



# PRINCE OF LIGHT

— A PRINCE OF BLADES NOVEL —  
BOOK 2

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*For W*

*Please don't read this until you're older*

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# Content Warning

Please note this book depicts issues of emotional and physical abuse, drug and alcohol use, sexual assault, graphic sexual scenes, PTSD, death, and fantasy violence. Please be aware that this content may be triggering.

# Prince of Light

by Kay Thatcher

# Chapter One

The scent of citrus hung in the spring air as Eric looked into the Fae prince's eyes. It had been almost a year since he left the merciless world of the Fae behind. Eric got out—he was free. Except, Cithrel stood there with Eric's hand pressed to his chest. Eric ripped his hand away as if it were on fire, realizing who he touched. Cithrel kept his hard blue gaze steady on his face. Then the swell of butterflies withered and rotted in Eric's chest, the refreshing scent of citrus in the air turning sour.

*Cithrel found him.*

The Fae that Eric hated and lusted after when he was a slave in their world was now in the human world. Not only that, but the last time they saw each other, Cithrel had attacked Eric, roaring that he was a traitor.

"Why are you here?" Eric's heart pounded in his chest, while a mixture of rage and fear clawed at his insides. "Forget it. I don't want to know. I don't care. Just get away from me and out of my life."

"We need to talk," Cithrel started, but Eric cut him off.

"No. No, we don't need to talk." Eric reared back. "You attacked me, called me a traitor, and cursed me. We have nothing to talk about. I have to get to class."

Eric turned to leave, heart hammering in his chest, when he heard footsteps behind him. The Fae prince wasn't going to let him leave.

*Shit.*

This wasn't happening. After Solonar helped him escape, Eric had looked over his shoulder for months, paranoid Cithrel would come for him. He was stupid to think he didn't need to be careful anymore. Just when things seemed like they were going back to normal, when he might have a chance to move on, this happened.



His chest constricted, but there was something else there, too. A giddy lightness, and he didn't know why.

"Eric," Cithrel called. "I came here for a reason."

*Don't say it*, Eric pleaded inside. *Don't say it*.

"I have to bring you back."

*No*.

He said it. The bastard actually said it.

"No." Eric's throat turned dry, mangling his voice. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"What?" Cithrel asked.

Eric whirled to face Cithrel, hoping his face didn't betray the fear that laced his veins. He half-snarled to mask the quiver in his voice. "I said no. I'm not going back there, to that hell. I don't give a shit about your duty or the empire."

He glanced around the campus for anyone else nearby, but what few students were around were clearly engrossed in their own worlds. His eyes darted back to Cithrel Aloneth, fourth prince of Alonetha, Prince Commander of the Imperial Army, and Prince of Blades.

Eric wondered how the hell Cithrel managed to make it this far into human civilization looking the way he did. The Fae prince's armor was gone, but he still stood out with his white shirt and leather straps wrapped across his chest. Not to mention what looked like riding pants with leather straps wrapped around those, too. Eric cursed himself for lingering along the hard planes of Cithrel's muscles that peeked out from opening of his shirt. Finally, a collection of striking platinum braids hung past the Fae prince's shoulders, practically highlighting the sharp point to his ears and the arctic blue of his piercing gaze. The angel-faced prince stared back, his face a blank slate. He wasn't an angel to Eric anymore, not right now at least. Cithrel was Eric's own personal demon.

"Things are not so simple, Eric. It's not safe anymore. You have to come back." Cithrel reached for him.

Whether it was seeing the Fae prince for the first time in months, or the trauma of being faced with his worst fear, Cithrel trying to grab Eric triggered something in him.

A long-dormant feeling blazed to life inside him. A tendril of flame ran through the nerves in his arm and into his chest. Before he knew what he was doing, Eric reacted. In one fluid movement Eric dodged the prince's reach and grabbed hold of Cithrel's arm, twisting and pulling the prince down.

Cithrel's back slammed into the green campus grass with a heavy thud. Eric's chest was heaving, every fiber and tendon burning with adrenaline. The prince looked up at him, icy blue eyes wide. He was as shocked as Eric at what just happened.

Eric shouldn't have been able to do that. Cithrel was a high-born pureblooded Fae with an unmatched speed and skill for killing. It should have been easy for him to counter Eric. What the hell just happened?

He stood petrified, jaw slack, waiting for the prince to summon a blade of chains to restrain him in a flash of brilliant aether light. But there was no light, no chains. Just cold, detached eyes that stared up at him. A trickle of realization started to flow in Eric's mind before it flooded his thoughts. How could he have forgotten?

Eric looked down at his Marking. Cithrel couldn't use his magic here for the same reason no one else but Eric could see his Marking, and why the constant duress he was in had disappeared. They were in the severed world. Humanity was aether-cursed; the aether, and magic with it, was cut off from the human world.

It was just a theory before—that the Fae wouldn't be able to use their power in this world. . He couldn't have been sure until now. But seeing Cithrel unable to use his aether, it all made sense.

Then Eric was given a painful reminder that even without Cithrel's magic to help him, he was still a supernatural being with inhuman strength and speed. He had just been lucky and caught the Fae prince off guard a second ago.

The fourth prince got to his feet blindingly fast. Eric had no hope of tracking Cithrel's movements. Then the prince had his arm around Eric's throat and started dragging him backwards with his other arm wrapped around Eric's waist, away from the few people already on campus.

Eric clawed at the Fae's arms for purchase, to get any room to breathe, but Cithrel's grip was as hard as iron. Eric's hazel eyes went wide as he gave in to his panic, letting it run rampant with every worst-case scenario he'd ever thought of if this exact thing happened. They were all terrible.

"We don't have a choice, Eric. We need the Marked One and you need us." Cithrel's grip tightened like a noose around Eric's neck.

There it was. The Fae needed the magic in Eric's blood, not him. He was just a tool, a weapon. He was not a killer and he wouldn't be used by these supernatural beings who played at being gods. Not to mention, the way Cithrel kept saying "we" grated at Eric more than he wanted it to. As if Cithrel was somehow less responsible for his own actions. It pissed Eric off.

"N-no." Eric's choked out refusal hung in the air.

His heart thrummed more in anger now than terror. He latched onto the feeling, letting the adrenaline flow through him. Months and months of suppressed feelings surfaced and overflowed—anger and hurt and fear and even longing.

Eric's jaw hardened, but his lip quivered. "I'm not going back."

"He found you, Eric."

The air rushed from Eric's lungs. There was only one Fae that Cithrel could be talking about now. It was *him*. Krysos Therion, the Fae king.

A million questions flitted through his mind, but somehow he found himself saying, "How?"

"We don't know how he was able to track you down so fast, but he found out you weren't in Alonetha. That you were in the severed world." Cithrel's words were measured but his

hold on Eric didn't lighten. "With war inevitable, it isn't a surprise that he has a spy in the palace. Which is why you need to come back with me."

Eric scoured Cithrel's words for any indication of him subverting the truth. There had to be something more he wasn't saying. He wished he could see the prince's face right now, what his expression might be. If it was one full of earnestness, or if he was guarded, masked.

After a loaded silence, Eric shook his head. "No. I'm not going back there. I can protect myself here where the aether doesn't reach."

"Protect yourself? You seem to be struggling to do just that right now. If I were the Fae king, you'd already be dead."

A surge of hurt went through Eric at the clear disappointment from the prince. He was quick to crush it, though, because Cithrel wasn't the one still dealing with the trauma of the last six years of his life. Six years was practically a blink to a being that lived for millennia. Instead, Eric let his anger well up in him at the arrogance of the Fae, of Cithrel.

Eric wasn't going anywhere.

