he looks at me. For a long, tense beat, I stare into those green eyes.

But I break the spell, using my grip on his neck to propel him toward the door. I'm more forceful than necessary, keeping him next to me even as he resists. He stumbles once, but I manage to keep him upright as we move through hall after dark hall.

When we exit Cauchemar into my private courtyard, he gasps.

"Wotan, don't do this."

“It was always going to come to this, witch,” I say as I shove him away from me. The city’s lights, a mix of candlelight and unreliable electricity, play across his face. In their glow, his eyes are every shade of green from the palest to darkest. I could get lost in those eyes if I let my desires guide my choices.

I press my lips together and whistle. Ryder wheels around as a midnight-black horse with red eyes emerges from the shadows of the wood that lies just outside the courtyard. The horse crosses the stones and stops in front of me, lips curled up, dark fangs poking out of its mouth.

Ryder takes a step away from the horse, no doubt remembering the way Rune dragged him here behind a very similar steed. Was that just days ago?

I glare at the pretty witch. “Get on. I’ll give you a short start before the Hunt begins.”

Ryder gulps visibly, his throat bobbing, I wonder how good it would feel to bury my fangs in that vein as I fuck him? Godsdamn this intense attraction. It serves no purpose other than to distract me. Which is likely exactly what Sybella intended when she sent him to first the Ball, and then the Wood.

When Ryder makes no move toward the horse, I grab his shirt and yank him to the mount’s side. Leaning down, I grip his waist and toss him up onto the ebony stallion.

“Oh fuck,” Ryder gasps, threading his fingers through the horse’s long black mane, using his knees to grip. “Wh-Where’s your horse?”

“I don’t need a mount, witch.” I chuckle, dipping my voice low and reveling in the way the sound pulls goosebumps to his skin. My predatory senses begin to rise and overtake my usual focus. I narrow my eyes as I observe my prey.

Ryder’s heart pounds hard, the scent of fear rolling off him. My muscles tense automatically, ready for this evening’s hunt. I’m a nightmare monster, waiting in the shadows for my prey to make a mistake. I will eat Ryder alive.

In the black of night, he looks gorgeous and so fucking pure on top of my horse. Guiding the horse’s head, I turn it toward the forest as I resist the urge to look up at the pretty witch.

“Wotan,” Ryder whispers, his voice begging, pleading for a reprieve from what I’m about to do.

Ignoring him, I slap the animal hard on the rump, watching as it takes off. Ryder throws himself over the horse’s neck as they shoot off into the darkness.

Closing my eyes, I count. I’ll give him a ten-second head start. But the reality is that nothing escapes me in my Wood.

I listen for the clamor of the horse’s feet through the underbrush. I hear Ryder cursing under his breath. Even from here, his heartbeat is audible to me. I count ten long seconds as I hunch down, preparing to sprint after him.

I am the nightmare of these woods. I am the Master of the Hunt.

And Ryder Connelly will never escape me.

CHAPTER 12

RYDER

The world whips by in a blur. A full moon shines overhead, casting a soft glow over the city. I barely notice. There's nothing soft about my desperate race through the streets. The beast under me is fast, but I know in my gut it's not fast enough to outrun Wotan.

Tonight's dinner was revealing in more ways than one. Not only did I learn I mean less than nothing to the Master of the Hunt, I discovered he's been holding back during our encounters. He pinned me to that chair without the slightest bit of effort, overriding my will and making my body a prison. He could have been doing that this whole time. Instead, he put his hands on me. Roughed me up and fucked me.

And it was all a means to an end. *My end*, apparently.

The horse's hooves pound the cobblestones, and one thought echoes in my head over and over.

He set me up.

Maybe even as early as the Syndicate Ball. He was always going to hunt me. Like a true predator, he toyed with me, batting me around like a cat with a mouse. How he must have laughed as I writhed and begged under his touch. Maybe that's why he preferred fucking me from behind. It was easier for him to keep a straight face that way.

My eyes burn, and I lean farther over the horse's neck. *There are always rules.* Wasn't that what he said? I have no idea what kind of rules govern the Hunt, but there's got to be some justice, right? In the stories of the Myth, a pure heart counts for something. I'm not aiding the ridiculous Resistance. I've been honest every time Wotan questioned me.

Except that isn't *completely* true. I haven't lied outright, but there are things I've kept to myself. Like how I saw Rune at the Ball. I was prepared to tell my grandmother about that. I've also attempted to bargain with the vampire. Never mind that it hasn't proved successful. I intended to escape. To deceive.

I was stupid to think that could have ever worked. There's no place I can run where Wotan won't find me.

My heart thumps painfully. Wind tears at my hair and clothes. I either make it to the Wood, or Wotan catches me and rips my mind apart to get the information he wants.

And once he discovers I've been less than forthcoming, he'll kill me. Maybe I lied, but he didn't.

The Wood looms ahead. The wall of trees and gnarled branches is darker than the night around it. Through it lies safety—or at least a temporary respite from certain death. I can reach it. I'm so fucking close.

A piercing howl splits the night. It goes on forever, trilling up and down and coming from every direction.

Terror shivers down my spine. The sound is eerie, and it resonates in the most primitive part of my mind. Deep in the tangle of synapses in my brain, an alarm blares a single warning: *DANGER*.

I grip the horse's mane and dig my knees into its ribs. *Faster*. The beast obeys, its hooves hardly striking the ground. Behind me comes the sound of the Hunt—deep snarls and menacing growls. I don't dare look over my shoulder. Something tells me I don't want to see what's snapping at my heels.

The horse hurtles toward the Wood. I can almost feel leaves slapping at my face. I lean forward, as if I can propel the beast over the threshold—

Something slams into me from the side and sends me flying. I hit the ground hard. Pain explodes in my shoulder. *At least it wasn't my head*, I think dumbly, and then I'm kicked onto my back.

A thick fog swirls. Where the fuck did that come from? I blink, seeing stars and wondering if they're real or if this is just my body experiencing trauma.

The fog parts. Wotan stands over me, but he's different now. My breath hitches as I take him in. He's still tall and muscular. The tattoos and amethyst eyes are the same. But he's...*more*. Bigger and more menacing. His ears are tapered to points, and his fangs descend past his lips. Ribbons of black shadow slide around him. As I stare up at him, his face smears briefly before righting itself.

"Like the first time," I hear myself murmur. His face smeared at the Ball. But he's not wearing a glamour now. It doesn't make sense. But nothing else does, either. And, anyway, I'm going to die.

He kneels and places a big palm on my chest. His skin is hot, and it makes me realize I'm chilled everywhere else. My teeth are chattering. When did that happen?

"I d-didn't make it t-to my grandmother's," I tell him. I've lost. Ruined everything. I'll never get a chance to prove myself to the coven. My mother isn't going to have a legacy now. It'll die with me. "Fuck," I gasp.

"Hush."

His tone is so much gentler than the rest of him. I wonder if he knows it—or if he does it on purpose. Another way to disarm me.

His purple gaze bores into mine. "We begin," he says.

And he flings my mind open and delves inside.

My back arches off the ground. Speech deserts me. I'm incapable of resisting. I'm helpless to do anything but endure as he peels me apart layer by layer, turning me inside out so he can read me like a book.

Memories and thoughts fly around my skull, untethered and completely outside my control. My life parades before me in flashes. There's me sitting on the back steps of my parents' small cottage. We were happy there, but of course it didn't last. There's my mother dead on the ground, her red hair spread around her like blood. There's me in the slums of the Hallows, my ribs visible through the thin fabric of my shirt. There's my first fumbling attempt at sex—a sweaty, rushed encounter that happened when I was still trying to figure out what I wanted.

I don't want Wotan to see it. There's so much I don't want him to see—so much I've buried. But my wishes are irrelevant as he keeps digging. He flings open the drawers in my head and dumps the contents on the ground.

My father's smile. A bike I rode for a few weeks before it was stolen. Jasper tossing me a bag of pixie dust. Sybella standing in my shop, her lips curved in a sneer as she stares at my crystal ball. The slim, golden wedding band that circled my mother's pale finger. Wotan's eyes glittering in the candlelight.

It's all there. Every part of me. He can see anything he wants.

The secrets my clients told me. The futures I glimpsed in the shadows. The human male who

pushed me against a wall in the bowels of a bar and thrust his cock against my ass. I didn't crave helplessness with that man.

I don't want to relive the memories, either, but here they are. The unforgiving press of his muscle. The way my skin crawled. The elbow I threw, and the burst of hot breath against my cheek when I nailed him in the gut.

My lungs burning as I ran home and then puked on my bathroom floor.

It's too much. Wotan is seeing way too fucking much.

It hurts like hell, but I draw in enough oxygen to tell him. "Get out of my fucking head!"

Like a tap cut off, the flow of memories stops.

I sprawl on the ground, my chest heaving.

He sits on his ass, hard, like he lost his balance. We stare at each other.

There's nothing left of me. So maybe this was a kindness, after all. Because right now, death is easier than the prospect of getting up and pretending I can be okay again.

He swallows. The slightest frown forms between his eyes. It can't be regret. He's not capable of that particular emotion.

"Go ahead," I rasp. "Kill me and get it over with."

CHAPTER 13

WOTAN

I dug deep into Ryder's soul—too deep. I flayed him open for my perusal, and now he's glaring up at me. Still too fucking stupid to be afraid of me.

A voice in my mind whispers how that isn't really true. He was terrified during the hunt, and even more destroyed when I broke his mind open.

But he was courageous to even attempt to run, knowing that not a single being has ever passed through my woods undetected. This was only going to have one possible outcome—his death—yet he did it anyway.

He rises to his knees, green eyes glittering in the beautiful, low light of the night forest. Around us there's not a sound. Not a bird, not the wolves that hunt these woods when I am not present. Not even the bugs chirp as I stare down at Ryder. He grits his teeth, lifting his chin higher, almost daring me to say something about what I saw.

Instead, my mind darts between his memories, sorting and picking through the very best and worst moments of his life. A short but happy childhood, the tragic ripping away of his parents, and his mother's last whispered words.

Then there's nothing but poverty and pain and hunger. And godsdamn, but now guilt stabs at me for keeping food from him when I first imprisoned him. It was needlessly cruel to a male who is already intimately familiar with the gnawing ache of a hungry belly.

Ryder's expression morphs into bitter, simmering anger. "Now what, Master of the Hunt? You've dumped my entire life out of my head and onto the ground. What do you make of it? I was telling the fucking truth, Wotan. The whole time!" He's shouting now, fists balled at his side as tears begin to stream down his cheeks. His full lower lip quivers as I revisit the scene where he barely fends off a human male. That man might have forced him sexually—he tried to.

If I ever come across that human, I'll rip his head from his body. It fills me with inexplicable rage that someone would try to hurt Ryder that way.

Even though you've done it yourself, a helpful voice whispers in my head.

A gasp leaves my mouth as doors unlock in my mind, pieces clicking into place as my cock hardens in my pants. It presses uncomfortably against the fabric as I meet Ryder's gaze.

I can't let Ryder Connelly go.

He's my quarry and I ran him to ground—I have only two options now—kill him or bind him to the Wild Hunt by stealing his soul. I started tonight knowing I would have to take his life, yet I find myself unable to imagine killing him. And taking his soul? Watching those beautiful eyes flash milky white before he's under my thrall? I can't imagine that either.

There's a third option, an option that's never occurred to me about anyone. I could bind him in

partnership. I can make Ryder Connelly my mate.

I look at him, bile burning my throat while I grapple with the choices in front of me.

Ryder slumps against his heels, his head falling as a soft sob wracks his shoulders. He gave up everything trying to reach his grandmother, and he failed. He is ready for the justice he expects me to deliver.

I want him so badly, it's physically painful. Even my power aches with the need to touch and comfort and caress. I've never experienced desire at this level, not in all the lifetimes I've lived.

Ryder's green eyes flick up to mine, his tone bitter and dejected. "You planned it this way. You never intended to let me go, did you?"

He deserves the truth after everything I've done to him. I can't resist him. I don't even want to.

"No. I was never going to let you go." Saying it aloud cements what my mind is desperately pushing me to realize. Ryder Connelly is mine in every way two males can belong to one another. It's why I fucked him instead of truly torturing him. It's why I kept him locked in a room, not allowing him to leave. And it's why I hunted him, knowing it would come to this moment.

Even forcing my hand tonight didn't work. Because now, the only option that feels viable is claiming him as mine. He'll never be able to leave or escape me. He will belong to me for the rest of his life, and I to him. It's terrifying.

"I know your truths," I murmur, "I know all of you, Ryder."

"And you're going to kill me," he states, emotionless. "Isn't that the rule?"

There's a heavy pause as I watch his body prepare for its end, despite the vacant expression on his face. His heartbeat thumps rapidly in his chest, his breaths becoming more shallow as he tenses to flee or fight. A muscle underneath his eye twitches, his body pushing anxious energy out of his system.

I fucking hate it.

He is good and kind and real. I'm a being made of nightmares. We couldn't be more opposite. Our power imbalance couldn't be more pronounced. Yet in this moment, I ache to be on my knees before him, claiming him as mine.

"I grant you a reprieve," I announce. I just made up that term, but I can't tell him I'm claiming him. I'm not ready to answer the questions he'll undoubtedly have. All I know is I can't be without him, and this is the only way he can belong to me.

Ryder's eyes flash up to mine in confusion. "I've never heard of that. What is it?" He appears suspicious, probably wondering if this is yet another trick.

Not answering, I reach for him, threading his fingers through mine before I pull him through the forest. He follows silently, and that is when I am truly lost. Because no matter what I do to Ryder, he wants more. His hand slides more firmly into mine as the forest begins to come alive again.

Now that I'm not hunting and killing, the insects sing. Far in the distance, the wolf pack howls. "I never feel at home so much as in the middle of the Wood," I say, pulling Ryder to walk by my side.

"It suits you, being out here," he says quietly. He seems unsure where I'm going with this, but with every step I take, I grow more certain.

We round a bend in the road and come upon a small clearing. Moonlight shines down on the leaf-coated forest floor, and it's then I know my path forward.

Turning to Ryder, I bring my hands to the buttons of his shirt and undo them, one by one. His green eyes are on mine as I slide the shirt down his muscular shoulders, letting it drop to the ground. The look he gives me is hopeful, so fucking hopeful, and I need more of it. I want that look to morph into lust and then red-hot ecstasy. I want his smiles. I've seen them in his memories, and I need them like I need the air that refuses to fill my lungs when I look at him. I want him to have new memories,

pleasant ones where he's not grief-stricken or terrified.

Dragging my fingers carefully down his stacked chest, over the dips and valleys of his abdominal muscles, I tug at the waistband of his pants. He shifts to help me slide them down his muscular hips. They hit the ground as I watch his half-hard cock begin to harden.

"You want me," I chuckle, cupping his balls in both hands as I roll them and tug softly, eliciting a soft moan from his throat. This is easy, touching him, making him feel good. It distracts me from what I'm about to do.

"You're an asshole, but you know your way around a man's body," he grumbles, looking away for the first time.

Gripping his chin, I correct him. "I know what I'm doing around *your* body. I want your hands clawing at the earth as I take you. I want you howling with pleasure as the moon shines down on us. I want you *here*, in my kingdom."

He hisses out a needy breath at my tender words, and I worry for a moment that he'll deny me, that he'll reject what he doesn't even know I'm offering. His eyes fall to my clothing.

"Too many clothes," he mumbles, ripping my shirt down the front. I help him shuck it off, dragging my pants down next. My hard cock bobs between us as he whines. Precum leaks from my tip as he reaches out, pinching the bulbous head softly between the fingers of one hand.

The mix of pleasure and pain sends a stabbing sense of knowing through my mind.

Mine mine mine is a refrain that repeats in my brain. Ryder's hand slides up my cock, gripping it before tugging slowly, dragging his rough palm down my length.

A deep, animalistic growl rumbles out of my chest as I grip his throat, forcing my thumb into his mouth. Ryder's eyes flash with challenge at my dominance, but his tongue swirls around the pad of my finger. My mouth falls open on a pant. Everything about him feels so good.

His cock swings around as he sucks hard on my thumb, his long shaft rubbing against mine.

"I'm going to have you right here, little witch," I snarl, pulling my thumb from his mouth. He opens it like he's going to speak, but I yank him to me hard. The breath leaves his lungs in a whoosh. His chest hits mine as I hover my lips over his mouth, reveling at the way his parts for me.

"You look so fuckable like this." My voice dips monstrously low, power rolling in waves around us as Ryder's cheeks flush a ruddy pink. His chest is hot against mine as I reach down and fist our cocks in one of my hands. I stroke them as I brush my lips along his, laughing at how fucking needy my little witch seems.

I circle the tips of our leaking cocks and coat us in precum. Ryder's hot length spars with mine as he throws his head back. The need to bite and bond with him hits me so hard, all I can do is let out a menacing roar. The thrill of the chase has given way to a possession so deep, I'm choking on it.

"Wotan, please," Ryder cries out. There are still tracks down his cheeks from the tears he shed earlier. Leaning over him, I kiss them away, trailing my tongue underneath his eye, down his cheek, and along his jawline. His breath is soft as a slight moan builds in his throat. Moving to the other side of his face, I kiss those tears away too, and then I look at him—truly look at him.