Eric grabbed a fistful of Cithrel's lightweight shirt and the arm around his throat. With a kick to the prince's planted foot, Eric used the momentum and advantage of surprise to throw Cithrel off him. He sucked in a breath as the prince's hold broke.

The prince stumbled, regained his footing and spun around to face Eric. The look of surprise flashed across the prince's face at Eric's newfound strength, but the look quickly vanished, his apathetic mask back in place. The same look he'd given Eric all those nights ago when he was about to kill him\_after he'd killed Eric's friends. Despite everything between him and Cithrel, that night between them was rife with bad blood and was a night they'd never settled.

Eric had thrown himself into exercise after he got back home. His older brother, to his credit, was a huge supporter of

Eric working to get stronger. The two of them trained together and Bryce taught Eric several self-defense moves in case Eric ever found himself in a similar situation. Though Bryce never said so, it was written all over the tight lines of anxiety in his face. The stronger Eric was, the better chance he had to defend himself. For situations like now.

“You should go.” Eric kept his guard up. He wouldn’t let Cithrel create a fissure in his life that he just barely put back together.

“I can’t leave you here,” Cithrel said. When Eric said nothing back, Cithrel took a single step forward, eating up the space between them. A hint of citrus wafted towards Eric. “It’s my responsibility to bring you back. I won’t return without you.”

Eric’s face contorted. “You keep saying that, but I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Cithrel stood there motionless, an unmovable rock against crashing and violent waters.

“Krysos’s threat against you and the empire was clear. He wanted your head and made sure we knew it. You were there when he promised to destroy you.”

Eric remembered that day. He couldn’t forget it. The Fae king had been at his mercy and Eric had let him live. Eric swallowed, his throat tight. Would this be happening right now if he’d just killed that Fae? But if he’d taken a monster’s life, wouldn’t he have been just as bad?

The longer Eric’s thoughts spiraled, the more he felt the lines of right and wrong blur in his head. He glanced back to Cithrel; his brow was creased. Weary lines ran deep and marred Cithrel’s face, which Eric was just noticing.

Cithrel took a step towards Eric and devoured what little tense space was between them. He spoke, voice low. “The last missive Krysos sent wasn’t a warning, it was a victory call. He’s toying with us, playing at his own perverse game. He *found* you, Eric. How many times must I repeat myself? We need to leave this place, now.”

Eric stared in disbelief. Then he looked down at the Marking on his forearm with a renewed loathing he hadn't felt in ages. The charred black marks seared into his skin were back to haunt him. A chasm opened a fraction of a second later as the prince's words, the truth hidden behind them, sunk in. He felt himself beginning to be swayed. Maybe the prince had a point. They were talking in circles, neither one wanting to hear the other. Eric wanted to hear him, but there was still something that nagged at his thoughts, pulling at his uncertainty.

"I just came home," Eric murmured. "I just got my life back. Why would you wait until now to come for me if he was hunting me? Why did you let me think it was over?"

There was a twitch to Cithrel's cheek, a small involuntary flex of a muscle, that betrayed his anger, or maybe guilt. They appraised each other for a moment, neither one's emotions budging.

"We thought it was better for you to stay here. That you were hidden." Cithrel's broad shoulders pinched tight at the admission. "Until now. It's better for you and everyone else to come back with me."

It wasn't what Eric wanted to hear. He didn't want to be told what he had to do. His time of having to take orders for fear of being beaten was over. Cithrel was still the same. All the Fae were the same. They didn't care about humans, didn't see them as anything more than a tool for them to use as they wished.

"Like hell it's better for me. I was a slave. I was someone's fucking pet!" Eric's nostrils flared; his hazel eyes blazed with an unquenched hatred. "I don't give a shit what you think is best for me because the last time we saw each other, you were content to lock me back up."

"Eric—"

"Fuck you," Eric spat. "Go back to your messed up life. You seemed fine enough for the past eight months without me."

At that Cithrel's mask cracked and shattered. "Because you have been *alive*, Eric! I have stayed away because you were safe." He glowered at Eric, a hidden emotion danced in his hard blue stare. "But you're not safe anymore. Krysos's assassins could already be here. You are in danger."

Eric's eyes shone. "The only danger I'm in is being near you."

Cithrel lunged to tackle Eric then, any pretense of talking over. Except, Eric was on more equal footing with the Fae prince in the severed world. He pivoted on his back foot and avoided the angel-faced Fae's main attack, but still felt the Fae prince's other arm slam across his rib cage.

Eric grabbed hold of Cithrel's arm and planted himself, not letting Cithrel knock him back over, before he drove his elbow into Cithrel's back.

Seemingly unfazed by the hit, Cithrel managed to break his arm free and wrenched it around Eric's wrists, immobilizing him from behind before Eric could get another punch in.

"I don't want to fight you, Eric," the prince said, his voice gruff. "I don't want to hurt you, either, but I will ensure you come back with me."

If Eric wasn't in a headlock, he would have scoffed. What a shit thing to say, especially coming from a being that mastered the art of manipulating the truth. He wouldn't believe a single word out of Cithrel's mouth, even if the Fae couldn't technically lie. One thing that Eric learned early on after he was abducted was the quirk that Fae, high-blood or not, were compelled to always speak the truth. Of course, that only made them that much better at spinning the truth, twisting it beyond recognition. Eric planted his back foot again and with a sharp inhale, he kicked at the prince's knee. When Cithrel lost his footing Eric freed his arm and drove his elbow straight into Cithrel's face again and again. A sickening crunch told Eric he'd hit his mark and the Fae prince's nose was likely broken.

It was a damn good feeling, even if Eric's heart thundered in his chest. He staggered back and out of Cithrel's reach as soon as he could, his hazel eyes wild with a rush of energy.

"I don't want to hear anything that spews from your mouth." His chest heaved. "I'm not going back to the place that treated me like an animal, that left me covered with scars, inside and out. Stay the hell away from me."

A crowd began to form by then, which Eric was grateful for. It gave him the chance he needed to get away from the prince and vanish. He started to back away quickly, sinking in with the forming crowd now that most eyes were on the prince.

Cithrel still reached a hand out for Eric, refusing to give up. The prince's mouth opened to form words, probably some attempt at convincing Eric, but no sound came.

Eric turned and grabbed his backpack from between a few onlookers' feet, which had been flung away during the struggle. He didn't look back and jogged away as fast as he could without drawing more attention to himself. He wasn't about to wait for Cithrel to get back up and have another chance to drag him back to his worst nightmare. Eric held his breath until he had no idea where he was headed.

Before he knew it, he was seated in his classroom and even then, he couldn't stop his leg from bouncing. At least Cithrel would have no idea where to begin searching for Eric, so he guessed being in class might actually be the safer option right now. His phone screen was lit up, Bryce's number waiting to be dialed. Eric's thumb hesitated. Would he even believe Eric?

*Shit.*

Of course he wouldn't. Bryce had never believed Eric about the truth of what happened to him when he'd disappeared for nearly six years. So why would he start now?

Shoving the phone back into his pocket, Eric bit at his thumb nail, his leg still bouncing full of adrenaline and



anxiety. He didn't know what the hell he was supposed to do.

All class he was distracted. He couldn't stop thinking about Cithrel and why he came back now after months of nothing. There was no way it had taken the prince that long to actually track Eric down. He knew where Eric was from. Even with the Fae's disconnect with the severed world, the human world, a battle-hardened commander of an army could have tracked Eric down in less than a month. Either someone kept him away, or there wasn't enough reason to come for Eric until now. Both options made him uneasy because Fae didn't do anything for anyone unless they got something out of it.

Eric shook his head. No matter how much he thought about it, there wasn't any feasible escape from the Fae prince. His hands balled into fists, knowing that Cithrel wouldn't stop until he brought Eric back. This was a disaster.

"I expect you all to be ready for your midterms next week." The professor's voice cut through Eric's bedraggled thoughts.

As students' raucous voices suddenly filled the air at their dismissal, Eric sat in his seat, staring off at nothing. It didn't matter what way he took out of class but he knew in his bones that Cithrel would have found him and would be waiting.

His heart thumped erratically and he clutched at his chest, as if he could steady the beating with touch alone. Sensory memories unloaded into his mind's eye. He felt the tearing of his skin against bark, the pungent taste of sap that stuck to his lips, the tightness of his body as he was dragged into the woods before he vanished into the darkness of trees.

Eric gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. That was years ago, and he was different now. It wouldn't happen again. More memories taunted him of being whipped and dragged in chains. His hands tightened into fists. It wouldn't happen again.

The recollections and phantom sensations overwhelmed him. He couldn't breathe. He thought his heart

was going to explode in his chest. Eric's eyes snapped open and he staggered to a wall, leaning up against it for support.

His hands trembled as he slid his backpack off his shoulder. Every shaking movement seemed to last forever as he held himself tight, like he could physically hold it in. Other students noticed and stared, some turning around to take another way out of the building.

"Shit," he whispered. His whole chest palpitated.

Running a sweaty palm over his face and through his hair, Eric felt as if he'd been hit by a train. He managed to collect himself and worked up the courage to make his way outside. There was no chance in hell he was going to his other classes. He needed to get out of here and away from Cithrel.

*Holy shit.*

Even thinking it didn't seem real. Cithrel was back. He wasn't hallucinating, and the prince wanted to take Eric back to Alonetha. It wasn't fair. He'd just started to pick up the pieces of his old life, he'd just found a shred of normalcy. He couldn't even imagine abandoning school, his brother, and his freedom all over again. Old survival instincts surged, mixing with his growing anger at everything he'd suffered and was forced to live through.

Grinding his teeth together, Eric was across the quad and had almost made it to the next set of tunnels on campus when he felt eyes on him. He whirled around but there were only other students lingering around campus, making their way to the library, or stragglers late for class. No pointed ears or blond braids or a sculpted jaw and toned chest....

He shook his head, banishing the thoughts, and ran the rest of the way to his bus stop. His gaze kept darting around, searching for the icy-eyed Fae, but he was nowhere to be seen. That made Eric feel even worse. The sensation of being watched clung to his skin and kept his hackles raised. It only worsened as he got off at his stop.

Eric threw glances over his shoulder the entire walk back to his house, even taking side streets and a back alley

before he landed at his doorstep. Still, the dread pooled in his gut and the unseen gaze continued to burn at the back of his skull.

Eric's chest was heaving as he locked the front door behind him, eyes narrowed with suspicion. Cithrel was out there, watching him. He sensed it.

"Hey!" Bryce appeared from the kitchen, tea towel slung over his shoulder. "Why aren't you in class?" He looked like he'd just rolled out of bed, still in his sweats and a ratty T-shirt.

Bryce had the same features as Eric, only more grizzled. Both had hazel eyes with freckles and unruly brown curls but Bryce's eyes were darker, angrier, his hair buzzed short with a trimmed beard. He got that rough exterior a long time ago when it was up to him to take care of a seven-year-old Eric by himself.

Eric flinched in surprise. He forgot his brother was off duty for a few days.

*Damn it.*

"Nothing," he blurted, slinking his backpack off. "Just a headache is all."

Bryce's hard eyes softened at that; a knowing look spread on his face. "Are the nightmares getting worse again?"

They got worse by the day, but that wasn't his problem right now. "Yeah," Eric lied. "Probably just need some sleep and I'll feel better."

His brother nodded. "Sure." He scratched his beard. "I know things aren't great between us lately, but that doesn't mean I don't care about you. You can talk to me about whatever's going on."

Eric paused at that, letting his brother's words sink in for a moment. He opened his mouth to tell him his worst fears had come true, that they were trying to take him back, but then he closed it again. Bryce didn't believe him eight months ago and he wouldn't believe him now. He didn't want to start

another argument, another fight. So he shuttered his feelings and gave a simple nod. “Yeah, I know.”

Bryce scrutinized his little brother, smelling the lie a mile away now. But he just nodded, half to himself, and shuffled back into the kitchen.

When Eric was alone in the entryway again, he let out a long, heavy sigh and his body sagged. He felt so tired\_of everything.

The front window to the living room shattered, sending a spray of glass shards everywhere.

Eric threw his hands up to shield his eyes. His arms stung where stray pieces of glass bit at his skin. He looked down at himself and at the aching mess his arms were now. His eyes were wide as he reached a hand towards his arm. Blood welled and ran down his forearms. There were several shallow cuts, but among them was a long shard of glass sticking out of Eric’s arm.

Eric’s breath shook, his heart thundered as he touched the shard. He recoiled with a wince as a fresh stab of pain ran up his arm. Eric swore and gritted his teeth, trying to steel himself to try and pull it out.

“Eric?” Bryce shouted, appearing in front of him, features hardened.

Eric was about to answer his brother when he heard glass crunching underneath boots. He looked over to see four silhouettes cloaked in shadows, every inch of them dripping with death.

Eric’s death.

“Kill them,” one hissed in a sinuous voice. “We’ll take their bodies back to our king.”

His heart pounded, adrenaline and fear spiked, and Eric was immobilized. He was dead. There was nowhere to run and he was outnumbered. The best he could hope for was that they’d give up on Bryce if they had him. With a tremulous breath, Eric shifted in front of his older brother.

Movement flashed in Eric's periphery then and when he blinked, a lone figure stood between Eric and what he now realized were killers sent by the Fae king. All memories of their fight from earlier vanished and all Eric felt was a rush of relief at the fourth prince's presence.

Cithrel's body shifted, his muscles tensed and relaxed all at once. He stared down the four assailants that surrounded them and reached behind his back. Slowly, Eric heard the unmistakable sound of gliding metal. A gleaming short sword appeared in Cithrel's grip, aimed at the assassins.

The prince only had a single sword against four trained killers. The odds looked grim.

The Fae king found Eric. Now the Fae who wanted to take away Eric's freedom, the Prince of Blades, stood between him and death.

## Chapter Two

The Fae killers lunged forward, but Cithrel moved faster, his sword clashing against one of the assassin's daggers at the last second. A second dagger flashed through the air and sailed towards Eric, just barely glancing the edge of his ear.

He winced, sucking in a sharp breath, his hand flying to his ear. Red coated his fingertips when he pulled his hand away. He heard sounds of metal clanging, followed by a howl of fury and pain.

"Get back or I'll shoot!"

Eric turned to see one of the assassins staring down his brother, gun pointed.

*No.*

Before Eric could react, even warn Bryce, the Fae moved too fast to track. Its fist connected with Bryce's face. Bone crunched and blood flew before Bryce's body slumped.

Eric watched in horror, racing to his brother but too slow, as the killer drove its dagger home into Bryce's chest.

Eric wasn't fast enough, but Cithrel was. The fourth prince was one of the fastest Fae Eric had ever seen. True to form, Cithrel had his sword up and through the other Fae's body before the dagger could fully bury itself in Bryce.

"Stay close!" Cithrel barked.

He ripped his sword out and entrails spilled from the assassin's eviscerated body. Black gore splattered all over Cithrel, but he was already moving again, charging towards another Fae. Eric needed to defend himself and his unconscious brother.

He dashed away and grabbed the long butcher's knife from their kitchen before he readied himself, adrenaline washing over him. The house was a massacre and it made Eric's stomach twist with nausea, worsened by the persistent

sting of the glass that was still stuck in his arm. But it didn't matter—he was going to protect his brother no matter what.