His face is full of wonder and surprise. I've never been tender a single moment in my life until I met him. Knowing what that means has me untethered from everything else. Right now, there is only Ryder. There is only my depthless need for him.

Slicking my mouth over his, my tongue seeks his warmth.

And then I fucking devour my pretty little witch.

Our kiss is a clash of lips and fangs. I'm not careful enough, because I nick his tongue, and Ryder's coppery blood spills into my mouth.

“Fuuuuck...” he cries out as I lower us to the forest floor, my hips jerking against his as I plunder his mouth. I could come like this, I realize, with nothing more than my tongue on his and our dicks rubbing together.

My body heats as I cover him with my larger figure. Groaning into our kiss, I flip so he’s riding on top of me, parting just long enough to reach around and grip his ass, spreading him wide as he rocks along my length.

“Ride,” I command as I shift up onto one elbow, not releasing my grip on his ass. Instead, I slide it further back, and I’m big enough to tease my fingers into his pucker as he moves.

Our shafts are coated in slick precum, forming a sloppy lube between us as he arches backward, his balls dragging along my shaft as I moan from the sensation. He rocks forward again, his thick length coating mine in his seed. And then he grips our cocks and jacks us off in one hand as he rides me.

I throw my head back as unspeakable pleasure spreads from my core through my limbs. My spine is so tight I feel like it’ll crack to pieces when I finally get inside him.

Ryder’s cries grow louder as the sloppy sounds of us fucking his hands echo under the midnight sky.

“Yes!” I roar. “Harder, witch!”

He releases a possessive snarl and shifts to his knees, guiding my cock to his ass. Ryder seats himself one throbbing inch at a time. I greedily watch his body gobble up my cock as I slip inside him.

“Mine,” I snarl as he drops fully onto me with a grunt.

I don’t wait for him to get comfortable. I’ll never be that male. Instead, I dig my heels into the cool earth, reveling in the feel of the dirt and leaves beneath me. Bringing my hands to Ryder’s hips, I buck my own, sending him up off my cock before I yank him back down.

His head falls back as he screams into the night, his ass clenching tightly around me. The heat of his ass and our combined juices has me feral with lust.

I pant as I fuck up into him again and again, until he’s a writhing mess of need, my name falling from his lips like a prayer.

I’m fucking lost to this witch, so godsdamned lost. I pull him to me, grip his jaw, and force his head to the side so his neck is exposed. Opening my mouth wide, I sink my fangs into the side of his neck, clenching my teeth hard around a claiming bite.

The scent of his blood and the spurt of his orgasm send me into my own. In my mind’s eye, a bond snaps and pulls tight between us. Heat barrels down my spine as I line Ryder’s ass with thick, sticky ropes of cum.

He screams into his own orgasm, coating my stomach in hot seed as ecstasy batters us together.

My eyes roll back as a second orgasm tears through us, outmatching the first. Ryder’s ass locks up around my cock, his chest heaving like a bellows.

When ecstasy fades, he falls forward onto my chest, his lips tickling my ear. “What was that?” he sighs, his breath warm against my skin.

I open my mouth to tell him he now belongs to me, that we’re bound permanently together until one of us dies—that’s what my “reprieve” means—but the words fade away. I claimed him, but I didn’t tell him that’s what I was doing. He thinks he got a reprieve from being killed. I haven’t taken his soul, but we’re bound together by a bond that’ll only die when he does.

I’m not ready to share that, somehow.

Instead, I rub my hands up his back as my dick slips out of his ass. It bobs between his cheeks,

sticky and wet as he lets out a well-pleasured sigh. I need more of that, more of those happy and well-pleasured sounds.

I should be disgusted with myself, but I don't fucking care. "I knew you were the male from the ball the moment you walked into Cauchemar," I say instead. It's the truth, just not the truth I should be telling him.

Ryder laughs into my ear. "I figured out pretty fast you were the champion, if we're sharing."

We fall into a comfortable silence as I drag my claws up into his hair, massaging his scalp before sliding them down his back. Ryder shudders and looks up at me. "I know you hide your true form from everyone. Will you show it to me?"

His request is so fucking reasonable after what just happened, but brick walls spring up around my magic. Ryder seems as drawn to me as I am to him, but some secrets are better kept hidden. I am an amalgamation of nightmares, and after what I did to him tonight, I don't want to show him that.

Shaking my head, I move him gently off me, grabbing our clothing. "Up, my pretty witch. Your grandmother is expecting you."

Ryder stands, hurt in his eyes. "After all that, are you asking me to spy on Sybella?" He glances over his shoulder. Sybella's coven lies just around the bend, through a dark gnarl of trees.

Despite what I did with him, I have an opportunity to find out what that witch is up to once and for all. I can't waste that, no matter how much I want Ryder. I decide I'm comfortable sharing that much with him.

"I may have granted you a reprieve, Ryder," I say gently. "But it's very likely your grandmother is collaborating with the human Resistance. If that's true, I need to know. The Resistance has never posed much of a threat to the Syndicates, but if a powerful witch coven were to align with them..." I don't say anything else, hoping Ryder can read between the lines.

If Sybella Rathmore were to align herself with the Resistance, it could quickly become a problem for all the syndicates.

Green eyes narrow as he appears to think it over. Eventually, he nods. "The humans have never managed to get together much of a Resistance. Why is it such a big concern?"

His question is reasonable. I pull on my clothing as I consider how much I want to tell him about this topic.

I decide the truth is a good place to start. I can't share everything about what happened tonight, but I can be honest about this.

"Humans and their old technologies upset the delicate balance of magic in our world. They can never be allowed to have power again. They would put the entire Hallows at risk. For that reason, all Syndicate rulers keep a close eye on that. That is why I need you to go to your grandmother. Anything you can find out will help me keep the Hallows more or less peaceful."

Ryder's expression is contemplative as he looks off into the black forest.

"Go," I encourage him, stalking off into the darkness with my clothes thrown over my shoulder. "I will find you after."

He's silent as I disappear into the shadows. The urge to trail him to his grandmother's front door is strong, but I stop myself. It's not the usual instinct of the hunt. I don't want to hurt him or kill him. I want to protect my innocent, kind witch, and I'm not sure I'm ready to acknowledge what that means, despite what we just did.

CHAPTER 14

RYDER

Now that I'm finally visiting my grandmother, the only thing I can think about is turning around and walking straight back to Wotan.

Because what the fuck just happened? I've studied the Wild Hunt, and let's just say none of the stories I read ended with Wotan's quarry riding the hell out of his dick in the middle of the forest.

But that's exactly what I did. I'm going to be sore tomorrow. Worth it? Absolutely. And the way we were so at ease with each other afterward? Him running his fingers through my hair. The two of us laughing and coming pretty damn close to cuddling.

Those aren't things people do when they're fucking just to get off. Those are things you do when you're invested.

So why did he send me away?

I stop and look over my shoulder. Nothing. Just empty forest drenched in moonlight. An inner voice that sounds suspiciously like Jasper's murmurs, *What were you expecting? Wotan holding a bouquet of flowers?*

A snort escapes me. I'm more likely to get Rune holding a knife to my throat.

The thought of Rune jolts me. Wotan turned my mind inside out. He scraped the thoughts from my skull like someone cleaning the inside of a pumpkin.

And yet he said nothing about the vampire—or about me trying to strike a deal with the mercurial male.

A shiver slides down my spine. Is Wotan truly in the dark about Rune? Or is sending me to the Wood just another setup? Maybe that sex was just one more power play.

Frustration nips at me. No matter what I do, I can't seem to figure him out. But standing in the middle of the forest isn't going to help, so I might as well make the most of the opportunity I've been given.

I start forward again, and it doesn't take long until the Wood comes into view. It's as forbidding as ever. The trees' thick, black trunks glisten in the moonlight, and I try not to think about whether it's blood soaking the bark. I brace myself for some kind of creature to burst from the shadows and halt my progress.

But it doesn't happen. Not this time.

Instead, the knots of low-hanging branches part and slither aside. Leaves flutter, and trailing vines scrape the ground. The movement is sinuous—almost sentient. When it ceases, there's a narrow path bathed in green light.

Not quite the welcome mat I hoped for. Then again, my grandmother has her reputation to uphold.

My heart pounds as I enter the Wood. When I get a few steps inside, movement behind me makes me whirl. The trees shiver and slide shut once more, sealing me in.

Great.

There's nothing to do now but keep going. So I do, my shoes crunching over the leaf-strewn forest floor. The trees are silent. Watchful. It's as if the air itself holds its breath, its attention fixed on my progress. I'm not sure how far I walk, but it's long enough for sweat to dampen my temples and trickle down my back. Just as I start to wonder if I'm walking in circles, a house comes into view.

Although, *house* isn't a big enough word to describe this place. *Mansion* doesn't really work, either. No, this is an estate—a sprawling, three-story stone complex that looks like it was built a thousand years before humans set foot on this continent. I've never seen it before, but I know it well.

It's where my mother grew up. My earliest memories are full of her stories of the Rathmore Coven and the home of the Witch of the Wood. This is the seat of my grandmother's power.

But at the end of the day, it's still a house. Stone wolves on pedestals flank the front doors, which bear knockers in the shape of screaming, agonized faces.

Iron knockers. Creatures of the Myth aren't welcome here.

As I contemplate my next move, the doors swing open.

My heart skips a beat. The stillness around me swells, until the silence is almost like a physical force. It's so uncomfortable I have to move, which is almost certainly what it—or whoever controls it—intended.

I climb the steps with blood pounding in my ears and my instincts warning me this is a *trap, trap, trap*. No one emerges to greet me, so I keep going, stepping inside a dimly lit foyer. I get an impression of heavy, claw-foot furniture and golden candelabra.

A whisper of movement behind me.

Pain explodes in the back of my head.

And then I see nothing at all.



I WAKE IN BED WITH THE WORST HANGOVER OF MY LIFE. MY HEAD POUNDS. EVERYTHING IS BLURRY, and my stomach feels like it wants nothing more than to exit my body and live a life unencumbered by my shitty choices.

Wait. Fuck.

This isn't a hangover.

My memory hurtles back just as my vision clears.

There's another ceiling above me—and it's not the one at Wotan's club.

Because I'm in the Wood. *At my grandmother's house.*

Mindful of the jackhammer in my skull, I sit up slowly and probe the back of my head with tentative fingers. There's a knot, but the skin isn't split. There's no crusted blood in my hair. I *know* I didn't fall when I entered the house. Someone struck me—and then dumped me here.

It takes a second for my surroundings to slide into focus. When they do, my heart rate kicks up. The pain in my head becomes unimportant.

I'm in a bedroom, but it looks more like a shrine. Every piece of furniture is covered with photos of my mother. Silver candelabra hold dozens of sputtering candles, which dance and give the illusion that my mother is moving within the frames.

I swing my legs off the bed and stand. My legs are shaky, but I don't give a shit as I stumble to a dresser painted with wildflowers. Everything in the room is girlish this way, from the quaint four-poster to the ruffled curtains on the window. There's a writing desk in the corner with a desktop cauldron on its glossy surface. A faded poster displays the periodic table of elements, along with the extra ones discovered by witches ages ago.

But none of these things merit more than a cursory look. The photos are the real treasures of the room.

My mother is displayed at every age, from a smiling baby with a mop of red curls to a gangly adolescent in black robes to a smiling young woman with a spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

I lift one frame in trembling hands and gaze at the same pair of green eyes I've seen in the mirror all my life. In this one, she holds a leather-bound grimoire embossed with golden moons and skulls.

"That was taken just before she ran off with that man," a familiar voice says behind me.

I whip around. Immediately, dizziness washes over me, and I wince at the bolt of pain that fires through my head. "Fuck," I mutter, steadying myself against the dresser. It bumps the wall and rattles the collection of frames.

Sybella looks anything but grandmotherly as she gives me a withering look. Her faded red hair is woven into a riot of braids that cascade over her shoulders. She wears a fitted jacket traced with blood-red embroidery that probably costs more than everything in my closet. And my apartment.

I clutch the frame to my chest. "You bludgeon all your guests?" I demand.

Her expression is impassive. "You've been spending a lot of time with the Master of the Wild Hunt. Why is that, I wonder?"

Well, Grandmother. It's complicated, you see. He's a toxic asshole, but he fucks like a god, so can you blame me for going back to the well?

"You've been spying," I say.

"Answer the question."

"Or what? You'll hit me again?"

Whispers ripple through the room.

I catch my breath, my ears pricked for more sounds. They come—murmured spells spoken in the arcane language of witchcraft. The words flow in layers of female voices. I lack the magical gifts to use this kind of power, but I understand it well enough. There are spells for lovers and enemies... health and sickness... good fortune and ill will. On and on it goes, magic rushing toward its intended recipients. Or targets. The voices swell and then fade, and the room is quiet once more.

Sybella watches me closely. "The coven does its spellwork in the evenings when electricity is less likely to interfere with the magic."

"How nice that you're on a schedule."

"Tell me about Wotan."

Gods, she's like a dog with a bone. If she knows I've been spending time with him, does she know about his dungeon? Or what happened at the Ball? I wouldn't put it past her to have someone tail me. A spy to watch her spy.

At the same time, I have to wonder just how much Wotan knows about *her*. Did he suspect she'd attack me as soon as I stepped over her threshold?

Hell, maybe he was counting on it. In the forest, he claimed he was giving me a reprieve. Perhaps that was just a kind way of saying he wanted someone else to do his killing for him. I won't delude myself into thinking he loves me or anything ridiculous like that. But is it possible he couldn't bring

himself to murder the male he fucked twice and called *baby* in the heat of the moment?

Anything is possible, especially when it comes to Wotan. I'm no closer to figuring him out than I was when he plastered me against the cathedral wall and made me see stars. He likes to fuck me. I don't question that for a second. But that doesn't mean he won't use me—or dispose of me—when it's convenient.

Sybella's gaze lowers to the frame I'm still holding against my chest. "Your mother had a soft spot for the Myth."

All thought of Wotan's potential treachery flees. I'm a desert when it comes to my mother. If there's information to be had, I'm ready to soak it up. I inject as much respect into my tone as possible. "What do you mean?"

"She was powerful," Sybella says, her green gaze moving over the photos behind me. "And she was curious. Gwendolyn wanted to learn all there was to know about magic, and she knew there are some gifts only the Myth possess."

"Did she study with them?"

Sybella looks at me, and now her gaze is cold. "My daughter abandoned her studies, just as she abandoned this coven."

"She fell in love," I fire back.

"*Love.*" Sybella's voice drips with condescension. "Is that what you're doing with the Master of the Wild Hunt? Falling in love?"

My face heats. I've never harbored any doubts she knows all there is to know about my sexuality, but I could have lived a thousand lifetimes without discussing it with her.

I lift my chin. "You sent me to the Ball. If you despise the Myth so much, why give me a mask and send me into the heart of the Hallows?"

"You can get to know your enemy without befriending him. Or fucking him."

My cheeks blaze. "It's none of your business what I do." I push off the dresser, ignoring the throbbing in my skull as I face off with her. I'm taller, and perverse pleasure streaks through me when she has to tip her head back to meet my gaze. "Don't pretend you ever intended to give me a place here," I say. "We both know that's not true. I'm the weak link, right? The powerless grandson you've always longed to sweep under the rug."

"You are my heir. And you're not powerless. There is a place for you in this coven if you're willing to earn it."

My heart skips a beat. Unless she's a better actress than I thought, she's serious. If I wasn't clutching my mother's photo, I'd pinch myself.

"So," she says briskly, as if she didn't just casually tell me the one thing I've always longed to hear. "What did you learn at the Ball? Or should I ask what you've learned in Wotan's club?"

"I..." My throat has gone so dry I have to swallow a couple of times before I can even think of speaking. Plus, I need time to come up with something to say. I can't tell her the truth about Wotan, which is that I like him a lot more than I thought I would.

And that even standing here now, in this place I dreamed of visiting, I can't wait to get back to him.

The moment the thought enters my mind, I know it's absolutely true. And it's so powerful, I have to stop myself from gasping as the weight of that revelation sinks in.

I can't say any of this to my grandmother, but I have to give her something.

"He thinks you're working with the Resistance," I say. There. That's neutral enough. It also has the benefit of being true.

Sybella scoffs. “I am the Witch of the Wood. This forest protects our people from the Myth. None enter here without my permission. Why would I jeopardize that by aiding ordinary humans?”

I don’t have a response for that, nor do I miss the way she said *our people*. Ours, as in hers and mine.

Because she considers me—a fortune-telling Cassandra—heir to the most powerful coven in the world. Have I gotten her wrong all these years? She said I had to earn my place. Maybe she left me to fend for myself in the Hallows as a sort of trial by fire...and hunger and poverty and pain. It’s not exactly the kind of upbringing good grandparents generally offer. But then, Sybella isn’t the milk-and-cookies kind of grandma.

It’s a revelation almost as powerful as my feelings for Wotan.

She studies me, her expression thoughtful. “Perhaps Wotan’s affection for you is useful, after all.”

My lips part. *Useful*. A step down from powerful, but I’ve never really craved that.

No, I’ve only ever wanted to be part of something bigger than myself. To belong. To serve the coven and walk in my mother’s footsteps.

“Go back to Cauchemar, Ryder,” Sybella says. She turns and goes to the door. Before she walks through it, she looks back. “Keep the photo. May it remind you where your true loyalties lie.”

CHAPTER 15

WOTAN

Angry tension simmers under my skin as I hover at the edge of my courtyard, awaiting Ryder's return. Whatever Sybella summoned him for can't possibly take long—I know from his memories that she's barely ever bothered to give him the time of day, so it's not like she'll invite him into her fold now.

I wonder if his connection to me might change that. She has spies the same as I do. The witches are a devilish, prickly bunch. Sybella in particular loves to deal in information. It's not a stretch to assume she's aware Ryder has spent time with me.

Which now has me pondering if the reason she initially summoned him was to tempt me. And if the reason for her summons might change now that he and I have connected so completely.

Of course, Ryder is unaware I bound him, and Sybella wouldn't be able to determine that either. She doesn't know how deep the connection goes.

That makes Ryder a dangerous weapon in Sybella's arsenal.

I think all this through as I pace outside Cauchemar, awaiting his return. The chilly winter air kisses my skin as I close my eyes and listen to the forest.

There. Slow footfalls.

Slipping through the dead and darkened trees, I slide like a nightmare around bend after bend until I see him.

Ryder picks his way slowly through the forest, green eyes focused on thorny roots that crisscross his path. I stand under the shadow of a gnarled oak and watch him. Even the way he moves is beautiful.

It's as if he can hear me thinking, and he looks up, a sad smile crossing his features. I stalk out of the shadows to him, pressing my big chest to his as I grip his throat. My eyes greedily drink him in. At first glance, he appears to be whole and unharmed.

When the fuck did I become so obsessed with this witch?

I've never bound anyone, I've never ended a hunt without either killing or taking a soul. I don't know what binding Ryder might produce in me, aside from the soul-deep knowledge that I want the only pain he ever feels to come from me in our bedroom.

His dark lashes flutter against his cheeks as he stiffens and takes a step backward.

I draw my knuckles softly along his angular cheekbone. "You look tired, little witch. Shall we go to your shop and talk?"

I may be drawn to Ryder, but I can play the political game at the same time. I want Sybella to see me with him, to think that whatever she's playing at will work. And I want her to wonder if Ryder is going to share something he shouldn't. Learning everything I can about him is a reasonable way to do

that. I haven't visited Ryder's shop before, but I want to do it now, and I want Sybella to see it.

Ryder tilts his head. "You want to see where I live?"

"Why not?"

"It's not very impressive."

I shrug. "I don't need to be impressed."

Ryder pauses, appearing to think it over before he nods.

I sense he's a little confused and has questions, so I remain quiet as we move slowly through the Wood toward the Free Zone. Ryder doesn't ask me anything, though. As we walk, I wonder what, exactly, happened at Sybella's coven.



AN HOUR LATER, WE STAND OUTSIDE A RUN-DOWN, SHODDY-LOOKING MAGIC SHOP WITH A WOODEN crystal ball sign over the door.

"It's not much," Ryder says, hesitating as he watches the way I assess his home.

I look up the street in both directions. Everything here screams poverty and lack of care. Half a block up, a dirty pixie snorts a shocking blue powder, groaning in pleasure as he slumps over into the road.

A gaggle of human women round a corner and wave at Ryder. "You open for a reading?"

"He's not," I growl, straightening to my full height as the girls stop short. Ryder turns to look at me, but I don't meet his gaze. Instead, I let my power roll off me in threatening waves. One of the humans shudders and shoos her friends the other way.

As I watch them go, Ryder sighs.

I turn to him. "What?"

His mouth tightens. "You scared them."

"They were bothering you."

"They were customers."

I hate that Ryder feels like he still needs to work. That's all done now that I claimed him. But, of course, we haven't had that conversation so he isn't aware. I'm irritated at the women and also myself. Since when was I up for playing house with a witch?

Frustration over the situation fills me as I snap at him. "It's an insult to your magic to debase it this way. Open the door."

"What magic," he mumbles under his breath, shoving a key in the aged lock and pushing his way through a door that barely hangs on its hinges. I duck through the door after him, stalking around the room as I assess his life.

I hate it, this place. I hate the dirty, threadbare rug. I hate the fake seeing orb on top of his rickety dining room table. I fucking hate the moth-eaten curtain that barely separates his bedroom from this front area.

"Someone could look right in here while you sleep," I scoff, yanking the curtain aside to reveal a rumpled, musty bed.

Ryder sighs. "I'm going to make some tea, do you want some?"

I growl and cross my arms as I hover inside the small shop that doubles as his home. Irritation skates across my skin as he rounds the dining table, rubbing at the back of his head.

An awkward silence falls over us while he fills an ancient-looking teapot and plugs it into an

electrical outlet. He crosses his fingers. "Please work, please work, pl—" A light on the teapot pings red, and he lets out a happy hum.

"You could set this whole place on fire, using electricity like that." It's known to be unreliable.

"Listen," Ryder counters, scratching at the back of his head again. "This is life in the Free Zone, Wotan. This is—"

"Why do you keep touching your head? Is something wrong?" My voice is gruff as I round his dining table and grip his shoulder, turning him from me.

"Nothing's wr—"

"Silence," I snarl, relishing the way he crosses his arms, his foot tapping in irritation against the aged wooden floor. I run my hands up the back of his head, and when I reach a spot just behind his right ear, he hisses in pain. His knees buckle as I turn him back toward me. "She did this?" The question rises from my chest as something between a growl and a snarl, my voice monstrously low.

Ryder shrugs. "I don't know who did the hitting, but they knocked me out and then dragged me deep into the coven. I guess they didn't want me seeing anything and reporting back to you."

I smile at that. It's confirmation of what I already know. Sybella has me in her sights somehow. Good. I hope she's watching now.

"I've got a headache, I need to sleep it off. Can we pick this"—he gestures to my entire body—"up another time?"

Suddenly, I've had enough of my witch hurting. I bend and sling him over my shoulder. When he yelps, I lay a hard smack on his ass. "You'll never be done with me, witch." Stalking past his ratty bed, I shove through a door I assume to be his bathroom. This room, at least, is clean. I set Ryder back on his feet and turn toward the tub, looking for oils. Finding a small bottle, I draw a bath, pouring oil into the water as he watches in silence.

"This is awkward," he grumbles.

"Why?"

"The Master of the Hunt is drawing me a bath."

"And?" I face him, taking two steps and pressing him gently against a tiled wall as I unbutton his shirt. His nipples pebble when I slide it down his muscular arms. His pants go next, and the whole time, my eyes are locked with his. He's naked before me, but I still don't look away. How long will he hold my gaze? I'd like to know for sure.

His eyelashes flutter against his cheeks as he looks at me. When he finally glances away, it's to turn the water off at the tap.

"Get in," I command, leaving the bathroom and returning to the kitchen. There's a teacup on his countertop, and I fill it with water, smelling around his cabinets until I locate the tea.

It's not lost on me that I'm doting. And it's not lost on me that underlying this tenderness is a thread of darkness. I want Sybella to see this and let down her guard long enough for me to win this little war she's starting.

It's a happy benefit that I get to care for Ryder at the same time.

What does that even say about me?

I don't examine it too closely as I return to the bathroom and hand him the teacup.

He takes it with a wary look and sips, humming as he rests against the side of the tub.

I kneel and grab the soap, filling one palm as I begin to rub his shoulders and arms. I massage the soap into his skin as he watches me, seemingly wary of what I'm doing. My hands make their way diligently down his chest and stomach as I bring my eyes up to his.

Ryder's chest heaves slightly, his nostrils flared. "You want to fuck."

It's not a question, it's a statement of the obvious, so I smile.

Underneath the water, his cock bobs softly up against his lower stomach. I slide my hand down as a grin splits my face. "My greedy witch," I murmur.

Ryder groans and rocks his hips as I roll his balls between my fingers, kneading them gently before giving them a light twist. He hisses but hands me the teacup, which I set aside. His hands come to the tub's edge as he lifts one leg out, propping it on the side to give me full access.

"Up on the edge," I command, patting the chipped porcelain as green eyes flash. But he obeys, shifting up onto the tub's edge with his legs splayed open.

I sit back on my heels to admire him, the way his skin is so pale I can see the blood running through blue veins along his inner thigh. There's that tight nest of curls at the base of his length. He already drips precum for me.

Grabbing the bar of soap, I stroke it along his cock before lathering my hands well. I grip him in both palms and pull. Ryder's head falls to the side as he groans. My hand makes rhythmic, short work of his cock while the other slides behind his balls, playing with his pucker. He shifts forward, granting me access.

The first aching moan leaves his mouth as he gasps, his breaths short while goosebumps trail down his neck and shoulders.

Ryder makes a choking sound, then shoves his hips hard to meet my hands and spurts sticky cum all over the edge of the tub.

I growl as I massage his throbbing length all the way through orgasm, pushing him into a second one as he pleads for mercy.

I'd like nothing more than to bite him right now, to bind him again and tell him what I've done. But a conversation needs to be had about that, and this is not the place to do it.

CHAPTER 16

RYDER

Wotan doesn't stop touching me after I come. He stays put, his broad shoulders forcing my legs wide. His hand is loose on my dick, and his amethyst gaze runs from my spent cock to my heaving chest. I've made a mess of his hand and the side of the tub. I wait for embarrassment to strike, but it doesn't. Some needy, insistent part of me *likes* this—the vulnerability of being nude and open before him while he's wrapped in leather and holding my dick like he owns it.

The bulge between his legs reminds me he hasn't taken any pleasure for himself.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice emerging low and husky.

He stands and opens the cabinet under the sink, and I get to experience the distinctly odd sight of the Master of the Wild Hunt rummaging through my toiletries. He produces a washcloth and gives me an expectant look. "Get in the water."

"You're not giving me a bath."

"Now, or I'll drown you in it."

I heave a sigh, but I sink back into the water, which is on the uncomfortable side of tepid.

He kneels beside the tub and drags the washcloth over my stomach and dick, wiping carefully. His tattooed forearm glistens with water, and the sight of all that sinew and muscle moving over my abs and shaft has me stiffening again. He plunges the cloth under the surface and tends to my thighs and balls, too, and then swipes between my cheeks, making me shiver. "I got you all dirty," he murmurs, and the combination of his thorough ministrations and the charged words makes me catch my breath.

I swallow as I meet his gaze. "I wouldn't mind if you got me dirty again."

He stares at my cock, which is semi-hard and bobbing eagerly on the surface. "You're injured."

"I'm feeling better." Is this really happening? Me trying to cajole a reluctant Wotan into fucking me? Because he's worried about my head?

Purple eyes lift to mine—and gleam with seductive promise. "You want me inside you, Ryder?" he asks, his mouth dangerously close to mine. "Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Yeah," I rasp. "I want you inside me."

We stand at the same moment, and we're kissing even as I step clumsily from the bath. He catches me before I can slip, and I feel his lips curve against mine as he turns and walks me backward through the door and into the darkened bedroom. He keeps kissing me as we tumble onto the bed, making the threadbare mattress shriek in protest. His weight presses me down, and one leather-clad knee works its way between my thighs.

Suddenly, I need more of him. "Clothes," I gasp between kisses. I find the bottom of his shirt and tug. "Want to...feel you."

He grunts and rises, pulling his shirt off as he gets to his feet. For once, I'm glad I'm too poor for proper window coverings, because there's just enough moonlight for me to appreciate the wonder of Wotan stripping himself bare. Within seconds, he's gloriously nude and hard as a rock, his thick, veined shaft heavy against one powerful thigh. He glances around, his brow furrowed. "Lube?"

"Nightstand," I say, pointing to the stack of wooden crates that serves as that particular piece of furniture.

He fetches the small bottle I keep there, then returns and covers me once more. Our mouths connect again, tongues thrusting and dueling as our chests meet and our lower halves grind against each other. Without realizing what I'm doing, I reach up and snap the elastic binding his hair. Black waves fall around my face and tickle my shoulders. I slide my fingers through the inky mass, stroking along his scalp.

His chest rumbles against mine. It's a contented sound—almost like a purr—and it's my turn to smile against his lips as I allow myself to think maybe I've tamed him a little. He's a wild beast, but he's *my* wild beast.

He kisses down my jaw and neck, dragging the tip of one fang over my skin and making me shiver. One big, warm hand slides between my legs and cups my balls.

"Yes," I groan, spreading my legs. When his hand slides lower, I shudder, anticipation coiling low in my stomach.

He pulls away, and the loss of his heat and weight has me growling and reaching for him. "Ah ah," he scolds, catching my wrists and pressing them above my head. He holds me there easily, laughing when I thrust my hips up. "Stay like this," he orders, leaning down and nipping my jaw. "Arms above your head." He sits back on his heels, as if giving me a chance to disobey.

I don't. I stay put, my body splayed out and my dick leaking and throbbing with need.

"Good boy," he murmurs, stroking his shaft. He drizzles lube over his length, then coats his fingers until they're glistening.

My breath shudders in and out. I want nothing more than to touch myself, but I don't. Because I want *this* more. I want to be at his mercy. To obey his commands. I want to follow all his rules and exceed his expectations.

He flings his dark fall of hair over his inked shoulders. "Show me where you want me."

White-hot lust streaks through me as I pull my knees to my chest, putting myself on display. And when his breath hitches and his eyes go heavy-lidded, the lust spins into satisfaction. I love being under his spell, but I might just love knowing he's under mine even more.

He strokes his fingers over my hole, teasing around my entrance.

"I'm ready," I gasp. "Don't want to wait."

For once, he's apparently in agreement, because he lowers himself until our chests are touching and our hearts pound against each other. Gaze locked with mine, he lines up his dick and pushes slowly inside.

"Gods," I breathe out, a tremor shivering through me as the burn gives way to exquisite fullness. The pressure builds as he sinks deeper...and then he hits exactly the right spot, and I moan helplessly.

He drops his head to my shoulder and growls against the pulse throbbing in my neck. "So fucking tight." He puts his lips to my ear even as his lubed-up hand finds my balls and squeezes gently. "And so swollen. I bet you wish you could move your arms right about now."

"Fuck you," I gasp, my hips lifting of their own accord. "Stop teasing me."

His laugh tickles my ear. He sits up, grabs me around the thighs, and hauls me more firmly against him. His cock sinks impossibly deep, and we both moan. All humor leaves his face as he begins to

move. He keeps his arms around my thighs and pumps his hips, giving me slow, rolling thrusts. “Stroke yourself,” he orders. “Work that gorgeous cock, but don’t come until I say.”

I whip my hand to my dick comically fast. I’ve been leaking so long, there’s no need for lube. My fist flies easily, and it feels so fucking good I almost forget his order not to come.

He keeps on fucking me, his arms tight around my thighs and his cock plowing into my body. His heavy balls slap my ass. The bed shudders and knocks against the wall. We’re both breathing heavily. Fuck, we’re both panting. Whatever tight rein he keeps on himself has snapped. His face is more open than I’ve ever seen it, his mouth slack with lust and his eyes full of raw emotion.

Need. It’s need I see there. From the moment we met, I’ve been drawn to him, even when I resented it. But now I know it’s been the same for him. He was just better at hiding it.

I grasp his wrist—another point of connection between us.

Our gazes lock.

And suddenly, this isn’t fucking anymore. It’s something altogether different.

He pumps his hips faster, jolting me with every thrust. “Come on,” he grits. “Let’s get you there.”

My hand flies faster, bliss barreling toward me. “Thought...you’d...never...ask.” My release rips through me, my muscles seizing as I spurt onto my stomach. “Fuck!” I cry. “Oh fuck, oh fuck.”

His response is to tighten his grip and fuck me even harder. His hips pump wildly as he fastens his gaze on my glistening stomach. He goes like that for a few more moments, then loses his rhythm. The room fills with his grunts and the sharp crack of his balls slapping my ass. Then he roars and shudders, his hips jerking wildly as he unloads deep inside me.

When he’s done, he collapses next to me. My bed is far from Wotan-size, and I’m immediately squished. He solves that problem by yanking me to him and rolling us to our sides. He pulls my ass to his hips and slings a heavy arm over me. Soft lips nuzzle my neck. Stubble scrapes my skin.

The Master of the Wild Hunt is...cuddling. After a moment, gentle lips brush the knot on the back of my head.

My heart squeezes as he plants slow, easy kisses around the wound.

“Wotan?” I venture.

He tenses. For a second, I think he’ll leave the bed. But then he tugs me more tightly against him. “What?”

“I think you’re softer than you let on.”

A beat passes. Then he sighs into my hair. “Only with you, witch. Don’t you dare tell anyone.”

I smile in the dark. “I won’t.”

CHAPTER 17

RYDER

It's the morning, but Cauchemar is already seething with bass and bodies. I stand on the catwalk and watch humans and others mingle. Behind the bar, a bartender with at least six arms slings alcohol—and probably other things.