Sounds of crashing and shrieks came from across the room and Cithrel went flying into the dining table. Eric whipped around to avoid the debris as wood splintered and shot out around him. He glanced up, searching for Cithrel in the wreckage. Was he alright?

A shape moved and pulled itself back up amidst the destruction. Gold blood dripped from Cithrel's chest before his wounds slowly closed up, his supernatural body could still heal even in the severed world it seemed, and he was on his feet again, charging and sweeping the assassin's legs out from under it before slamming his sword down into its chest.

Black blood spurted from the Fae's mouth as their body slammed into the hardwood flooring. The floor caved in, a crater forming from the force of the assassin's body crumpling in on itself. The sound of bones shattering and organs being eviscerated filled the room. Cithrel was already in motion, his sword ripped from the mangled corpse and plunging towards another Fae attacker, but they evaded the fourth prince.

When Eric looked up he had just enough time to see another Fae assassin charging at him, metallic claws overlaid on its hands sharpened at him. The attacker wore shadows like it was its skin, but underneath the darkness that coiled around the assassin was a rotting stench. The smell of mold and bloated corpses filled Eric's lungs. He coughed and gagged as the awful smell slammed into him. Whatever kind of Fae attacked Eric was clearly already dead.

Eric slashed at the Fae with the butcher knife, driving the Fae back for an instant. The Fae moved fast and dodged Eric easily enough before advancing again, their movements like tracking smoke. The assassin was everywhere at once but impossible to strike. Its movements only served to percolate the noxious odor.

It was all Eric could do to block one attack before metallic claws raked along his other arm. He cried out before

sucking in a sharp breath as droplets of crimson beaded from where his skin had just been sliced. The strength in that arm waned, all but giving out after the glass had embedded into him earlier, as pain overtook him. It was all Eric could do to slump forward, his good arm over Bryce's unconscious body like a shield.

"Eric!" Cithrel roared.

The Fae prince threw himself forward and brought his sword down to the hilt into the body of another Fae assassin before they could move. He skewered the assailant and jerked the short sword back out in one swift motion, sending a spray of black blood across the room.

Eric flinched as the hot spray hit his face. His entire body shivered, a mixture of pain and an old wound reopening at the sensation of being coated in someone else's blood.

Cithrel was at Eric's side, his arctic stare roving over him before landing on his bloodied arm. His lips thinned into a hard line. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"I'm fine," Eric huffed. "Are you?"

Cithrel reared back, as if Eric just asked something stupid. "My duty is to keep you alive and bring you back, Eric. Nothing else matters."

"My brother matters," Eric corrected.

Cithrel glowered at him, his cold mask in place, but Eric just glared right back.

All of a sudden, Eric was thrown into a wall, knocking the air out of him at the same time as his head snapped back with a painful crack. His eyes went wide, stunned, before pain riddled its way through his entire body. He slumped to the floor, blinded by the pain.

With what little strength Eric had left in his good arm, he searched the ground for the knife he dropped and grabbed it. Then he hurled it towards one of the Fae attackers. They deflected the knife away with ease, but it was the opening Cithrel needed.



The fourth prince lunged forward, his blade striking out like a snake and burying itself in the assassin before he slashed across, tearing through muscle and bone. The assassin's body slumped to the ground, nearly in two pieces, as Cithrel pivoted to face the final assassin.

Cithrel and the final assassin danced around each other, swiping and blocking. Now that it was one-on-one, the Fae assassin didn't stand a chance. Not against the prince commander.

That was when a Fae Path opened.

Eric's stomach plummeted as the air snapped and sizzled with magic, the glow of a dark forest revealed in the portal. Worse than that was the other Fae waiting there. Krysos was prepared to do whatever it took to have Eric, that much was clear from the countless Fae assassins before them.

The assassin's eyes, gray as stone, locked onto Eric then without so much as blinking. Eric felt it, the knowing dread balling up and squeezing in his gut: this Fae wanted Eric's life. Needed to take his life like killing was an addiction.

It was enough to draw Cithrel's focus for a split-second, enough for the assassins to make a move. Cithrel realized his mistake a breath too late as one Fae brought their sickle blade across the fourth prince's neck.

Cithrel dodged at the last minute, but the tip of the knife's hook was still able to tear through his flesh. Golden blood trailed down Cithrel's chest, staining his torn white shirt. His hand flew to his throat to staunch the blood flow.

A wave of awful foreboding cascaded through the entire house then and Eric's knees shook. When he looked over, Cithrel's face was bloodied and full of boundless killing intent. His aura was crippling even without the full power of his aether. The Fae assassin froze, their body locking up as the weight of fear pressed in on them. A second later, the assassin's head hit the floor with a wet thud and rolled across the destroyed kitchen.

“Eric!” Bryce shouted, who must have regained consciousness at some point. He charged from behind, a look of panic in his hard eyes.

It sounded cliché, but time felt as if it slowed down, almost frozen, in that moment.

Bryce dove for Eric, his hands outstretched as if to knock him out of the way, and there was no possible way to avoid the tackle. Cithrel shouted something at Eric, but amidst the cacophony of violence, Eric couldn’t hear what because a low hungry growl rumbled behind him.

Slowly, Eric turned to see what Bryce was trying to protect him from. The gray-eyed Fae who craved murder was just behind Eric. Its hands clawed like a ravenous beast’s, ready to tear its quarry to pieces. It stared wide-eyed and still unblinking, spittle hanging from its open mouth to reveal rows and rows of teeth. Not shark teeth, like one would expect, no, these teeth looked like they were for pulverizing, for grinding into nothingness.

Teeth that were ready to destroy Eric.

Then time moved too fast.

Bryce’s bulking mass hit Eric full-force and sent them hurtling backwards in the air. The gray-eyed Fae’s teeth clamped down where Eric’s neck had been seconds ago, tasting thin air. It roared in frustration and dashed after Eric. Cithrel chased after them, his cold mask in place. The prince was in a trance, like killing was second nature to him.

Eric squeezed his eyes shut, cringing as he waited for the pain of hitting drywall to come, but instead the breath was knocked out of him again as he crashed into dirt and dead leaves with Bryce’s full weight on top of him.

His eyes went wide with the sudden rush of every single nerve ending lighting up with aether. It felt like his blood sang, the melody shrill, its notes too high, screaming with relief and vitality as the long-dormant magic roused back to life.

Eric let out a silent scream as all his power came rushing back. His arm burned and burned, scorching his flesh as the aether settled.

His gaze fogged as he looked over at Cithrel, whose shoulders finally seemed to relax as he let out a long breath. A second later the prince's entire body shimmered, the glow of his aether magnificent as the clothing he wore in the severed world, Eric's world, vanished. Now the Fae's body was adorned with his signature silver armor, the emblazoned sigil of a black doe on his chest plate, complete with emerald cloak.

How many times had Eric eyed Cithrel in his armor and wanted him? This time was no different, it seemed. He didn't know whether he felt shame, or maybe anticipation, the longer he drank in the sight of the armored prince.

Cithrel's arms spread wide, his fingers splayed, and the air filled with citrus. The Wilder Woods just outside the capital city were alight with power as Cithrel summoned countless weapons that surrounded every assassin, caging them with nowhere to go.

Eric saw the murderous Fae still had his gaze trained on Eric as his entire body was skewered by Cithrel's innumerable blades. He watched as the shine to the assassin's eyes faded and his body hung limp, stuck in place by Cithrel's power.

With a flick of his wrists, a macabre conductor, all of Cithrel's weapons vanished and the bodies fell to the earth in a ghastly chorus.

Eric's brother eyed the mangled bodies that littered the ground of the darkened woods before he aimed his gun at Cithrel, who to him was a stranger covered in strange gold liquid and wielding a sword.