I lean against the railing, grateful the lighting is too dim for anyone to see what Jasper would undoubtedly call my “bedroom eyes.” Although, he usually follows it up with “and bent-over-the-nearest-surface ass.”

I don't have to imagine what he'll say when he finds out I returned to the club with Wotan, and that I plan on staying as long as he'll let me. We didn't talk about anything long-term this morning, but I sense things are trending in that direction.

Which is...complicated. I still haven't fully processed my conversation with Sybella.

I haven't told Wotan about it, either. Once again, *too busy fucking*.

And that's a potential problem. If a relationship—or whatever this is—between us is going to work, we have to be honest with each other. The Wood isn't going anywhere. Sybella certainly isn't having more children.

Which means unless she finds a magically gifted orphan to adopt, I'm her heir. Just how am I going to strike a balance between sleeping with Wotan and earning a permanent place in the coven?

I'm not. And I can't. Even taking the barely-there Resistance out of it, I can't be the heir apparent to the Rathmore Coven *and* the guy who fucks the Master of the Wild Hunt. I can only imagine how “evening spell time” at grandma's house would go down if anyone found out Wotan bathed me and tucked me in bed.

Well, fucked me in bed.

I groan and hang my head. “I am so screwed,” I say under my breath. I stay that way for a moment, then straighten, intent on finding a mirror. I'm not exactly vain, but it would be nice to know I'm not sporting a haywire eyebrow hair or anything. I'm steps along the catwalk when something below catches my eye.

Rune sits at the bar now. There's a male with him.

Neither looks happy to be there.

Rune stares straight ahead as the male leans close and speaks animatedly. Whatever he's saying, the vampire doesn't like it. Even from this distance, I can see Rune's hand on the bar curl into a tight fist.

The male continues speaking. He's bigger than Rune. A lot bigger.

My heart rate picks up. The vampire seems more than capable of handling himself, but something about the way the other male is talking—and the way Rune is just sitting there taking it—makes

nausea burn my throat.

Without being totally conscious of what I'm doing, I go to the stairs. I'm down them in seconds, and I weave through the crowd with my heart pounding and my gaze locked on the scene unfolding at the bar. As I near, Rune's glamour flickers. His hair goes from short and brown to long and pale.

The male at his side gives no reaction. But as I near, he puts a thick-fingered hand on Rune's arm. The vampire stiffens.

I walk faster, sidestepping a laughing female holding a drink with a tiny umbrella in it. The bar looms ahead. The male's voice is pitched low, but I'm close enough now to hear him.

"It doesn't matter what you want, Tower," he says, a rough edge of anger in his voice. "Your duty is to the family."

Rune turns his head sharply and glares at the man's hand on his arm. "Don't presume to lecture me about my duty."

Tower?

The man's face is in profile, so I see his expression darken. "Listen here, you entitled little fuck —"

"Ryder Connelly," I say, stepping forward.

Both males swivel. Rune's eyes go wide with surprise before he quickly covers the look with his usual cold expression.

The other male frowns. "Excuse me?"

I extend my hand. "I'm Ryder Connelly. I don't think we've ever met."

The male looks at my hand like it's a venomous snake. "We haven't." The second he stops speaking, his glamour flickers.

Another vampire. I meet Rune's gaze and raise a brow.

He returns my stare. As the tension grows, he gives a subtle shake of his head.

Message received. I move to the bar and plop down on a stool next to the stranger. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"No."

I signal the bartender. "A vodka tonic for my friend here."

As the bartender hurries off, the stranger turns fully toward me. "What the fuck is your problem?"

I seize his wrist and tap my power. In my peripheral vision, a female vampire embraces a man. Behind her, a portrait of the stranger without his glamour bursts into flames.

He jerks his arm away, and the vision disintegrates. The bartender sets a drink in front of him.

I cluck my tongue. "Your girlfriend is cheating on you."

Confusion clouds his features, which flicker between his real self and his glamour.

"Oh," I say, my voice full of mock sympathy. "She's your fiancée, isn't she?"

His expression goes from outraged to disbelieving to worried.

I push the drink toward him. "This will help."

He lifts it, then stops as he seems to realize what he's doing. Fury crosses his features, and he slams the glass down, shattering it.

"Hey!" The bartender bustles forward, three of his fists clenched. "Not in here, pal. I'll bounce your ass so hard you'll land in the Hudson."

The man shoves his stool back, almost sending it toppling. He rights himself and looks at me.

I shrug. "Tough break."

"Fuck you."

I let my eyes roam down his body. "Sorry. Not my type."

He looks at Rune, who regards him steadily, as if daring him to act out further. With another muffled curse, the male spins and stalks away.

I wait for him to leave the dance floor before turning to Rune. "He seems nice."

"He's not," Rune says flatly. He swivels back to the bar and starts picking up the shards of glass.

I scoot around and help him, dropping the tiny pieces in what's left of the highball. "Is Tower your last name?"

He hisses. "It's not a name you need to remember."

I still for a moment, and we share a look. His eyes are as cold as ever, but there's a hint of fear under all that ice.

I continue picking at the glass. "All right." Pain streaks through my finger, making me wince. "Shit." Blood drips down my finger and splatters on the bar.

Rune sucks in a breath. Fast as an adder, he grabs my hand and dips his head. A hot tongue flashes over my skin.

"What the—?" I jerk my hand back, but he's already released me.

His glamour wavers as he leans so close I think he's going to kiss me. Instead, he hisses in my ear. "What the fuck are you doing, Ryder, coming in here with dark magic in your veins?"

"*What?*" I gasp. I try to pull away, but his hand clamps down on my arm, holding me in place with superior strength.

"There's a curse in your blood," he whispers. "The most potent I've ever tasted. It's no harm to you, but anyone who bites you will die quickly. Even an immortal."

Shock holds me rigid. Immediately, the back of my head starts throbbing. "Sybella," I rasp. Witches can embed curses in the blood. Some are even powerful enough to be passed from generation to generation.

Rune releases me and eases back, a deep furrow between his brows. "You didn't know."

I shake my head. My heart races as the implications filter through my shock. My grandmother didn't have a change of heart yesterday when she declared me her heir. She doesn't want me in the coven. She knocked me unconscious and planted a magical bomb in my blood.

And fool that I am, I did exactly what she wanted. Wotan could have bitten me last night.

If he had...

My throat is instantly dry. "Will you tell him?" I ask Rune.

The vampire gazes at me for a long moment. Then he glances over his shoulder as if checking for eavesdroppers. When he focuses on me again, his face looks suddenly younger, the hard veneer giving way to a vulnerability I've never seen from him. "You've kept my secret," he says. "I'll keep yours."

"Thank you," I rasp.

He lowers his voice. "But you need to do something about this, Ryder. Right now, you're a walking time bomb. It will only take a few drops of your blood to kill."

"All right."

He slides off the stool and walks away.

"Wait," I call. When he returns, I gesture between us. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You tasted me just now. My blood. If it kills any immortal, how are you still alive?"

His smile is fast. And humorless. "I'm not like other immortals." He walks away for good this time, his tall form parting the bodies on the dance floor like a shark cleaving the sea.

My blood pounds in my ears as I watch him go.

Bomb. I'm a walking curse. And Wotan is my intended target. My grandmother betrayed me—and

set me up to betray the male I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with.

What the fuck do I do now?

Someone taps me on the shoulder. When I turn, the bartender is using two hands to polish a glass. Another hand is holding a slip of paper. "Got a message for you." He hands me the paper. "Boss man wants to see you in his office."

"Thanks," I say.

Fuck.

CHAPTER 18

WOTAN

My body tingles with a mixture of anticipation and dread, knowing Ryder will come to me in my office. I need to come clean. Binding him means he can't leave me, that our souls are now partners. It means I'll never take another partner as long as I live, and he can't either. The only step I haven't taken with him is a blood exchange that would make him immortal like I am.

There's a lot he doesn't know.

That's why I called him to my office after leaving him to his own devices most of today. I needed time to think about what passed between us in his shop. I'm unaccustomed to the feelings of guilt that burrow in my chest, eating me up from the inside when I think about claiming him without so much as a conversation. I took that choice away from him because I was selfish and couldn't kill or enthrall him. He's too perfect. Too sweet. Too godsdamned pure.

A guilty sentiment is new for me. I'm the Master of the Hunt—I take what I want when I want. Considering another being's state of mind has never crossed mine. Not in the Old Country, and not here on this side of the Veil.

I pick up my favorite knife, tossing it in the air and letting it thunk into my desktop. The noise it makes when it sinks into the wood calms me somehow. It's violent and deadly and it feels right to me.

My office door opens and my heart leaps in my chest.

Gods, I need to calm the fuck down. Who would ever have thought the Master of the Hunt would find himself acting like a giddy schoolgirl at the prospect of seeing someone?

Ryder strides quietly into my office, giving me a tense smile as he crosses the extravagant carpet and stops just past my extra chair. His green eyes flick down to it, and I realize he's waiting for my fucking permission to sit. My dick throbs against the back of my zipper, imagining him asking for permission to do so many other things.

I clear my throat, crushing the nerves down deep in my belly. They won't serve me for the conversation I'm about to have.

"Sit down, Ryder." My tone is gentler than usual, and he gives me a wary look before his lips curve in a half-smile. He rounds the chair and sits. I hate that he reaches one hand up to rub at the back of his still-tender head.

For a long moment, he holds my gaze, and he's so breathtakingly innocent and pure looking that I ache to slide across the desk and tarnish him. I could break him, and take him for mine—

Except I've already done that, he just isn't aware.

Ryder cocks his head to the side. "You look good like this. In charge, I mean."

He's attempting polite conversation, but he seems off-kilter and uncomfortable. That just adds to my own feelings of the same.

There's an awkward silence, and I run my hand up the back of my neck, massaging the muscles as I consider the best way to share what I did. Instead, I open my mouth and say, "You asked me a question recently, and I didn't answer it. I want to do that now."

His slight smile grows broader, and his green eyes spark a little. Gods, I don't want to know what it'll look like when I tell him the truth and that spark fades. Will he feel betrayed? Violated? A flush creeps up the back of my neck.

Ryder gives me another wary look, shifting in his seat. "Okay... "

I'm fucking this all up. He's nervous and I'm nervous, because the reality is that if he doesn't want the mate bond, he can deny it. It'll fray and snap and I'll be left without him. It's the first time he's had this level of control over me, and I am fucking terrified.

I stand up and round my desk. I lean against the edge and cross my legs at the ankle, and I watch his green eyes drift to the bulge at the front of my pants. Everything dominant in me preens under that attention, under the knowledge that he wants me so damn much, all the time. Maybe there's hope for us...

I should tell him about the claiming. I really should. He deserves the truth. But then I remember I'm an amalgamation of nightmares. I tarnish everything I touch, and I'm not ready to sully him with the knowledge of what I did.

Instead, I meet his gaze. "You asked me once about my true form, and I wasn't forthright with you about that."

Ryder sinks further back in his chair. He doesn't seem wholly ready to hear what I have to say, but I barrel on.

"I am nothing," I say quietly. "I don't have a true form. In the Old Country, on the other side of the Veil, I was invisible. Ephemeral, although it's been a long time since then."

The expression on Ryder's face is a mixture of confusion and curiosity, and I'm desperate to fill the silence that hangs heavy between us.

"Over the centuries, I slipped through the Veil to hunt. As I did, I began to take on the looks from humans' nightmares. I can reproduce every nightmare I've ever collected. I remember every single one."

Ryder opens his mouth as if he might say something, but then snaps it shut. He motions for me to continue.

"When the Veil ripped, I grew more powerful. There were so many humans here willing to trade their precious possessions for a little power. I took more souls than I can even count, and gathering those is how I came into my rule as Master of the Hunt. This plane was absolutely ripe for the taking."

Ryder pales. "Have you taken mine? Is that why I feel the way I do around you?"

Nerves jangle in my chest again. This hesitance, this terror that I took his soul, is exactly why I haven't told him the truth. The look of fear on his face is everything I need to know. He's afraid I took something he can't get back.

And he's right.

He's not ready for the truth about our claiming. He might never be. And I know one thing for sure now. If I tell him the truth, he'll run from us. And then he'll discover he can't really run from me, and he'll hate me for taking his choice like that.

I haven't answered his question yet. "I haven't taken your soul. You feel just as I do."

"How do you feel?"

"I don't care about your link to Sybella," I admit. "I want you to stay here with me." It's the closest I can come to admitting what I did. Maybe if I can make him as crazy about me as I am about

him, he won't leave when he finds out what I did.

Ryder sucks in a breath and presses backward in his chair, his muscles tense. "Live here in the club forever? How will that work?"

I can see his mind is awash with possibility and anxiety and a hint of fear, and I want to banish all of that. I want his answer to be a hearty yes.

Reaching down, I grip his throat and pull him roughly against my chest, dragging the tip of my nose along his. Our mouths brush and his lips part for me. But instead of taking his kiss, I tease him with my tongue, licking my way along his plump bottom lip.

I guide his head back even as guilt rears its ugly head. I shared a huge secret with him, but I didn't share what I meant to. If I was a good male, I'd tell him the truth right now. But I'm not and I've never pretended to be.

I kiss my way down the strong column of his throat, pulling his shirt to the side to suck at the skin along his collarbone. Bringing my lips to his ear, I growl softly. His body jerks against mine, goosebumps peppering his skin as a needy sigh leaves his throat.

"Say you'll stay," I press. "I need to hear it, my pretty little witch."

Ryder gasps, dragging my face back to his as he takes my mouth. It's tender and desperate and reverential. He's soaking in my strength and telling me he's mine without saying the words. His tongue probes mine as our kiss turns frantic. My hands are all over his body as I open my mouth to sink my teeth into his neck.

"No," he says suddenly. "There's something I want to do." His green eyes flash with desire. When I don't say anything, he sinks to his knees. I sit on the edge of my desk and spread my legs to make room for him. He works my pants open, and I lift my hips so he can pull them down. I'm on fire watching his eyes go heavy-lidded with lust, his pupils blown wide as my cock springs free of its confines.

"You're beautiful like this," I growl, stroking a stray auburn wave away from his cheek.

Pink tinges his cheeks, but there's a determined glint in his eyes as he suckles my cock head. I grasp my dick and pull it away from him, only to bring the tip back to his mouth. I rub my leaking slit over his lips, tracing a wet path along the bottom one.

"Allow me," he murmurs again, a supplicant at the altar of pleasure only I can provide.

"Take it," I hiss, guiding my cock into the wet heat of his mouth.

Ryder sucks hard, hollowing his cheeks. His dark lashes flutter as he moans around me. I resist the urge to flip us and fuck him into the desk. He wants this, to worship me, to please me. And I want to give him that.

For the first time since I met Ryder, I want to feel taken and accepted by him. I want to sense that connection, and I'm well aware that claiming him will continue to deepen that bond I'm feeling.

It's uncomfortable and perfect all at the same time.

A moan of pleasure rattles in my chest as Ryder surges forward, taking me deep into his throat. When he growls around my length, my balls tighten and I begin thrusting. Claiming him fundamentally changed the connection between us, and I'm on the knife's edge of exploding, knowing he's mine and he wants to give me this.

Moments later, I fill his mouth with so much cum, he chokes and sputters around it. My seed dribbles from both sides of his mouth as I reach down and slap his cheek softly with my cock.

Ryder turns his head and licks up the underside of my dick, sucking at the sensitive skin just under the spongy head. I let out a possessive growl and reach for him, pulling him up into my arms.

Stalking across the office, I lay him down on the soft rug in front of my fireplace, ripping his shirt

from his body and I flip him onto his stomach.

“Stay, witch,” I whisper, straddling him as I kiss my way down his muscles, feeling myself harden again as I rub against his ass.

Ryder sighs, gazing into the fire as I lavish affection on him. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, but I can’t stop doting on him.

He’s mine, I growl inwardly. I’ve never worried about what a human thought. I’ve never felt anxious about lying to one. Whatever is happening to me is ridiculous, but it’s the bond—I put myself in this situation.

There’s no such thing as a fucking reprieve from the Hunt. The only options are death and claiming, and I have never failed to kill someone I hunted. Not once in all the millennia of my rule.

Until him.

Which means I have to tell him.

I will. And when I do, I have to hope he’ll forgive me for not being honest. I have to hope he’ll still choose to stay when he finds out I took his freedom.

CHAPTER 19

RYDER

I didn't intend to fall asleep on Wotan's rug.

But that's exactly what I did, I realize as I jolt awake. There's no sign of Wotan. Just an empty office and a crackling fire. My boyfriend left me curled up on his rug like a pet.

Boyfriend. Am I...dating the Master of the Wild Hunt? He asked me to stay, and he didn't mean for a night or a weekend. After what passed between us last night, it's clear he wants more than a casual fuck.

He doesn't want sex. He wants *me*.

Somewhere in the back of my head, Jasper's voice chimes in. "*Oh, he wants sex, you dumb witch.*"

"Yeah," I say aloud, "but he actually *likes* me."

Great, now I'm arguing with pixies who aren't even in the room. But I don't need Jasper in the flesh to know I'm right. Wotan *bathed* me last night, for fuck's sake. And the sex we had afterward...

Yeah, that was more than just screwing. He looked like he wanted to chain me to the bed. Not in some twisted game, but because he didn't want to let me go.

How long have I waited for someone to look at me like that?

My heart pounds, and something perilously close to joy rises in my chest. Just as quickly, the bubble of happiness pops. Rune's warning pounds through my head.

"There's a curse in your blood."

Courtesy of my grandmother, who doesn't give a shit about me.

But Wotan does, and right now I'm a living, breathing liability.

I brush shaking fingers over my neck. For a terrifying moment today, I thought he might bite me. If Rune is right, any taste of my blood is a death sentence.

"Shit," I mutter, standing and dragging a hand through my hair. One thing is certain: I can't tell Wotan. Part of me wanted to just before I sank to my knees and sucked him off. For a wild moment, I wanted to blurt out the whole ugly truth about Sybella and the poison in my veins. But I know him well enough now to know he'd charge to the Wood and try to tear the place apart. Hell, he might even bite me just to prove he's stronger than a witch.

Men.

I can't tell him. But I have no fucking clue how to remove the dark magic from my blood. Hell, I don't even know if it's possible to remove it. It's not like I can just slit my wrists and let it drain out.

I freeze in place.

Drain it out. *I* might not be able to do it.

But there's a chance Rune can. He siphoned that male at the Syndicate Ball. Why can't he siphon

me the same way?

Within seconds, I'm out the office door and wending my way through the maze of hallways. By some miracle, I don't see anyone as I make my way to the main part of the club. There's the usual thump of music and tangle of conversation as humans and creatures of the Myth mix among the tables.

I ignore all of it, my sole focus on finding the vampire.

At last, I spot him high up on the catwalk. *Fuck*. I should have looked there first.

More precious seconds pass as I shove my way through the crowd and find the stairs. I rush up to the second level with my heart in my throat, and I arrive in front of Rune with sweat dripping down my back.

"Can you remove it?" I ask, an edge of desperation in my voice.

He doesn't pretend to misunderstand. Glamour firmly in place, he says simply, "You could die."

"Could *you* die?"

"I already told you I'm not like other immortals." He pauses. "Or other vampires."

"What you did at the Ball—"

"We're not going to talk about that," he says sharply. He glances around, then lowers his voice. "But yes, it would be like that."

I don't have to think about it. I want Sybella's magic out of me. I don't care what it takes. "All right."

His brows pull together. "Did you hear what I said, Ryder? There's a real risk with this. I'll have to drain you almost to the point of death."

I consider his words, but probably not in the way he expects. Because I'm not thinking about dying. If I do this, any chance of securing a place in the Rathmore Coven is gone. Not that I ever really had a chance. I know that now. But there was always the longshot dream of proving myself. For as far back as I can remember, that dream kept me alive. No matter how bad things got on the streets of the Free Zone, there was always the chance the doors of the coven would open to me.

Removing Sybella's magic will shut them forever, closing out the possibility of carrying my mother's legacy forward. Of preserving her memory and restoring honor to her name.

But it'll also mean a future with Wotan.

Worth it?

"Let's do it," I say to Rune.



"THIS WILL HURT," RUNE SAYS.

It's ten minutes later and I'm stretched out on my bed with my shirt off.

I raise an eyebrow. "You sweet talk all your victims like this?"

He shoots me an exasperated look. "I wish you'd take this seriously."

"It's gallows humor, Rune." And I'm not joking about that. My throat is so dry I have to swallow a couple of times before I can add, "Since I might die in the next few minutes, don't you think I deserve to know your real name?"

He locks the door and crosses to the bed. "Turn your head to the side. And don't touch me while I'm feeding."

"Your name," I say quietly.

His chest lifts as he sighs. "You are really annoying. You know that, right?" He frowns and,

almost to himself, mutters, “And really fucking perceptive.”

“A lifetime of fortune-telling. I’ve learned to listen.” I park my hands behind my head. Maybe if I pretend I’m not about to lose all the blood in my body, I can trick myself into not freaking out. “And I heard that other bloodsucker call you Tower.”

His frown deepens as he sits on the bed near my hip. Slowly, his glamour recedes. His stunning beauty emerges, and it’s just as dazzling as the first time I saw it. Deep blue eyes. Finely drawn features. That glorious fall of platinum hair. The only thing that saves him from being too pretty is his strong, stubborn jaw and the sharp intelligence that burns like fire in his eyes.

When he speaks now, his fangs are visible below his lips. “It’ll feel good at first and then it’s going to burn like hell.”

My stomach lurches. “Like bottoming but in reverse.”

He flashes another exasperated look.

“Oh, so you’re a top? My apologies. I shouldn’t assume.”

“Ryder.”

“Or versatile. Lucky you, I guess.”

His lips twitch. Then he laughs.

Then we’re both laughing. His is husky—rusty, even, like he doesn’t do it very often.

And then I grab his hand before I even realize what I’m doing. “I’d like to survive this if I can.”

He’s serious in an instant, and he squeezes my hand. “If anyone’s heart is strong enough to withstand it, it’s yours.” Before I can fully absorb the mind-shattering impact of Rune giving a compliment, he nudges my head to the side.

I stare at the far wall with my heart in my throat and Wotan’s face floating in my mind. This is for him. For *us*.

There’s a rustle of fabric. A shadow falls over me and Rune says quietly, “It’s Tower, by the way. Tower du Sang.”

He strikes.

Bliss. Absolute bliss rockets through me. It’s like everything good that’s ever happened to me. It’s all the best food and the sun on my face and a hot shower and the most amazing orgasm of my life.

A groan of pleasure escapes me, which is kind of mortifying. Rune—*Tower*—is an attractive male, but I don’t want to fuck him.

But dammit, I want to fuck *someone* right now. With every strong pull of his mouth, fresh ecstasy bursts inside me. It builds and builds, until I’m gasping and struggling not to lift my hips.

And then it changes.

Pleasure recedes. Like the ocean pulling back from the shore, it rushes away, leaving me scraped raw. Hollowed out. Empty.

Pain snakes through my veins. The tugs on my neck become tugs *all over*—hundreds of tiny ropes sewn into the pulp and sinew of my flesh. Every tug snaps them tighter...and tighter. Dizziness sweeps me. The room spins. I close my eyes, but that makes it worse so I blink them open again.

Nausea burns my gut. The ropes strain but don’t snap. No, they burrow deeper. *Pull...pull...pull*. It doesn’t let up. My whole body is a bruise, and someone is prodding it. Digging in and twisting.

“Ow,” I say faintly. I wish the pull would stop. It’s too much.

But now I’m too weak to do anything about it.

My arms won’t move. I can’t turn my head or even blink. The wall grows blurry. The image of Wotan slips from my mind.

And my veins catch fire.

CHAPTER 20

WOTAN

I've got to talk to Ryder. Too much has happened for me to keep my claiming a secret any longer. Our connection was surprising, but it's undeniable to me. I left him fast asleep on my rug, intending to speak with him later. But I can't wait any longer. His soul calls to mine through the bond we now share—the bond he is unaware of because I haven't fucking mentioned it.

Stalking through dark hallways, I arrive at his bedroom and press my forehead to the door to gather my thoughts. He'll forgive me for taking without his consent. He has to, because he's mine. He is everything good that I didn't know I needed. But I can't begin a relationship on this footing.

For the first time in my entire existence, I am going to apologize. And then I'll drop to my knees if my witch wishes it. I'll grovel for his forgiveness.

I shove my way into the room. "Ryder, we need to talk. I—" Words die on my lips at the scene before me. Ryder lies prone on the bed, his head fallen to one side. His body is limp, too limp. He has the slackness of someone edging quickly toward death.

Next to him on the godsdamned bed is Rune, but this is not the Rune I'm familiar with. This Rune is tall and elegant, with a long swath of white hair. He is otherworldly. And he is a godsdamned vampire. Touching my fucking mate. I saw him in Ryder's memories of course, but I was waiting for the right moment to use that knowledge.

But now he's *touching my fucking mate*.

For a moment, I take in the scene. Rune wipes a droplet of Ryder's blood off his mouth and throws his hands up. "He asked for this."

In a flash I'm across the room, tearing Rune away from Ryder by the hair. I toss him like a ragdoll into the wall, relishing when I hear a bone break. Snarling, I slip in front of him and slam his head against the dark stones, snapping my long teeth in his face.

Death is a heavy presence in this room. He comes for Ryder, who is drained and pale because of the vampire.

Rune struggles against my grip, but he keeps his hands up. I tighten my grip until his pale face flushes purple and the light in his eyes starts to dim. Grim satisfaction spreads through me. He touched my mate. No one touches what's mine.

But Rune's betrayal is a second to Ryder's life.

He touched my fucking mate!

"Wotan." Ryder's voice is a soft murmur, as if he barely has the energy to speak. It is a voice I've heard many times, the voice of someone speaking his last words.

Every emotion I've been burying bursts forth. I'm ready to tear someone, anyone, apart. Even Ryder. Why would he risk this? What possible reason could he have? If Ryder dies, I will rip this

entire building to the ground. And Rune will not survive.

I let go of Rune, who falls to the floor on his hands and knees, one hand gripping his throat. Kicking him aside, I stalk to the bed and pull Ryder into my arms. His head falls back, and I resist the urge to bellow in rage at the twin puncture wounds on his neck. They cover my mark, and I want to rage at Rune and Ryder both for doing so.

“Why?” I demand, my voice harsher than it should be. “Why would you allow this?” My mate is dying in my fucking arms.

Ryder is groggy, a soft smile on his handsome face. “Had to do it to save you,” he whispers. He’s losing energy fast. His green eyes flick to Rune. “Rune, explain.”

Rune slips soundlessly to the edge of the bed. I snarl and clutch Ryder tightly to my chest. Desperation claws its way up out of my throat as Rune gestures to Ryder.

“Sybella poisoned his blood with a bomb meant to kill you. He asked me to drain it away to save your life.”

I blink as I comprehend what he’s saying, and then I scowl down at Ryder. “Why didn’t you tell me?” My voice is gruff and mournful. He did this for me? A memory of Ryder at my feet comes to the forefront of my mind. He knew he was facing an impossible task, that he would have to ask for Rune’s help to save my life.

“I was never all that innocent,” Ryder mutters. “But I am now.” His head falls to the side as his eyes roll backward.

Oh gods, I’m fucking losing him. Panic chokes me as I heft him higher in my arms. Bringing my wrist to my mouth, I tear at a vein and direct the blood into his mouth.

“You’re probably going to regret this, my little witch, but you’ve given me no choice.” My words are bitter and terrified as my blood coats Ryder’s teeth, dripping onto his tongue as I acknowledge that I’m once again doing something to him without his consent.

Perhaps that is simply the way of our relationship. I take, and Ryder gives and gives and gives endlessly.

Rune moves silently away from the end of the bed. I don’t bother to look up at him as I growl. “Try to leave this room and I’ll rip your fucking head from your shoulders.” He stills, watching as Ryder gags on a mouthful of my blood.

Suddenly, Ryder shoots upright, eyes wild as his heartbeat picks up. It gallops faster as his green eyes scan mine. One hand presses flat to my chest, his muscles quivering. It’s as if he’s centering himself by touching me.

“What...? Wotan? Am I okay?”

I give my pretty little witch a grim smile. “Not yet.” For a long, tense beat, I force him to look into my face, to see me for the monster I am. “Maybe never,” I snarl. And then I plunge my mouth into the hollow at the base of his throat, sinking my fangs deep into his neck as I cement the gift of my blood with a claiming bite.

Power strains and pulls between us, and I sense Ryder on a deeper level. Pleasure streaks through my system as his body goes lax in my arms, a groan issuing from his throat.

I sink my fangs deeper, infusing my power into him, causing his body to buck and writhe. He is mine in every possible way now, bound to me forever.

When I release the bite, I grip his chin and force his gaze to mine. “You belong to the Wild Hunt, little witch. You are immortal.”

“It burns,” he whispers, scratching at the wound on his neck. Even now, the glowing mark of the Hunt is visible.

“I marked you.” I stroke the spot as Ryder arches his back. “I marked you *permanently*.” Gently, I nestle him into the pillows. I sit on the edge of the bed, knowing he’s likely to have questions.

“What does that even mean?” Ryder’s voice is somewhere between hysterical and exhausted.

Rune stands to my right at the foot of the bed, not daring to move as I brush the back of my hand along Ryder’s blood-covered chin. It’s time to admit what I came to share in the first place. Normally I wouldn’t do this in front of Rune, but I won’t be letting the vampire out of my sight—not until he answers for touching my mate and covering my mark with his bite.

“I claimed you as mine in the forest, Ryder. And now I have given you my mark.” I meant to be more romantic, more eloquent, when admitting this. I meant to seduce him into forgiving me, but now I find myself bracing for his rejection.

“What’s the difference?” Ryder’s voice is tremulous as he stares up at me, clutching the blankets to his chest, almost like he’s protecting himself from me.

I look away. I can’t face him after what I did. But I can’t withhold the truth from him any longer. “When I hunt I do one of two things—I kill, or I kill and take that being’s soul, marking them as part of the Wild Hunt. I’ve never entertained a third option, which is binding that person to me through a mate bond. It never entered my mind to do so, until you.”

His swift intake of breath makes me tense. I want to look at him, but I’m terrified of what I’ll see on his face. Disgust? Anger? Rejection?

When I turn at last, I see none of those things. He looks shocked, his green eyes wide. Now is the time to make this very clear. I opened the floodgates and there’s no going back.

“I bound you in the forest, Ryder. I didn’t ask, I took you because I wanted to and I could. That alone would have tied us together for the remainder of *your* life. But then I did it again, just now, in giving you my blood. Your soul and mine are intertwined for eternity. You will never be able to leave me. You will never take another lover. Your soul will never be yours alone. It belongs to me now, just as mine belongs to you.”

Even so, you had no choice. I don’t say that part aloud again, but it’s at the very heart of the matter. I bound Ryder Connelly without his consent, and I will live with the knowledge of that every day from here on out.

CHAPTER 21

RYDER

I 'm not dead.

I stare at Wotan and let that reality sink in. With it comes another realization: Not only am I not dead, I'm immortal.

And bound to Wotan forever. *Eternity*. I can't wrap my mind around it.

But I can feel him. I can't describe it, but when I reach for him in my head, he's there—a dark, powerful presence. If I didn't know him the way I do now, that presence would be terrifying. Malevolent and wicked. Monstrous.

But I *do* know him. Yes, he's wicked. He's a straight-up monster. But he's *my* monster.

I sit up and put my hand on my neck, right over his bite.

He watches me. Rune watches him. If I had any doubts about the vampire being undercover, they're gone now. And I can't help but wonder just how powerful he is. Anyone who can trick Wotan is a force to be reckoned with.

"How do you feel?" Wotan asks. "Are you...?" He rubs the back of his neck. "You're probably angry with me," he finishes gruffly.

My jaw drops. A lot of weird shit has happened in the last half hour, but Wotan looking *apologetic* is by far the weirdest. He's worried I'm angry with him for saving my life? From almost the moment we met, he's threatened to kill me.

Except when he's fucking me. Or being unexpectedly gentle with me.

He saved me. Sealed me to him forever. And "forever" means something entirely different to immortals than it does humans. There's only one reason why he might do that...

Emotion swells my chest. It climbs into my throat and threatens to make my eyes water. I swallow hard so I can continue speaking. Because what I have to say next is important. "You can't reverse this," I say quietly. "Making me part of the Hunt."

"No, witch. I can't."

"Why would you do a thing like that?"

"I couldn't let you die."

I let a smile tug at my lips. "You have to do better than that, baby."

His nostrils flare. Silence stretches, and for one tense, shivering moment, I think I might have miscalculated. But then his expression turns glowering. "Fine. I love you," he mutters.

"What was that?" I say, my heart racing and joy bubbling up. "I didn't quite hear—" My words cut off as two big hands seize me.

Wotan holds me against him with one thick arm wrapped around my back. His free hand grips my ass. "I love you," he growls against my lips. "Happy?"

“Yes,” I say simply. I kiss the underside of his jaw. “And I love you, too, by the way.” I release a watery laugh. “But we really have to work on your communication skills. Like, maybe ask me what I’d like for dinner or whether I’m okay with you making me a permanent member of your mystical workforce.”

Eyes glued to my mouth, he grunts. “All right.”

“Are there any benefits?” I ask hopefully. “Dental or...”

He squeezes my ass. “There are benefits.”

Movement over his shoulder catches my eye. Rune moves toward the door.

In a blur, Wotan sets me on my feet and whips around. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

Rune turns, his expression unrepentant. “I’ve done no harm here, Wotan.” He nods toward me. “I saved your witch. That counts for something.”

Wotan growls and steps forward. “Your kind never do anything without inflicting harm. You’re lucky I didn’t kill you the second I saw you in Ryder’s memories, you little shit.” Wotan’s gaze flicks over Rune’s hair. “What family are you from? I’ve never seen you before.”

Rune’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “Because I didn’t want you to.”

“I’ll have your name or your head, vampire. Your choice.”

My gut clenches. Wotan doesn’t make idle threats. Can I really watch him kill Rune? The vampire saved my life. In a flash, power builds within me. It’s new and *intense*—a crackling mass of energy that steals my breath and heats my skin. The lingering effects of my blood loss vanish like smoke. I feel like I could do anything. Run forever. Take on a giant.