"Bryce, don't," Eric coughed out. "It's not what you think."

Eric gritted his teeth. His arm stung; the pain and blood loss were taking their toll.

Then Cithrel was at Eric's side, ignoring his own cut throat, and began to tend to Eric's sliced-open arm.

"There's a hole in your neck," Eric said. "You should probably fix that first."

Cithrel tore a piece of his jacket off like tearing paper. "It's already healed, the blood just smeared. Never mind me though, you're human. If I don't get this bleeding under control, there won't be a Marked One to bring back."

Eric shot a look at his brother, who looked like he was in shock, or was just patiently waiting for Cithrel to mend his wounds before he tried to kill him. He wasn't sure how to go about explaining everything to his brother, so instead Eric's mouth snapped shut and he watched Cithrel work in silence. It was hard to argue with that logic. He didn't feel like dying today.

When the Fae prince finished with Eric's arm, he fished through his coat and pulled out a small vial with a murky-looking liquid in it. Cithrel grabbed Eric's face with one hand, applying enough pressure to force Eric's mouth open, and dumped the vial's contents down Eric's throat with his other hand.

Eric choked and sputtered, but managed to swallow the whole thing. "Shit. You could've just asked me."

"I don't have to ask your permission to keep you alive," Cithrel replied, voice hard.

They both watched as the shredded mess of flesh, blood, and bone that was Eric's arm began to stitch itself back together and heal. It felt as if the vial's contents inside him had come to life and moved of its own will. The aether flowed freely, nudged along by the remedy Cithrel gave him, and within moments Eric's arm was perfectly fine.

As Eric shook his head, memories of the two of them together leaked into his mind. With them came all the frustration, the uncertainty, but most of all the anger. Now the fourth prince was back, and everything was already so complicated.

“Step away from him, *now*,” Bryce commanded, his voice full of anger.

Never mind, it just got even more complicated. Eric turned to face his brother at the same time as Cithrel got to his feet, picking his sword back up.

“Who are you and what did you just do to us?” Bryce kept his gun leveled on Cithrel.

“Bryce, hold on.” Eric held up his hands, his mind a mess. “Just let me explain.”

“Explain why we just *teleported* and then I watched you and that psycho with a sword murder people?”

*Shit.*

Eric turned to the Fae prince, who was eyeing Bryce like he was an annoying gnat. “Cithrel, please. Put your sword away.”

Cithrel acted like Eric didn’t say anything.

*Great.*

“You have the same eyes,” Cithrel spoke, his words like plunging into ice water. “You must be Eric’s brother.”

“I’m warning you,” Bryce said. “Tell me who you are now and what’s going on or I’ll shoot.”

Cithrel eyed Eric’s brother with a chilling disinterest. “I don’t take orders from a human.” Then he turned his attention to Eric. “I told you it wasn’t safe. We’re returning to the palace.”

Eric opened his mouth to explain when Bryce fired a single shot directly into Cithrel’s chest. The sound made Eric’s ears ring and the force of impact should have knocked Cithrel back. But he stood motionless, as if Bryce had just shot stone.

The Fae prince turned his attention from Eric back to Bryce, seemingly unbothered by the stream of gold blood that poured from his chest. Then, Bryce watched in harrowed silence as the wound slowly began to close itself up, pushing the bullet out as it went. The crumpled bullet fell to the earth.

“What the fuck....” Bryce’s voice trailed off as he stared at Cithrel wide-eyed.

He emptied the rest of his clip into Cithrel’s skull. Eric gasped, not knowing what would happen if the Fae prince was shot in the head, but still, the bullets fell to the forest floor at Cithrel’s feet. The crumpled pieces of gold-stained metal.

“Let me explain, please,” Eric begged again.

Bryce shook his head, slack jawed. It was like he didn’t want to believe what saw, or rather he couldn’t comprehend it. It was then that Bryce seemed to finally take in Cithrel and everything about him, including the sharp points to his ears that poked out from his twin platinum braids. When he looked back at Eric, there was fear in his eyes, but also something Eric had never seen. Like Bryce was beginning to understand Eric for the first time since he came back.

Bryce’s voice was soft when he finally spoke. “I think there’s a lot to explain.”

The entire time Eric told his story, Cithrel stood by like an apparition dead set on haunting Eric, his stony gaze scanning the woods for any other threats. Occasionally, Eric felt the prince’s gaze on his back, but after a moment the prickling sensation would dissipate as if he’d gone back to watching the darkness around them.

Being hunted by Krysos was maddening and terrifying, like a waking nightmare he feared would be worse when he closed his eyes. He’d been so caught up in finally escaping the Alonethan family that he forgot about the vindictive Fae king who promised Eric he would kill him. In one morning, the freedom he just started to believe in was gone.

“Eric.” His attention snapped to Bryce. His brother’s hands were clenched together, his face withered and rattled. “This just doesn’t make sense. It can’t be real.”

Bryce’s eyes blazed with understanding but also frustration. He clearly struggled to come to an acceptance of what had unfolded. He couldn’t rationalize supernatural beings and yet, he’d fallen through a portal, watched Cithrel and Eric

use magic, and then failed to kill Cithrel with several bullets to the head.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Eric soldiered on. “But it’s really not safe for you here.”

Eric’s brother’s face crumpled. He started to shake his head, running both of his work-weathered hands over his shaved head. “No, it’s not possible....” He trailed off and Eric heard it in his brother’s voice that he didn’t believe his own words.

After a heavy exhale, Bryce lifted his gaze to Eric. Eric stared back, hands still clenched tight. Bryce opened his mouth to say something, but when he came up with nothing, he closed it again.

Disappointment flared in Eric’s chest. He waited, hoping for Bryce to finally believe him. He just wanted his brother to say something, anything, but he couldn’t even do that. At least he didn’t think Eric was crazy anymore. Cithrel caught Eric’s notice and gave him a warning look.

“Bryce, you can’t stay here,” Eric said. “You need to go back before someone else sees you.”

Bryce’s eyes sharpened; his full attention zeroed in on Eric. “I think you mean *we*. Eric, you’re not going anywhere. Definitely not with him.”

His brother didn’t understand the situation they were in now. If Eric didn’t go back, Bryce was as good as dead. His chest felt like it was caving in and the back of his throat stung, tears threatening to spill over. He didn’t want to leave his brother behind, not again. The thought of going back to the Fae world made him want to vomit but he didn’t have a choice, not really, not if it meant keeping his brother alive and safe. Eric ran a hand through his curls, mentally wishing he could wash this blood from his face. He was suddenly so tired, drained from it all.

“I’m being hunted, Bryce. This place isn’t safe for you. What they’ll do to you....” Eric paused, shaking off his old memories. “You need to go. It’s not safe for you and Ava with

me around. I have to go back to the palace, back to Alonetha, at least until things settle down.”

“Not a chance in hell.” Bryce threw up a hand in frustration. “They abducted you, Eric! You barely made it home. You could have died. It’s insane to go back to that sick place. You’re coming back with me.”

Eric’s mouth formed a hard line. “We both know I can’t, Bryce.”

“Eric is staying with me, human.” Cithrel turned his chilling stare on Bryce. “I have orders to bring him back to the palace. Go back to your world with your life intact while I’m still allowing it.”

“Like fuck. You just came home, Eric. What that place did to you....” He paused to glare at Cithrel. “I’m not letting you go back there.”

Eric and Bryce fumed at each other, neither one backing down. “Just stop,” Eric said. “I’ll be safe with him.”

“Safe?” Bryce spat. “Like how he kept you safe for the years you were gone? Your mind and body are a fucking mess thanks to him keeping you *safe*.”

Eric’s teeth ground together. “Cithrel had nothing to do with the scars I carry.”

As much as he agreed with Bryce, Cithrel was right. His brother and his family would be in too much danger if Eric stayed in the human world. Once Eric was back in Alonetha, Krysos would turn his attention back to the Alonethan Empire.

“Eric—”

He cut his brother off, turning to look at Cithrel. “Send my brother back. Keep him hidden. They won’t care about Bryce once I go back right? I’m the only one they want so once they know I’m back they should leave him alone. Promise me you’ll watch over him, find a way to keep him hidden and I’ll go back with you. I’ll do whatever the empire wants me to.”



Cithrel regarded him, glacier gaze roving over Eric. Whatever he saw in Eric's expression must have satisfied him because he crossed his arms and hardened his jaw. "I promise to send your brother back and keep him hidden."

The pressure in Eric's chest lessened just a little. *Thank god.* "Thank you."

"You don't get to decide what I do, Eric!" Bryce shouted. "And I'm not letting you do this to yourself."

Cithrel bristled at that, but Eric ignored it. He didn't know when he would see Bryce again. And Ava's due date was coming up soon. He was going to miss seeing his niece or nephew. Would he ever meet them?

Eric swallowed the hard lump in his throat. He didn't want to go to the palace, not with Cithrel, not back to that world of deception and never-ending nightmares. Going back meant he had to face all of his demons again, with no end in sight.

His hands fisted at his sides. If he thought like that, he was already lost. So instead he forced a smile at his brother.

"Go back to Ava."

The Fae Path hummed and glowed from behind Eric's brother, a window of where Bryce was heading back. Back to his home, back to his life with his family. Cithrel promised he would keep Eric's brother hidden from the Fae king.

Then Cithrel shoved Bryce through the portal.

The Fae Path disappeared, and with it, so did Eric's brother and his home.

Cithrel materialized from the cover of night at Eric's side. Eric turned to face the Fae prince that uprooted his life once more. Part of him wondered if he would ever truly be free of Cithrel and another part of him, separate, small and quiet, hoped he wouldn't be.

Cithrel didn't take his eyes off Eric, not for a second. He waited.

“Alright.” Eric sucked in a sharp breath before letting it out. “Take me back to Alonetha.”

The prince’s shoulders pulled together tight, every muscle along his back tensed, as if his own skin rebelled against him. He was on edge as much as Eric was, but Eric had no idea why.

They lost no time setting out through the woods. Loosing a sigh, Eric’s tired gaze slid from the twisting path to his forearm where his Marking stood out against his freckled skin.

Since he’d been back in the Fae World, his body hadn’t rebelled against the Marking and the aether that flowed through his blood because of it. In the moments before Eric escaped the Fae world all those months ago, the aether was killing him, eating away at his body from the inside out. He’d suffered splintering headaches and nosebleeds any time he so much as used his power. Eventually, he was so far gone he wasn’t sure he was even going to live long enough to be free. Would the headaches and the countdown to his death start again now that he was back?

He was lost in thought, imagining the worst possible scenarios in his mind’s eye when the signs of the city illuminated their path.

Eric was in desperate need of a distraction from his racing heart and the nerves that threatened to spill from him. “How did the assassins find me, anyways? How did you find me, for that matter? You never actually said.”

“This is the severed world, but everything still leaves traces. Especially a power like the emperor’s blessing.” Cithrel was so straightforward it was off-putting.

Eric wasn’t expecting such a clear answer. He blinked before recovering. “So that’s why I can still see my Marking but no one else can?”

Cithrel gave a single curt nod. “Any Fae would be able to sense that strong of an aether, even if it was dormant. For a pure-blood it would be as easy as breathing.”

A shiver ran down Eric's spine. He really wouldn't have stood a chance if he stayed behind. Without Cithrel, Eric was easy prey for the looming assassins in his world. He probably owed Cithrel an apology, or at least a thanks for saving his and his family's life, but a bitter childish part of him refused to. After all, he was paying the price for Cithrel's help right now, forced to return to the one place he never wanted to see again.

Eric stretched his limbs and felt the eerie yet peaceful night breeze whistle through the trees. There was one more question that had burned inside him as soon as he'd decided not to follow Bryce home.

"Since we're about to go back, I have to ask," Eric said and took a steadying breath. "What's going to happen to me? The Marking's power was killing me before, back in Alonetha."

Cithrel glanced over his shoulder back at Eric. His hands balled into fists at his sides. The Fae prince was getting what he wanted, so why was he so agitated? Something was off.

"My brother is still bound to you by oath."

That wasn't an answer. Plus, why did that make Cithrel so irate? "The crown prince?"

"Yes," Cithrel bit out. "The only reason he is not a traitor to the Alonethan Empire is because he did it to protect you. The crown prince was forced into his oath of protection after he disobeyed our mother's decree and tried to kill you. Now the Solonar is connected to you in his aether and body. The oath he bears still prevents him from harming you. More than that, it compels him to protect you. However, I know my black adder of a brother. He did that so he could be free of you. There wouldn't be any need for his oath if you weren't in the city."

A ghost of a smile played on Cithrel's mouth, a slight uptick to his lips. Then another thought seemed to catch him and a grim look took hold. "Now that you're back, however, he is oath-bound to protect you—his life depends on it. So

whatever damage the aether does to your body, Solonar will be there to undo it.”

What Cithrel said was the truth, it had to be, but a tingling sensation told him the prince’s words were misleading in some way. Or maybe it was what Cithrel thought to be true, but wasn’t. Then again, Solonar was the only Fae in Alonetha that had tried to kill Eric.

“Oh,” Eric said. Fear trickled into him. He was chained to the royal family, the Aloneths, except instead of an angel-faced warden now he had a devil. Eric was quiet when he asked his next question. “Can he be trusted?”

“We’re here.” The prince stopped, putting an abrupt end to their conversation.

Eric bit down on his lip, working to keep his emotions in check. Cold alarm ran down his spine, while months of keeping his fears and paranoia at bay withered away in an instant. Suddenly, the scars etched into his body itched, pulling his skin too tight over muscle and sinew. Like the Marking on his arm, roused from a too-long slumber, eager to stretch its limbs.

He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth. He must be insane to willingly go back, even if it was to save lives and prevent more senseless death.

Cithrel turned to face Eric, a single brow arched in question. The cold blue in his eyes softened a fraction, maybe in pity, as he waited for Eric to say or do something. Then the softness melted into a hard glint. He might feel for Eric, but his stance made it clear running was not an option. Eric was coming back with him one way or another.

So when Cithrel turned and pushed through the gnarled branches and light spilled through, Eric followed.

When he came through the other side of the shimmering light, Eric was greeted with the old and whimsical beauty of the Alonethan Imperial Gardens. The fragrance of spring filled the evening air, with buds beginning to blossom in vibrant and fanciful color. Green spanned the entire space of

the gardens before an entire carpet of flowers coated the palace walls.

Even though they returned at the back of the palace, the sheer magnitude and beauty of the palace stunned Eric. He went still, drinking in the ethereal structure that reached for the sky, each of its black spires pointed up like spikes that could fell a god. The Roman inspired architecture was highlighted with pieces of the greatest ingenuity of the renaissance. Discreet stone walls spoke volumes to the stoicism of the Fae and yet their arching windows, colored with a touch of aether, were gothic and extravagant. It showed both sides of the Fae, indomitable and majestic, unfeeling, and excessive. They were a contradiction of fantasies and worst fears.

Eric spotted Cithrel, already halfway down the packed dirt garden pathway, and followed after him. Delicate flowers from his world lined the pathway, along with exotic flora of the empire that only existed in this world through magic. Kauma flowers, which burned like acid to humans, appeared before Eric and taunted him with their presence. If the overwhelming grip Nature held on the city wasn't reminder enough, the Kauma flowers made it clear to Eric that California was gone—he was in the world of monsters and gods now.