Well, maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. But the rush is incredible. Power hums in my veins. All I have to do is tap it.

Wotan and Rune don’t appear to notice. They’re still locked in a standoff, their bodies tense and primed for a fight.

Rune offers a mocking bow that makes his platinum hair slide over his shoulders. “Tower du Sang.”

Wotan sucks in a breath, and it’s weird to hear him sound shocked. “*You*. You’ve got a lot of nerve coming here, boy.”

Curiosity tugs at me. The du Sang family is the quieter of the two vampire gangs. I’ve never heard of anyone among its ranks named Tower.

But Wotan seems to know exactly who the vampire is. His amethyst eyes gleam and his tone turns silky. “I didn’t think your uncle let you out without a guard, considering how much money you make for him. How much you *steal* for him. Is that what you’ve been doing here? Stealing from me?”

The vampire shrugs. “From your patrons. Not you.” Arrogance rolls off him like fog, but something about his nonchalance isn’t quite believable. Underneath all that bravado, he’s afraid of Wotan.

I can’t blame him. Wotan looks ready to break him in half.

A growl rumbles in Wotan’s throat. “Stealing from my patrons *is* stealing from me. I should send you back to Lucius in pieces. Small ones.”

Tower bares his fangs. “Try it. I dare you.”

I look between them, curiosity tugging harder. Just as I wonder what the fuck is going on, it hits me. *I don’t have to wonder.*

I can *know*.

Power floods my veins in a wild rush. Visions spin around me—a selection of shadowy forms

that represent a dozen different futures. They're at my beck and call. All I have to do is summon them.

Somewhere in my head, I'm aware that Tower and Wotan are staring at me now. But I can't be bothered with them as I study the rotating visions. I'm not sure what compels me to do it, but I walk forward and let one of the shadows pass through my hand.

Immediately, a tall male with blond hair several shades darker than Rune's—*Tower's*—steps from the spinning mass. He bears a striking resemblance to the vampire.

Tower's gasp is loud in the quiet room. "What the fuck?" There's a thump. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him sag against the door as if he just stumbled into it.

"It's not real," Wotan says. A warm hand settles on my shoulder. "Go slow with this, Ryder. This is my power you're feeling. We don't know how it will react with yours."

That's an understatement. And he's right, but I can't fight the pull that compels me to pluck another shadow from the circle. This time, a huge male in an expensive-looking three-piece suit steps from the mist. He's handsome in a brutal way, with broad shoulders that are even wider than Wotan's. The male is ripped, I realize, but his gold eyes are kind.

Until they focus on Tower. Then something undeniably possessive flashes in them. At his side, his hand curls into a fist.

Wotan drifts forward, his gaze going from the hulking male to Tower. "How do you know Gothel?"

Surprise flits through me. Because *that's* a name I recognize. Every resident of the Hallows knows the Lord of the Sky Syndicate. Gargoyles are a rare breed. Mysterious creatures obsessed with buildings. But this one looks a little obsessed with Tower...

"I don't know him," the vampire says. He looks at me, his blue eyes uncharacteristically anxious. "What is all this?"

"Your future," I say as the males drift forward and stop on either side of him. Just as I knew I was right to pull them from the shadows, I know they won't move any farther. "You're at a crossroads," I tell Tower, and my voice echoes like I'm speaking through a megaphone. "What happens next is up to you."

In a blink, the males disappear.

But the shadowy circle keeps spinning. The *knowing* pulses inside me again, and I tilt my head. All at once, the circle stops. Then, slowly, it starts to spin counterclockwise.

The tall, blond male steps forward again, but this time he has a younger version of Tower with him.

Against the door, present-day Tower makes a strangled sound.

The male rounds on young Tower and backhands him across the face. "*I told you to fetch it.*"

Young Tower recovers. His blue eyes burn with hatred as he wipes blood from his busted lip. "*I tried, Uncle.*"

"*Try harder.*"

"Stop," present-day Tower says, his voice as hard as I've ever heard it. "Enough, witch. Turn it off!"

I release the vision. Dizziness assails me, and I grope for the bed.

Wotan is beside me before I can reach it, his big hands on my shoulders as he guides me forward and presses me to a sitting position on the edge of the mattress. He hunkers down in front of me with his hands on my knees. "You saw the past."

"Yeah," I say hoarsely. "That was wild. You saw everything?"

He nods. "It looked real."

I swallow. “That’s not one of my powers. Actually, I don’t think any Cassandra has ever been able to share their visions with others.”

“It’s my blood,” he says, and he looks pleased with himself as he rises and runs his knuckles across my jaw. “You’ve grown more powerful.”

“Maybe I’ll finally impress Sybella,” I say, the words jumping from my mouth automatically.

Wotan growls. “You don’t need to impress that bitch.”

I murmur in agreement, but now my head is spinning for an entirely different reason. I don’t really give a shit about my grandmother. But if I can see the past, maybe I can see anything I want.

I can see my mom.

My heart starts to pound. I stand and move around Wotan. He makes growling protest noises, but I ignore them as I bring up the spinning wheel again. It’s easier this time. *Like riding a bike*. The power flows hot and fast, and I’m giddy as I spin to exactly where I want to go. I reach out...

And there she is. My beautiful mother steps into the room with her auburn hair shining and her creamy skin flushed with happiness. She’s singing and looking over her shoulder. And it’s weird because it’s almost like she’s...sitting.

The moment I think about it, she’s in the passenger seat of a car. My father is beside her, and he’s smiling too.

My heart beats faster. *No*. No, this isn’t what I want to see—

A fireball strikes the car.

Somewhere in the room, male voices shout. Someone grabs at my arm, but I shake them off.

The vision flickers, switching to a different scene. The car is a wreck. A charred body sprawls next to it. A child screams.

Again, the scene changes—flickering forward. Rotating. Now I see the other side of the car.

I see myself.

I’m a child, bleeding and unconscious on the ground. My mother crawls toward me. She’s burned but her face is still beautiful. Tears streak her cheeks. “*Ryder*.”

Footsteps. The swish of fabric. Dark robes appear. My grandmother steps into view. She’s younger, her hair the same vivid shade as my mother’s.

The same shade as mine.

“*Gwendolyn*,” she says.

My mother keeps crawling. When she gets to me, she spreads her arms wide, blocking me from my grandmother’s view. Her face pinches with pain, but her green eyes are fierce as she meets my grandmother’s gaze. “*You won’t touch him*.”

Sybella pulls a knife from the pocket of her robes. “*You had so much potential*.” Her mouth twists. She glances toward the charred body on the ground. “*And you wasted it on a human*.”

“*I loved him*,” my mother says, her tears flowing faster. “*Something you’ll never understand because you’re incapable of that emotion*.”

Something flickers in Sybella’s eyes. For a moment, she looks almost sad. As quickly as it appears, it’s gone. She straightens her shoulders. “*I could have forgiven you the human. But your dalliance with the Myth went too far. The monsters from beyond the Veil would make us slaves. It’s why we resist*.”

“*They saved us*,” my mother says. “*Without them, we wouldn’t have a world*.”

Anger darkens Sybella’s eyes. “*You’re no daughter of mine. You’re a traitor*.” She raises the knife.

My mother tenses. Magic builds around her. The air crackles and seethes. She raises a bloody arm

and gathers the magic in her hand. It forms into a shivering blue orb. Teeth clenched, she shoves the mass of energy behind her. It slams into my tiny body, jolting me.

Sybella holds the knife aloft.

My mother smiles. *"That was Myth magic. Gifted to me by one of the creatures you despise due to your ignorance. Now you can't hurt him."*

"Perhaps not. But I can hurt you." The knife streaks down.

"RYDER!"

The vision vanishes. Wotan's shout echoes in my ears.

I'm on my knees in the middle of the room. Wotan kneels in front of me, his eyes wide with fear.

"Ryder," he gasps. "Gods."

My hand shakes as I brush his jaw. "Don't be afraid. You're supposed to be the scary one."

He crushes me to him, and his heart thumps hard against my chest. "I'll get really fucking scary if you ever do that again. I couldn't reach you. It was like there was a barrier around you."

"A shield," I say, my throat growing tight. I push away from him. "It's old magic, and something that protected me from Sybella. My mother sacrificed herself for me. She poured all her magic into one final spell and cast it so my grandmother couldn't kill me."

"I saw," he rumbles. "The magic was of the Myth."

Anger builds, making my voice tremble. "All this time, I thought it was an accident. But Sybella killed her because she worked with the Myth." I huff a humorless laugh. "You were right. My grandmother has been plotting against you. She just wasn't working with the humans."

"I don't give a shit about that."

I glance at the door. "Tower is gone."

"I know. He slipped out right as your vision ended."

"Will you go after him?"

"Right now, all I care about is you." He takes my face in his hands and kisses me, his forked tongue seeking entry. When I grant it, he groans and deepens the kiss. It's aggressive and passionate and a little unhinged. I get it. I scared him, and he needs to reassure himself I'm okay.

It's a heady thing, knowing someone cares about me this much.

When we come up for air, my head is curiously clear, my thoughts focused. "I'm part of the Wild Hunt now."

I make it a statement, but Wotan nods anyway, a gleam in his amethyst eyes. "That's right."

"We run evildoers to ground."

"We do."

Tower had called Wotan *justice*.

Well, I have some of that to mete out.

I look at the male I love. "Let's go hunting."

CHAPTER 22

WOTAN

T whistle to my mount as I stalk my mate through the dark halls of Cauchemar. The devil horse will hear me even from his resting place deep in the Wood. Ryder and I enter the courtyard just as the midnight-black steed emerges from the forest.

It stops in front of me and bows its head low before swinging its red gaze to Ryder.

Ryder's handsome face breaks into a grin as green eyes flick to mine. "I've been across this horse's withers a time or two. Is that how we're playing this?"

"You ride," I command, hoisting him on top of the horse's broad, dark back. "I'll follow."

There's something significant about that statement, and Ryder can tell. His breathing picks up, eyes flashing with devotion and need. I'll answer that need later, but for now, we have justice to deliver.

"We will run her down, mate," I assure him. "But when it comes to her death, that belongs to you, unless you want me to handle it."

For a moment, uncertainty clouds his eyes. Despite the horrific crimes Sybella is guilty of, despite how terribly she treated him his entire life, there is still a deep-seated need for acceptance. It is a uniquely human trait. I open my mouth to remind him Sybella doesn't deserve restraint, but then he nods.

"I'm gonna murder the shit out of her," he says grimly.

"That's my good boy," I growl, watching his cheeks turn pink. He loves my filthy mouth, and already my mind spins with the need to cement our bond again. Now that he knows everything and still wants me, I'm choking with desire for him.

Still, now is not the time. Sybella took everything from him, and she will answer for those crimes—right this fucking minute.

I slap Ryder's mount on the rump, reveling in the way he leans over its withers as they take off into the forest.

Magic seeps from him, and it calls to my own. My blood bolstered his power, and he's riding the high of it as he urges the horse faster through the woods.

Grinning, I take off after them, thrilled to chase. He is my quarry, my partner, my love.

I shake off the sweet sentiment of love right now, though, because the power rolling off Ryder is growing in strength and darkness. My little witch is furious.

Pushing my muscles harder, I focus on the Wood around us—every creature is silent, the Wood itself anticipating the Hunt. The only noise is the clomp of the hooves as Ryder speeds toward Rathmore Coven.

My mate runs, and I give chase, barreling through the pitch-black forest until we get to the

meadow where I claimed him. We're near the coven now. Ryder brings the horse to a halt and dismounts.

Ryder's gaze falls on the spot where I fucked him. Of course he remembers it.

He slants me a look. "So this is where...?"

I close the distance between us and take his mouth, bending his head back as I kiss him deeply. When I break away, we're both breathing heavily.

"When this is done, I need you, pretty little witch."

"Deal," he whispers. "I feel so fucking powerful right now, Wotan." His muscles quiver with tension as I rub his back.

"You'll need it," I murmur, looking around at the forest. "Sybella waits for you."

His eyes narrow. When he looks at me, I see a predator for the first time. Infusing Ryder with my blood means he carries part of me with him, and I'm godsdamned thrilled to see the murderous look in his eyes.

"Let's hunt," he rasps, turning before I can even answer. He stalks into the dark, and I follow.

We're quiet the few minutes to Rathmore, but when we round that final bend, Sybella stands out front with the entire coven. Her gnarled hands are folded at her waist. Her eyes flash as Ryder and I step from the shadows.

The grand house sits behind her, and I note that she's still technically on coven property. She hasn't stepped into the Wood itself just yet.

"Ryder," she says. "I see your guard dog is alive and well."

I don't bother to bristle at the insult. Her life ends tonight. She just hasn't realized it yet.

When I grin at her, I sense a thread of unease snake through the other witches. Beside me, Ryder takes a step forward.

"You killed my mother." His voice booms in the small space between us. Dozens of witches at Sybella's side murmur and look at one another. A few appear unsurprised. I take note of their faces. Her inner circle, perhaps.

"She died in a wreck, you fool," Sybella hisses.

Ryder shakes his head. "You killed her for loving a human. I know, because I went back and saw it."

Sybella's powerful wrath is tangible. Trails of magic leak off her property and into the Wood. I could expel them, but I'm letting Ryder lead this chase.

With a hiss, she stalks across the small space, not stopping until she stands before Ryder. Her tone is cruel and dismissive. "Your power is weak. *You* are weak, and if you have to bring the Master of the Hunt to take me down then you have no chance of success."

I'd love nothing better than to rip her head from her shoulders for speaking to my mate this way. But I keep an eye on the rest of the coven. They're powerful, but I am more so, and it's clear they dislike their coven head being so close to me.

Ryder gives Sybella a tight, satisfied-looking smile. "You tried to kill my mate by poisoning my blood. Unfortunately for you, it didn't quite work out that way." He throws his arms outward, and the same vision I saw earlier pops up like an old televised movie from the time before the Veil.

The vision replays. But this time, the whole coven watches as Gwendolyn protects Ryder with a spell.

The witches of the coven stir, their murmurs growing louder.

Sybella's eyes widen as she watches the vision unfold. "How?" she croaks. "How did you see this?" Without warning, she spins and tries to flee.

I sink my claws into her shoulder, reveling in the way she screams as I yank her away from my mate. I toss her to the ground, where she lands hard on her back. She rises from the dirt with a snarl, fists balled at her sides as the vision continues playing out.

Her eyes flick from the scene, where Gwendolyn now curls herself around Ryder's small body, to her coven. The same few who seemed unsurprised before dispassionately watch Ryder replay Gwendolyn's death.

There's a split second where Sybella freezes, and in that moment, she delivers the killing blow to her daughter.

In my bond with Ryder, I sense his heartbreak all over again, but beneath that, an undercurrent of resolve swells and rises.

"Run," he commands his grandmother.

Sybella turns on her heel and sprints toward the coven property, but a line of witches stands at the edge, their arms linked together.

A tall, dark-haired witch as wiry as a twig moves in front of Sybella. "You will never return here, Sybella. The death of a witch is on your head, and you must answer to those you harmed."

Sybella snarls and moves down the line, but those who seemed to know of her crimes slink backward behind the group in front.

"You knew!" she shouts at them over the heads of the witches denying her entry. "She chose a human! We could not allow it!"

Ryder stalks to his grandmother, grips her shoulder, and yanks her back. "Those who knew will get their punishment as well, grandmother. You can be certain I'll see to that. But you first, just the way you like it. You stole my family from me. You made me homeless. You took my entire life!" His voice rises as my muscles quiver in anticipation.

I grin at the old witch. "He told you to run," I say softly.

Her eyes flash. Then she turns and takes off.

Ryder looks at the line of witches in front of Rathmore Coven. "I'll be back for the rest of you. You can take care of Sybella's conspirators yourselves if you like. If you don't, I will."

There are hushed gasps, but the tall witch who denied Sybella nods once, her lips pressed tightly together.

"Let us chase, mate," I whisper, reaching for his hand.



SYBELLA'S DARK ROBES HAVE DISAPPEARED INTO THE DARKNESS, BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER. SHE'S IN MY Wood, my home, and everyone and everything here answers to me. Up ahead, I hear her calling spells as she guards the last precious moments of her life.

"There is no way out, Sybella," I call to her, Ryder jogging by my side.

We pick up the pace until we're both running through the forest, chasing the witch who destroyed my mate's entire childhood.

She took so much, and we will judge her for those crimes.

Sybella's figure comes into view. She sprints ahead of us, her robes clutched in both hands.

With a swirl of my fingers, I call the trees. Their gnarled roots spring up out of the ground, tripping Sybella. She stumbles and falls to her knees. The roots crawl up her body and wrap her tightly.

Ryder and I stop. His face pales as he watches a root slither across her face.

"You can't kill me, boy," she gasps. "You're weak. You've always been weak. You—"

"Silence," I snap. "Insult my mate again and we'll kill you slowly. I could command these roots to strip the skin from your bones for hours. Think on that, witch."

She swallows. Her gaze rests on Ryder, who thrums with power.