Eric shook off the dark thoughts and caught up to Cithrel, brushing past the long hanging branches of wisteria and willow trees. Eric wasn't the same person as he'd been when he was trapped here before. This time would be different. He would make sure of it.

They came upon two guards standing on either side of the doors leading into the palace. One had an extra set of arms and the other's skin looked like moving water. When the Fae guards spotted Cithrel, they straightened, their bodies going preternaturally still. Only the Fae could move and freeze like that, their lungs and maybe even their hearts paused.

"Your Highness, Prince Commander, welcome back," the guards said in unison. "Her Imperial Majesty will be glad to hear of your return."

Cithrel nodded by way of greeting and wasted no time striding past them. Eric moved past the guards and didn't miss the way both Fae guards' eyes focused on him. He didn't recognize the guards and was glad for it. The fourth prince's trusted knights never looked at Eric with anything other than cold detachment at best, or envy and loathing at their worst. Either way, it was never kindness.

"We're honored by your return." Eric's attention snapped to the Fae guard with cold shark eyes and four arms. "Marked One."

Then both guards dipped their heads and bowed to Eric. They *bowed* to *him*. A human. Eric blinked back surprise before he collected himself.

"Thanks." He waved them off. "But you really don't need to bow."

They both kept their heads down and the cold-eyed one spoke again. "You're blessed by the aether, chosen by our emperor. It would be an insult not to bow, Marked One."

Eric wondered where the hell this attitude was the last time he was basically a prisoner in the palace. Maybe after he left Alonetha and the King of Belfir declared war on them was some kind of humbling amongst the Fae.

"I understand." Eric dipped his head ever so slightly as he moved past the guards. "You honor me."

His head swiveled to see that they were still bowed at the waist. With a shake of his head, Eric turned back around and noticed Cithrel staring at him.

"What?"

The blond-haired prince shrugged. "Nothing." The knowing look on his face said everything and nothing at the same time. "You can get some rest once you've been presented in the Throne Room. A knight will have sent word to my family letting them know you're back."

Eric swallowed. "Great." He meant there to be more sarcasm, but his waning tension left the word flat and weak.

“It won’t take long,” Cithrel said, falling in step to walk next to Eric instead of in front of him. If Eric didn’t know better, he’d think the prince made an effort at comforting him. It stirred something in Eric he thought was dead between them. He quickly quashed the feeling and squared his shoulders.

“So what kind of welcome am I walking into?” A poor attempt to distract his gnawing anxiety.

“It’s complicated,” Cithrel said, not meeting Eric’s eyes. “It hasn’t been long since what happened, leading to your escape.”

They rounded a corner before coming to the closed grand doors of the Throne Room. Eric didn’t realize how much the fourth prince’s opinion of him mattered to him, but now that he asked, he bit the inside of his lip, a bundle of discomfort. Cithrel turned to face Eric, drinking him in.

Eric guessed what he saw. A scarred human marked in just as many freckles with hazel eyes that searched his hardened blue ones. Cithrel’s chin lifted and he rolled his shoulders back with a cool disinterest.

“As Prince Commander, I am an extension of Her Imperial Majesty. My will is her will.”

The way he spoke told Eric there was something else behind his words, like maybe Cithrel wished they weren’t true. “It was my duty to protect you, in Alonetha, and I failed.”

Eric knew that Solonar had been gravely punished for disobeying the empress’s orders, so he could imagine what kind of punishment Cithrel received for letting Eric escape.

“I said it before, Eric.” Cithrel reached for the door. “Being a prince doesn’t equate to being free.”

Cithrel shoved open the doors, letting them swing open with all the ceremony of a prince, his emerald cape billowing behind him. Moonlight poured into the hallway through the doorway, the beam a contrast to the aether-lit lamps that lined the Throne Room.

As Eric walked in, a feeling of déjà vu hit him. The entire Imperial Family was already there, waiting for him. At his entry all of their gazes fell to him.

Only this time, there was no ceremony, no diadems resting on their heads. The plants that had previously grown and sprawled across the dais were gone. No sunlight shone; instead, other than the flickering lamps, the room was barren and dark.

One thing remained the same though as Eric moved to stand before the dais of thrones. Solonar spotted Eric first and gave him a wide sardonic smile.



## Chapter Three

“Greetings, Your Highnesses,” Eric said and looked straight ahead at nothing in particular as he lowered his head. He played this game for years; he knew when to bow and give them sweet words. It was unsettling that the empress wasn’t with her children though.

“How disappointing that you’ve returned after all my hard work,” lamented Solonar, the Prince of Light, despite his toothy grin. “Though I suppose nothing is stronger than habit.”

Eric’s hands balled into fists, but his voice was calm and proper. “Perhaps you should try harder, Crown Prince.”

When he raised his head, he saw with hidden satisfaction that the crown prince’s impish grin had withered away into a scowl.

“Oh my, how I’ve missed you, lovely.” Luthais descended the dais with his arms wide.

The second prince, blessed by the aether to alter himself in any way imaginable, hugged Eric tight. Countless silver chain piercings adorned his face, obscuring the Prince of Masks’ impeccable features. Even Luthais’s long, pointed ears were covered in metallic studs, which made his loosely braided silver hair shine even more. Eric smiled into the embrace, knowing it would be hidden from the rest of the room. He’d missed Luthais while he was gone. He was one of few Fae who felt like a friend.

Eric clapped Luthais’s back. “It’s good to see you.”

“I hope I’m not the only one you’re happy to see again, lovely.”

Eric pulled back. “What?”

“He’s back now,” interrupted Elasuin, the third prince. His anger sapped away the small spark of joy. “Now we can address *important* matters.”

Luthais rolled his eyes before whirling to face his scowling brother. “What excellent manners you have, sunshine. I’m stunned there is a Fae alive who can resist your radiant disposition.”

Elasuin’s hands dug into the arms of his throne, while the great wood groaned from the third prince’s strength. He looked just like Eric remembered, head shaved with tattoos all over his exposed skin, a self-imposed oath to the empire. Instead of his usual chainmail, which overlapped like dragon scales, Elasuin wore a loose black shirt that revealed more of his tattoos and a black leather harness to hold at least a dozen daggers.

Brilliant green eyes glowered at Luthais. “Don’t you have an orgy you should be getting to? Or are you going to fuck our enemies at the border to death? There are matters to discuss with the Marked One for the war effort. His blessing can’t be wasted.”

Luthais hurled an insult back at his brother, but Eric didn’t hear it. He was brought up short by what Elasuin had said. All of a sudden, he felt flushed, the room stifling. He knew he made a deal with Cithrel, but somehow it didn’t feel real until Elasuin’s words breathed life into it. His thoughts began to sink into darker pits. What the hell was he doing back here? Was coming back here really his only option? The Fae were horrid monsters who thought themselves gods and treated all other beings like their tools. He hated them all.

“Apologies, Prince of Dreams.” Eric’s hatred filled his words with courage. “But I don’t have anything to discuss with you.”

A vein in Elasuin’s neck bulged and he gritted his teeth in fury, as if what he was hearing was so stupid it should be impossible. The energy in the room turned thick like sludge, toxic vapors spilling into everything, souring it.

Eric looked around the dais and saw all eyes of the Aloneth family turn on him. Eric thought Cithrel almost looked smug. Solonar’s mouth formed a thin tight line, a clear effort to bite down on his smile. Luthais didn’t bother to hold

back his delight and outright laughed at Elasuin. Rhistel, the fifth prince, looked fixed with concern. His eyes like galaxies darted to the third prince. Only Princess Lyari, the blind Fae and soon-to-be High Priestess, seemed unmoved.