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Should we judge her soul?"

"Yeah," he rasps. He looks up at me, and he seems to rally as he stares into my eyes. "Yes. Show me how to do it."

I place a hand on Sybella's heart. She struggles, but her thrashing only pulls the roots more tightly around her. Bone cracks, and she whimpers.

I open my mind and read her soul. Beside me, Ryder shudders, no doubt seeing the parade of evil deeds that make up her long life.

When it's over, I withdraw my hand. "There is not an ounce of good in you."

"You're nothing," she snarls at me. "Nothing but death."

"Perhaps," I say. "We are certainly yours."

Ryder pulls a knife from a holster on his thigh. He turns the blade so it glints in the moonlight. He looks her in the eye. "Your time is over. You'll never hurt anyone again. I'll take over Rathmore, and I'll be a good leader. I'll be everything you're not."

"They will never accept you. There are those who will always be loyal to me, boy."

And there it is, that moment when my prey knows and accepts death. The hope fades from her eyes, even as she sneers at my witch.

"That might be true," Ryder murmurs, gripping the knife tightly in his hands, "but you won't be there to find out." Without another word, he stabs the knife directly into her heart, pushing past bone and gristle as he buries it to the hilt.

Sybella screams, fighting as the knife severs muscles and arteries, blood spurting from the wound as her heart pumps those final, futile beats.

Ryder lets the knife drop to the forest floor. We watch as Sybella's blood streams onto the leaves and into the dirt, feeding the soil. Her body stiffens, and her eyes grow cloudy. Finally, she stills.

I grunt, then turn to Ryder and jerk my head toward the path leading out of the Wood. "Let's go. I'm horny."

He laughs weakly. "Only you could watch a murder and want to fuck someone afterward."

I grip his chin and tilt his gaze to mine. "Only *you*. I only want you. There will only ever be you, Ryder."

His breath hitches. "Better be," he whispers.

"Threats?" I growl. "Threats are my fucking favorite."

"I know," he sighs. He kisses the underside of my jaw. "Take me home."

That sounds perfect to me, so I lace my fingers with his and lead him through the Wood.

Back to the place where it all started for us.

EPILOGUE

“There are a lot of people out there.”

I turn from the mirror where I was adjusting my tie. Wotan is staring out the window that overlooks Cauchemar’s courtyard. His shoulders are wider than the frame.

Desire kindles low in my belly. Am I ever going to get used to knowing this male is mine?

And he’s about to be mine in front of half of the Hallows. That’s what I get for letting Jasper handle the wedding planning. When he heard Wotan proposed, he showed up at the club and announced he was in charge. *“Because you two don’t stop fucking long enough to plan anything, and I am not having the other syndicates claim you don’t know how to throw a party. That’s the kind of slander that starts wars, Ryder.”*

A smile tugs at my lips as I go to Wotan and put my arms around his waist. “Nervous?” I murmur against his back.

A half-second later, a pair of outraged amethyst eyes glare down at me. “Nervous? Need I remind you, witch, I am Master of the Wild Hunt.”

I can’t keep the tenderness out of my tone. “I know, baby. You are definitely the scariest monster in the Hallows. But it’s not every day the Master of the Wild Hunt marries the man of his dreams.”

His glare stays in place, but its intimidating effects are blunted when his big hands slide down and grip my ass. “Think that highly of yourself, do you?”

“Mmm. Your cockiness is rubbing off on me.”

He yanks my hips into his, and I gasp as his hard dick grinds against mine. “I’d like to rub more of it on you right now,” he growls.

“Dicks in your pants until after the ceremony!” A stern voice rings out.

Wotan and I turn toward the door, where Jasper stands with an exasperated look on his handsome face. He’s got a clipboard tucked under his arm. He’s dressed head-to-toe in white leather, and his silver hair is streaked with something that looks like pink glitter. The hint of gossamer wings flutter agitatedly behind him. “Not the first time I’ve said that today, actually,” he mutters. “Weddings make people so thirsty.”

“I thought only the bride was allowed to wear white,” I say.

“Please. Like either of you two are virgins.” His bright blue eyes move over us critically, taking in our hair and clothes. After a second, he clucks his tongue and marches forward. “This is crooked,” he mutters, fixing my tie. I stand patiently while he fusses, adjusting the boutonniere on my lapel and removing microscopic pieces of lint. When he turns to Wotan, my fiancé glowers.

“Don’t even think about it, pixie.”

Jasper rolls his eyes. “Fine, but your tie is crooked too.”

Wotan tosses his head toward the window. “How long is this stupid ceremony going to take? I’ve got shit to do.”

Unfazed, Jasper props a hand on his hip. “It’ll take however long it takes. Now you’ve got ten minutes to get your asses outside. Someone—I suspect your idiot head of security—decided to invite the Sea Syndicate at the last minute and those fuckers drink like, well, fish, so I’ve got like thirty drunken mermen doing all kinds of lewd shit with their tails.” His wings flutter faster as his voice rises. “I’ve also got a string quartet of harpies out there and if you keep them waiting they’re going to start a dust storm and ruin my flower arrangements.” The last is said on a near-shout.

“Jasper.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “Everything is going to be fine. I can see the future, remember? No dust storms in sight.” I give his shoulder a squeeze. “And thank you for planning today. It means a lot to both of us.”

He slides a skeptical look toward Wotan. “I don’t know about that, but you’re welcome. I couldn’t let you two handle it on your own. I mean, no one throws a party like a pixie.”

I nod solemnly. “Today would have been a disaster without you.”

“True.” He brightens. “Well, I’d better get out there. Nine minutes now.” He flicks his fingers at Wotan. In an instant, silvery glitter peppers Wotan’s face.

My fiancé sputters. “You little—”

“No violence today, babe,” I say, stepping in front of him. As if I can stop him if he decides he wants to tear someone apart.

Fortunately, he doesn’t at the moment, because he lets Jasper go. Of course, that leaves me alone with an incensed Wotan.

Scratch that, a *gorgeous* incensed Wotan. Because Wotan in a suit and tie is a sight I’m not sure I’ll ever get over. The pixie dust settles over him and disappears, leaving behind a soft glow that makes his purple eyes gleam. His tats peek from under his collar. I convinced him not to shave, so dark stubble shadows his jaw. A fresh wave of desire blasts me as I straighten his tie. “Jasper was right,” I murmur. “It was a little crooked.”

He lifts his chin so I can get at the silk knot. “How do I look? I...can’t see for myself.”

I stop, and I have to wait a minute before I can speak. He never allows anyone to glimpse his vulnerable side. The fact that he does it with me is the most precious gift he could ever give me. More precious than the mirrors he had brought into the club just for me, or the flowers he sends me when I’m stuck in the Wood doing coven business.

With a shaky breath, I place a hand on his cheek. “You don’t need a mirror. *I* see you. And I love what I see.”

A muscle in his cheek jumps under my hand. “I’m not sure why,” he says gruffly. “But I’m grateful. And I love you, too.” His eyes gleam. “Especially now that my cockiness has rubbed off on you. You’re going to need it to control that coven of yours.”

I groan and thunk my forehead against his chest. “Can’t you let us have a little bit of a honeymoon before you remind me of that?” After I killed Sybella, he and I easily rooted out the bad apples. But now there’s a vacuum of leadership. I’m not used to being in charge of anything. Suddenly, I’ve got dozens of witches looking to me for direction.

Warm fingers lift my chin. “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but power is two-thirds bluster. It’s not *if* you decapitated a legion of vampires, it’s whether your enemies *think* you did.”

“Well, I don’t plan on decapitating any witches.”

He shrugs. “Could be fun.”

His words have me thinking, and I hear the wistfulness in my voice as I say, “I wish Rune could

be here.”

Instantly, Wotan’s expression grows shuttered. “You mean Tower.”

“Are you going to decapitate him?”

“I haven’t decided.”

I put my hand on his chest. “Wotan. I was joking. Please don’t decapitate Tower. He’s my friend.”

“He’s a spy. And a thief.”

“He has his reasons. If anyone needs decapitating, it’s that uncle of his.” My memory floods with the image of Tower’s uncle backhanding him across the face. Tower had looked furious...and unsurprised.

Wotan grunts.

I trail my hand down his stomach. “Don’t kill Tower. Consider it a wedding present.”

Purple eyes narrow. “Are you bargaining with me, witch?”

“Is it working?” I cup his erection as my own dick presses against the zipper of the suit Jasper forced me to buy.

Wotan's heart speeds up, and my heightened senses register the beat right away. He pulls me against him and runs a thumb over my bottom lip. “It’s working.” He puts his mouth next to my ear. “But I’m going to need something in return.”

“Anything,” I whisper.

A forked tongue touches the curve of my ear. “As soon as the party is over, I’m going to cut that pretty suit off you and whip your ass raw in my dungeon.”

Rapid pounding on the window makes us both jump.

Jasper stands outside with his hands cupped around his eyes and his face pressed against the glass. “Dicks in your pants! You’ve got two minutes!” With a final glare, he stalks off.

Stifling a laugh, I smile up at Wotan. “Promise?”

He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles. “I do.”



Dying to know where Tower snuck off to? Grab your copy of [Steal the Sky](#) to watch him get in over his head with the Lord of the Sky Syndicate, Gothel, in our MM Rapunzel retelling!

Read on for a quick excerpt...

AN EXCERPT FROM STEAL THE SKY

TOWER

“Cut me, baby.”

I grip my knife and trail the tip of the blade down the woman’s neck, raising a thin line of blood. Her head tips farther to the side, and she moans. The thick scent of her arousal hits my lungs, but I ignore it. I’m not interested in what’s between her legs.

I want what’s in her veins.

Although, it’s not really a matter of *want*. If I could stop wanting it, I just might. Blood has always been an inconvenience in my life. Blood. Bloodlines. Blood oaths.

Yeah, blood has been a collar around my neck since I was born. Just once I’d like to breathe without feeling its weight on my skin.

“Lick me,” the woman gasps. “Please, baby, I need it so bad.”

“You and me both,” I mutter. Our needs couldn’t be more different, though. She’s a *feeder*. Some humans get off on vampires biting them. Downside? They’re usually junkies, and their blood tastes like sewage. Upside? They’ll do just about anything for a fix.

Desperation is a powerful motivator. It’s one of the first things my “family” taught me.

“Please,” she whines, her hand scrabbling for my dick.

With a growl, I slam her harder against the brick wall. She moans, loving it, which makes anger spike in my veins.

That’s a decent motivator, too. I seize it, letting my rage burn away the raw edges of my hunger. Every second I spend with her is a risk. Every moment I linger is a chance for my uncle to track me down. I’ll take just enough blood to keep me on my feet and then I’ll get the fuck out of here. As she writhes in my grip, I bare my fangs. Quick as a snake, I strike, nailing her right in the jugular.

“Yes!” Her body jerks. Rich, hot blood hits my tongue. I swallow with a groan, ignoring the acidic undercurrents of drugs and alcohol.

We’re in a dark alley in the Free Zone—the only place in the Hallows where the long arm of the syndicates doesn’t reach. Once upon a time, there weren’t syndicates at all. Back then, the Hallows was known as New York City and there were eight billion humans on the planet.

Seriously.

The history books use all kinds of descriptive language to describe what happened next, but the short version is this: One group of humans got pissed at another group; Group One fired a bunch of nukes; Group Two fired back; big boom; most of humanity dead. The blast was so powerful it ripped the Veil that separated the human world from the mythical one.

And then humans discovered all the creatures they thought were make-believe were no such thing. With the Veil gone, magic flooded the world—and the creatures of the Myth took over. Humans became mostly prey, and the most powerful monsters chose the Hallows as their base. Two centuries later, that power structure still holds. The syndicates operate like an unholy trinity of government, entertainment, and organized crime.

But every power structure has gaps—the nooks and crannies where the dirtiest deals happen. That's where my people dwell. We're beholden to no one. Loyal to no one but our family. Like the werewolves, vampires have always lived on the human side of the Veil. Not to sound crass, but this is where the food is.

Right on cue, the human tenses and cries out. Her arousal drenches the air.

I disengage my fangs and, grimacing, swipe my tongue over the puncture wounds so she doesn't bleed out in the alley.

She sags against the wall, her features slack and her pupils wide from her orgasm. "You wanna...?" She makes a jerking motion with her fist.

"No." I pull a cloth from the inner pocket of my jacket and wipe my mouth.

"Uppity fucker, aren't you?" She squints. "It's weird. When you bit me, I swore you looked different. Like you had long hair."

"Your eyes played tricks on you." Suddenly, I've had enough conversations with humans to last my immortal lifetime. I toss a couple crumpled bills at her feet. "Drink plenty of water."

I stalk from the alley without waiting to hear her reply. With her blood in my veins, power hums under my skin. For the moment, I'm strong enough to maintain my glamour—and blend into the shadows when I don't want to be seen. If I'm going to make it to the harbor, now is the time to do it. I've wanted to reach that harbor for as long as I can remember. I just didn't have the courage to try until now.

Or maybe I just hadn't realized how pathetic my life has become. That changed a couple weeks ago, when I watched the witch, Ryder Connelly, sacrifice himself for a...well, I don't exactly know what Wotan is. A fucking nightmare—literally. I was supposed to be casing his nightclub for marks. Instead, I ended up being a reluctant observer of his and Ryder's sappy love story.

And something about witnessing that flipped a switch in me. It made me do stupid, dangerous things.

Like hope.

Like seize my own destiny.

Glamour up, I step onto the broken sidewalk. The harbor lights twinkle in the distance. If I can make it to those lights, I can leave the Hallows. I can board a ship and sail down the coast. There are places in the south where the syndicate lords don't bother to wield their power. Where the two families will never find me.

Where there's not a human in sight and nothing to eat, a little voice in my head chides.

I shove it away. I can live on animal blood if I absolutely have—

Two huge males step out of the shadows and block my path. The one on the right smiles, showing the tips of his fangs. "Nice glamour. Too bad that feeder you just drained works for the family."

Fuck. *Fuck.*

I spin, prepared to run. Another pair of males is already waiting behind me. One of them is Axel, my uncle's top lieutenant.

Misery punches me in the gut. Axel's presence means I can't lie my way out of this. I can't claim my assignment lasted longer than I thought, or that I spotted another potential mark on my way back to

the family. My uncle probably knows every move I've made since I left Wotan's club.

Maintaining my glamour takes energy, so I drop it. My hair lengthens and turns a platinum hue that glows under the city's lights.

One of the thugs snickers.

I clench my fists.

"Time to go home, Tower," Axel says. "It's past your bedtime."

"Fuck you, dickface."

His dark eyebrows go up. "Now, that's not very nice. I thought pretty boys like you had better manners."

There's a scuffling sound behind me. Before I can react, a huge hand clamps down on my shoulder. Pain explodes in my side. Nausea roils me. I try to double over, but the hand forces me to stay upright.

"You want us to shut his mouth, Ax?"

Axel shakes his head. "Lucius wants to take care of it personally."

My stomach lurches. The feeder's blood burns my throat as my dinner threatens to spill onto the pavement.

"Search him," Axel says. "The little shit always has a knife or two on him."

Rough hands jostle me, prodding and squeezing. One knife clatters to the ground. Then another.

"That's all I've got," I say. My side is numb now, but it's going to hurt like a bitch tomorrow. Assuming I'm conscious enough to feel pain.

The thugs at my back aren't content to take my word for it, because they shake me down for several more minutes. At last, they finish, leaving me rumpled and swaying on my feet. I guess the feeder's blood wasn't enough, after all.

Axel moves forward. He stops a couple inches away. We're almost the same height, so I can look him in the eye, but he's got about eighty pounds of muscle on me. Still, my stupid mouth can't help but taunt him.

"Does it suck?" I ask.

He frowns. "Does what suck?"

"Being my uncle's dog. He sent you to fetch me. He makes you fetch for him so often I'm surprised he doesn't keep you on a leash. But you're such an obedient dog, I guess he doesn't have to."

My head snaps back before I even register the punch. I stagger, but one of the thugs catches me before I can fall. Then Axel has my shirt in two fists and his face close to mine.

"You're the dog, you entitled little prick," he snarls. His breath smells like old blood and tobacco. "All that blue blood in your veins and you can't even use it. Fetching is all you're good for. It's all you're *ever* going to be good for."

A half dozen replies spring to my lips, but I can't voice them. My jaw is misaligned, possibly broken. Starved as I am, I can't heal it. And if my uncle flexes his authority tonight, I'm not going to be able to heal it for a while.

And isn't that just an apt fucking metaphor. I'm capable of speaking—and other things—but I'm locked down. Dormant. Muzzled and incapable of freeing myself. Axel is right: The only thing I'm good for is retrieving things for other people. It makes me valuable, which is the only reason my uncle gives a single shit about me.

"Nothing to say?" Axel sneers. He waits a beat, then shoves me into the thugs at my back. "Bring him." As they grip me under my armpits and start walking, his mocking voice follows me. "Back to

your cage, Tower. I hope this brief taste of freedom was worth it.”



TOWER

THREE MONTHS LATER

They’ve been feeding me more regularly. That means Lucius is going to let me out soon.

At least that’s what I tell myself as I walk to the window.

My limp is gone, which is nice. The final reminder of my uncle’s displeasure. I look out the window, careful to avoid touching the bars, which are infused with magic I collected from a siren a few years ago. The view below is spectacular—a hundred acres of sprawling greenery dotted with manicured shrubbery and meandering pathways. A garden maze nestles close to the mansion. The fountain in the center shoots water toward the sky. Sunlight sparkles in the mist that clouds the air around it. When the family celebrates a new acquisition, the fountain runs with blood.

That hasn’t happened for a while, of course. Not since my extended stay in my bedroom.

The door behind me opens without warning. When I turn, Axel is there. I haven’t seen him since that night in the Free Zone. I expect a smirk or nasty comment now, but he merely jerks his head toward the hallway.

“He wants to see you.”

Nerves prickle down my spine. “All right.”

It’s a short walk to my uncle’s office, but I’m winded by the time we get there. Which is both frustrating and enraging. I do my best to blank my expression as Axel opens the door. I step inside, and he shuts it behind me, leaving me alone with my uncle—and the woman on his lap.

She straddles him, so I can’t see her face. But the slow, sinuous way she’s moving makes it obvious what’s happening here. Her arms are twined around his neck, and her long skirt is bunched at her waist. It’s a flowy sort of material, so the ends trail toward the carpet. As Lucius makes eye contact with me over her shoulder, she tips her head back and moans.

“Is this a bad time?” I ask.

Irritation flits through Lucius’s eyes. He grabs her hair, yanks her head to the side, and plunges his fangs into her neck. She shudders and gives a choked cry. He bucks his hips once...twice, then grunts. His eyes close briefly. For a split second, his features are soft, his body relaxed.

Then his eyes snap open. He licks her neck and slaps her ass hard enough to make her yelp. “Go clean up. And eat something. I’ll want you again later.”

She scrambles off his lap like she’s afraid he’ll dump her on the floor if she doesn’t hurry. Her skirt swishes around her ankles. Despite the chill in the air outside, she’s wearing a white tank top. Probably so Lucius can access her veins more easily. Her whole outfit seems designed for his convenience, which is wholly unsurprising.

She peeks at me from under her lashes as she passes me. Her gaze moves down my chest, and her plump lips curve in unmistakable invitation.

No thanks. Even if I was into women, I’d rather starve than drink from one of my uncle’s stable of feeders.

Thankfully, Lucius has his dick tucked away by the time the door closes behind her. He points to one of the chairs in front of his desk. “Sit.”

My temper flares, but I obey. The big windows behind him let in broad shafts of sunlight, turning his blond hair to gold. It's a power move, sitting in a room like this. Only vampires from the oldest bloodlines can tolerate the sun. Just two of the original, ancient families remain: du Sang and Dolabella. Direct descendants of these bloodlines are daywalkers with unique powers. The Dolabellas are *imperators*. Under the right circumstances, they can force just about any being to do their will.

As for the du Sangs, we're siphons, which means we can harvest magical abilities from other beings.

I say "we," but that's not entirely accurate. I can siphon, but that's all I can do. For some reason I've never been able to figure out, I can't release the powers I collect.

But Lucius can. He's the only being in the world who can. Worse, he's the only person alive who can release the magic *I* drain. Without him, I'm nothing but a locked vault. A puzzle box no one—including me—can open.

He regards me now, and it's like staring at my own face in the mirror. We share the same bone structure, with high cheekbones and strong jaws. Our eyes are the same bright shade of blue. The only difference is our hair. His is short and golden blond. Mine is platinum and long enough to brush the center of my back.

But there's nothing I can do about it. It's a quirk of vampirism. Once we reach adulthood, our appearance doesn't change. I could cut my hair every night and I'd wake with the same long, obnoxious waves. *Thanks, genetics.*

Lucius rests his hands on the arms of his chair. "You look fully recovered from your ordeal."

Ordeal. That's an interesting way of putting it. "I would have recovered more quickly if you hadn't starved me. Uncle."

"You were starving on the streets when my men found you." His mouth tightens. "Living among humans in the Free Zone. Going without blood and jeopardizing your ability to hold onto your glamour."

Yeah, well, it was the only way to evade your spies. Not that I'd succeeded. I should have killed that feeder in the alley. I won't make that mistake again.

My uncle growls as he continues his lecture. "You were reckless and foolish. Do you know how many people would love to get their hands on you, boy? What they'd do to you if they caught you?"

I sit back in my chair and prop my ankle on the opposite knee. "You mean like keep me prisoner in a bedroom with bars on the windows?" I look toward the ceiling and frown like I'm trying to remember something. "Or maybe tie me to a chair and savagely beat me?"

"You earned that lesson, son."

In an instant, I'm on my feet and leaning over his desk. "I'm not your fucking son," I snarl. "You don't *ever* get to call me that."

He sits calmly, clearly unmoved by my outburst—and unimpressed by my display of speed. "You're right. No son of mine would ever act as you do. You're as temperamental as my brother was. You have zero respect for the privilege and responsibility you carry in your veins. You're not fit to rule this family."

"Spoken like a second son. The only reason you rule is because you squat on my father's throne."

His hand is around my throat before I can blink, and I realize he was just waiting for the right moment to prove he's faster than I am. The edge of the desk bites into my hips as he pulls me toward him. His fangs extend so far past his lips they mangle his speech.

"I rule because *you* can't, you ungrateful little brat. You're good at siphoning, I'll give you that.

But no matter how many chances I give you to prove yourself, you just can't finish the job, can you?"

I glare, which is all I'm capable of. I sure as hell can't breathe. His fingers squeeze. Just a little bit more pressure, and he'll crush my throat. I can heal the injury, but it'll mean another three months in my room.

He won't kill me, though. I'm confident of that much. Two things stay his hand.

One, I keep him out of harm's way. With me chasing down magical gifts and siphoning marks, he doesn't have to put himself at risk. He can sit comfortably in the mansion while I do the hard part. And when I return flush with new power, he pulls it from me, sells it, and keeps the profit. Literally, he bottles the shit. There's a lot of money to be made in blood magic.

There's a second thing holding Lucius back, and it's the thing he hates most about me. For all their bluster and willingness to rough me up, the family is loyal to the du Sang bloodline. My father was the boss before he died fighting the Dolabellas. Technically, Lucius is a regent. A placeholder until I come into my full power. If that happens, the family will look to me for leadership.

But it's a big *if*, and he knows it.

With a hiss, he shoves me backwards. I slam into my chair, which tips onto two legs and threatens to topple before I right it. My throat burns, but the pain is nothing compared to the rage that simmers deep in my gut. My chest heaves as I suck in oxygen.

He sits and smooths his hair. The blond waves fall into place just like his army of enforcers. "As it happens," he says, "I have a new assignment for you. Consider it an opportunity to redeem yourself."

I wait with my jaw clenched. The thought of fetching power for him makes me want to puke all over the carpet that should be mine. But I'll do whatever he asks. No matter how much I try to tell myself I won't, I know I'll fall in line like I always do. Because he'll lock me up if I don't, and I can't bear it. A pretty cage is still a cage.

"My sources tell me Gothel has a rare book in his possession. It's a powerful artifact from beyond the Veil."

Against my will, interest stirs. I might be a broken siphon but I'm still a du Sang. The urge to *collect* is as natural as breathing. "The lord of the Air Syndicate?" I rasp through my aching throat.

Lucius nods. "You'll have to figure out how to get close to him. He's an aloof son of a bitch. You know how gargoyles are."

I don't, actually. Lord Gothel is the only one I've heard of. He rules old Manhattan—the only part of New York City that's been restored to its pre-war glory. The whole territory is skyscrapers. I'm a daywalker but something about being that much closer to the sun creeps me out. I have no desire to leave the ground.

But my desires rarely factor into the assignments my uncle cooks up for me.

"I can't siphon a book," I say.

"Obviously. This is an old-fashioned theft. I don't care how you get it here. Just do it." He tilts his head. "Your old glamour is compromised since Wotan saw you wearing it. You'll need something new. I'll have Axel bring you a vial."

I'm tempted to ask what's in this for me, but I hold my tongue. I already know the answer.

Nothing. There's nothing in this for me. But I'm trapped. Collared. Suddenly, my dream of reaching the harbor and fleeing south sounds desperately stupid. My uncle has good reasons to keep me under his thumb. He's never going to let me go.

I stand and go to the door. With my hand on the knob, I turn. "What's the name of the book?"

"It doesn't have one."

Exasperation makes my tone sharper than I intend. “Then how am I supposed to find it?”

“You’ll know it when you see it.”

Okay. Suppressing a snort, I open the door.

“Tower.”

I freeze, my shoulders tense.

His voice is like silk, which is how I know his threat is real. “If you ever pull another stunt like you did in the Free Zone, you’ll never leave your room again.”



GOTHEL

I STRETCH MY LEATHERY WINGS WIDE, RELISHING THE WAY THE CRISP, WINTER AIR FEELS AGAINST MY hard skin. The claws that top each wing joint flex and point in the wind, helping make my bulky frame more aerodynamic. Swirling through an updraft, I break through a wispy cloud as I breathe deeply.

The thin air above what used to be Manhattan is so cold, it burns my lungs on the way to filling them. What a time to be alive. When I created the Sky syndicate, I ensured that this island, at the very least, would be rebuilt from the rubble of the war that tore the Veil. Other parts of this world are decaying and decrepit, but not here. Not in *my* territory.

Lights glitter from the towering skyscrapers below me. Smirking, I look down at the cluster of three towers that marks my home territory—a strip of high-end casinos topped by my club, the Aerie. Beings from every syndicate flock to my properties for the opulent sensualism found within. There’s nothing like losing your ass at the poker tables to light a fire in your belly.

For those with more deviant tastes, the Aerie is the most exclusive place to see or be seen. It’s a seductive club for those with exceptional needs.

A strobe cuts through the pitch black night, shimmering as it waves slowly from side to side. To an onlooker it appears only that a light shines in the night. For me, it’s a signal from my grotesques.

I sigh as I flap lazily, staring down at my beautiful properties. Gargoyles are natural collectors of buildings. These three are my prized possessions—not the most prized—but definitely second.

Flattening my wings behind me, I speed like a bullet down toward the Aerie. Far below, my personal assistant, Raoul, stands with his stone arms held tightly behind his back. I speed faster, watching his granite brows arch up and then knit together as he frowns. This is a little power play he and I often engage in.

Swooping low, I aim straight for Raoul’s rock-hard chest. He leaps to the side at the last moment, screeching in anger as he throws himself onto the ground to avoid my body slam. I dig my three-clawed hands into the wall as I turn to him with a snarl, then alight off the vertical surface elegantly.

A give Raoul a cheeky grin as I straighten the lapels on my vest.

“I fucking hate it when you do that,” he grumbles in a ragged, rocky voice. All grotesques sound this way. They’re miniature versions of us gargoyles, unable to ever change out of their stone form, although they’re far more nimble than one might suspect. One of many reasons grotesques are such excellent companions to their larger gargoyle counterparts.

I watch my hand morph from the stone-like claws to something far more human, and I reach for Raoul. He grips my pale gray fingers, squeezing tighter than absolutely necessary as he hauls himself upright, brushing off his tiny vest. The top of his head barely reaches my navel.

Looking down my nose at him, I fold both bulky arms over my broad chest.

“Raoul, if you dug deep for your protector power, you’d be able to stave off that attack easily.”

“So you keep saying,” he hisses back, black eyes flashing in dismay as he picks at the edge of his tunic. “But I don’t feel the power at all, Master Gothel.”

“I do,” I remind him. “It is clear as day to me, and I will continue to push you until you use it.” Glancing up into the dark sky, I smile as I muse aloud. “Perhaps I will toss you off the balcony so you can find that power on your way down to the ground. What say you, Raoul?”

“You wouldn’t,” he hisses, pointing one claw-tipped finger at me angrily. “When I crashed into a million pieces there would be no one to manage your properties and then you would be in a pickle indeed.”

I grunt, folding both hands behind my back as I tuck my wings into a cape, nodding for Raoul to head inside.

He licks dark gray lips as he glances toward the edge of my private balcony on top of the Aerie.

“You wouldn’t, would you?” His voice is small as he looks toward the edge, true apprehension in his eyes.

“Not today,” I laugh. “Now why did you flash the strobe at me?”

Electricity is finicky these days. Magic didn’t combine all that well with human power once the Veil ripped. At best it works, and at the worst, well, I’ve seen buildings destroyed by the unfortunate combination of power and electricity.

“I would not have used it, but Megos has agreed to sell the Cavana building next door. He sent over paperwork just moments ago.”

My eyes flick over the edge of the balcony to the glittery high rise next to my casinos. It is a building I’ve had my eye on since I came through the Veil and became the ruler of the Sky Syndicate. I could take it, certainly, but it is better to create pawns in my game than to simply lord over them with my nearly unlimited power. Plus, I enjoy the give and take. I enjoy the chess game that is ruling a monstrous syndicate.

“Imagine how far you could fly,” Raoul says wistfully.

I bristle at his musing, but he is not wrong. My power is that I understand power. It’s a unique feature of certain gargoyles. It is why my services were so sought after in the other plane. I could take a nearly powerless being and find their power somewhere. My role was to uncover and develop beings, although my methods are my own.

The downside? Gargoyles are bound to their buildings. I can fly straight up for miles, but I cannot fly over buildings that are not mine. It is a secret most gargoyles will guard with their lives, although I suspect it isn’t too difficult to figure out why gargoyles do not stray far from their nests.

I trail Raoul through dark halls lit with pale firelight. Although we have more electricity here in my territory, I prefer not to rely on it. Raoul pulls a lever in a flat wall and the whole wall swings open on a swivel. We pass through, Raoul letting out a contented sigh.

“I adore the library,” he murmurs, looking around.

Grotesques are like gargoyles in nearly all ways, a love of collecting being one of those.

Peering around the four story library that makes up the top-most level of the Aerie, I grin. This library is private to myself and my innermost circle of grotesques. I keep my most prized possession here. No one is allowed in this sanctum without my express permission.

My nest lies off to one side, a pile of blankets atop a raised platform where I can sleep in humanoid form or perch myself and become stone.

“The contract, Raoul?” I hold my hand out as the small male hands me a stack of papers. Flipping

through, I look at the terms. They're good—very good. A win, to be sure. Little by little, my empire grows. And with it, my ability to roam, which is something I'd very much like to do.

“Sign them on my behalf,” I direct him, waving my hand in indication that he may leave my space.

“Home sweet home,” I sigh as I cross the elegantly inlaid parquet floor and sit in a plush, oversized chair. The back is cut out to make room for my folded wings, and they drape over the edge comfortably. I pick up the book I was reading earlier. I prefer to relax before a wild night downstairs in the club.

And tonight is going to be wild indeed.



ABOUT ANNA FURY

Anna Fury is a North Carolina native, fluent in snark and sarcasm, tiki decor, and an aficionado of phallic plants. Visit her on Instagram for a glimpse of the sexiest wiener wallpaper you've ever seen. She currently lives in North Carolina with her Mr. Right, a tiny tornado, and a lovely old dog.

Keep up with new releases by visiting annafury.com

Sign up for her [newsletter](#) to get access to most of her books spicy epilogues, including hours of free audio!



BOOKS BY ANNA FURY

DARK FANTASY SHIFTER OMEGAVERSE

Temple Maze Series

[NOIRE](#) | [JET](#) | [TENEBRIS](#)

DYSTOPIAN OMEGAVERSE

Alpha Compound Series

[THE ALPHA AWAKENS](#) | [WAKE UP, ALPHA](#) | [WIDE AWAKE](#) | [SLEEPWALK](#) | [AWAKE AT LAST](#)

Northern Rejects Series

[ROCK HARD REJECT](#) | [HEARTLESS HEATHEN](#) | [PRETTY LITTLE SINNER](#) | SALVAGED PSYCHO | BEAUTIFUL BEAST

Scan the QR code or visit www.annafury.com to access all my books, socials, current deals and more!



@annafuryauthor
liinks.co/annafuryauthor



ABOUT AMY PENNZA

Amy Pennza is a USA Today Bestselling Author of steamy paranormal and contemporary romance. After stints as a lawyer and a soldier, she discovered her dream job is writing about stubborn alphas and smart heroines. She lives in the Great Lakes region with her husband and five children.

Keep up with new releases by visiting amypennza.com

Sign up for Amy's newsletter and get a FREE scorching-hot paranormal romance!

www.amypennza.com/subscribe



ALSO BY AMY PENNZA

Check out all my books by [visiting my author page](#).

If you like your romance blistering-hot, don't miss my best-selling MMF menage Dragon Lairds Series:

[Kiss of Smoke](#)

[Dark Fire Kiss](#)

[Kiss of a Dragon King](#)

Craving something darker? You'll want to read my Bitten and Bound MMF menage vampire trilogy:

[Given](#)

[Stolen](#)

[Kept](#)

And if you love wolf shifters, check out my ultra-steamy Lux Catena Series. Each book can be read as a standalone:

[What a Wolf Desires](#)

[What a Wolf Dares](#)

[What a Wolf Demands](#)

[What a Wolf's Heart Decides](#)