“What did you just say, *human*?” Elasuin spat the insult at Eric. He leaned forward in his seat and pinned Eric with a deep green glare. “There are countless lives on the line, lives lost every day on the border, because of this war with Belfir. That ogre King Krysos will happily burn our people to ashes just to stand in this very spot. He will not stop until he has the aether you were blessed with for himself and control over this empire. Yet you presume to say there’s nothing to discuss? You were chosen to be the Marked One. There is one purpose for receiving that blessing and that is to protect our empire.”

“*Your* empire,” Eric corrected. His chest hurt with each heartbeat, but he steeled himself. He wouldn’t falter. “Not mine. And how many lives have already been lost within this city? Or do you not count the lives of humans? Even now, you insult me for not being Fae. I made my promise to Cithrel, not you. Make no mistake, Your Highness, I’m not a weapon for you to wield as you please.”

His chest heaved and the words spilled from him. He knew it was a bad idea to keep talking, that anything else he said would only further brand him a traitor, but he didn’t care. Eric jabbed a finger at Elasuin. “I don’t owe you or the Fae who abducted and tortured me for years anything.”

“You hubristic piece of shit.” Elasuin shoved from his seat to tower over Eric.

The energy in the Throne Room shifted dramatically as soon as Elasuin moved. The chill of Solonar’s bloodlust swirled in the air as everyone was reminded of who was Eric’s oath-sworn protector.

Luminous flames licked at Solonar’s long scarlet silken coat, which billowed around the heat of his aether-born fire. His long black hair was pulled back into a simple knot, letting a few strands brush against his lean features. The heir arched a

brow and flashed a crooked smile at Elasuin that didn't reach his eyes.

"Did you forget your place, little brother?" Solonar's velveteen voice carried an undertone of foreboding. "Move another breath against Eric and I will incinerate you before you can so much as twitch."

"We can talk of war later." Cithrel stepped forward, positioning himself between Elasuin and Eric. "This gathering was merely to announce Eric's return."

Elasuin snorted and redirected his ire. Eric was glad for the shift in attention. "You always do exactly as you're told, don't you? So unwavering. Do you even have a single individual thought or are you just mother's pathetic lapdog?"

Eric watched as the blue in Cithrel's eyes darkened to the color of haunting storm clouds. The fourth prince leveled his tempest of emotion against the third prince and Eric could have sworn the temperature in the room plummeted.

"Don't forget the position you hold, brother," Cithrel said, deathly calm. "How easily it was given to you and how easily it can be taken away."

Elasuin charged forward, his clawed hand reaching for Cithrel's throat but finding only air. Cithrel had already moved out of the way, simply shifting his weight to dodge.

"You think you can take what's mine?" Elasuin roared, his green eyes blazing. "You're nothing but a dog, doing its owner's bidding. You don't belong any higher. So, stay down in the dirt of the battlefields, because if you try to drag yourself out of the mud and blood, I'll knock you back down."

Just as the words left Elasuin's mouth, Cithrel shifted. He moved with frightening speed, faster than Eric had seen any Fae ever move. Even with his own aether blessing, Eric knew he'd never be able to keep up with Cithrel because he moved like lightning. He was a storm of fury and steel.

Elasuin had no chance to stop Cithrel as he backhanded the Prince of Dreams—better known as the Prince of Nightmares. The dais quaked with the impact of Elasuin

smashing into the fine marble stone that surrounded the thrones made of great tree roots. Elasuin let out another furious roar and reached to grab hold of Cithrel. Cithrel dodged and was behind Elasuin in one fluid movement before he kicked the back of the third prince's knees and watched him topple to the ground.

The rest of the room fell into a stunned silence as they watched the third prince take a beating from his younger brother. Elasuin tried to push himself back up, but Cithrel was already there with his hand on the back of Elasuin's skull, pressing his face into the ground. The smooth stone floors cracked under the force of Cithrel's strength this time as he held his brother down.

No one said a thing. The Throne Room hung in a pained silence, except for the sound of Elasuin's pained and enraged breaths. His shaved head dipped in defeat as Cithrel kept a firm grip on his skull.

"From where I'm standing, you're the one in the dirt. Perhaps you should remember what just happened here, because I have no problem reminding you again and again."

Elasuin swore as Cithrel shoved his brother's head down one more time before releasing him and stepping back. Their display of power made it clear that for all the rumors that surrounded Elasuin, it was his younger brother, the one of lower standing, who was to be feared.

Eric understood a little better now why the empress had chosen Cithrel, Prince of Blades, to protect Eric over a year ago. It wasn't just for his obedience, but for his overwhelming strength and skill. It made Eric wonder about what Cithrel said to him earlier. He frowned as he mulled it over. What controlled Cithrel's freedom when he was stronger than his older siblings?

Solonar's hand was on Eric's shoulder then, pulling him from his thoughts. "I think we're done here for now, aren't we?" A smile full of teeth, accentuating his canines, spread on his face.

Eric saw that Rhistel was on his feet now too, his small hand on Elasuin's arm. He didn't know what the youngest prince's title was, he didn't even know what his aether blessing was. A look of concern strained his face. "Please don't, El," he said quietly.

"I told you not to call me that." Elasuin jerked his arm away from the sixth prince, but his demeanor relaxed. It seemed the only soft spot Elasuin had was for the youngest prince.

Lyari rose from her throne and nodded to Eric once. "I'm glad you've returned, Marked One." Then she left the room quiet as a whisper.

The sudden shift in tension had Eric distracted until Elasuin and Rhistel left. Then he remembered Solonar's hand resting comfortably on his shoulder. Eric shifted away from the touch, but it was too late.

He looked up to see that Cithrel had also noticed—if the blizzard of his irritation swirling in the room was any indication. He made his way down the dais towards them without so much as a blink. The two princes stood off against one another, a silent challenge.

"I'll take you back to your quarters." Cithrel didn't look to see if Eric listened. "Follow me."

Eric frowned. He didn't miss listening to orders being barked at him, but he was tired after everything that happened today. If he was staying in the palace, he might as well go somewhere familiar. Except, as soon as he started for the doors with Cithrel, Solonar decided then was a good time to pick a fight.

"That won't be necessary, brother." The crown prince slid to Eric's side, a possessive glint in his feline pupils. "I think I can show him to my quarters as easily as you can to yours. Better than you, perhaps, since they're *my* quarters."

Eric swallowed hard.

*What?*

Cithrel went still except for his jaw, which worked to temper his growing irritation. After years with Lord Aimar, Eric knew all too well about the possessive nature of these mythical beings. Sharing was not something the Fae did and now Eric was stuck between two seething Fae males warring for dominance.

“He’s stayed in my wing of the palace before.” A tenuous calm edged Cithrel’s voice. “It’s better for him to be familiar with his surroundings in case there’s an attack or intruders.”

Eric wanted to sink into the floor as he stood next to the pulsing aura that roiled off Cithrel, full of wrath. He bit the side of his cheek, doing his best to keep his growing anxiety at bay.

Solonar just sneered. “Just because you publicly whipped one brother doesn’t mean you’ll be as lucky against me, dog.”

Luthais, for all his charm, chose that moment to add to the conversation. “You can stay at my private estate, lovely.” He winked coquettishly at Eric, which only made Cithrel fume. Luthais’s suggestion wasn’t helping anything.

If Cithrel was angry before, he was positively murderous now. “Did all those flames melt your brain? Eric’s promise is with *me*. And for good reason, since you tried to kill him yourself once. Or did you forget why you’re being punished?”

The crown prince adjusted the high neck of the deep red coat he wore, doing his best to obscure the oath tattooed into his flawless skin. Solonar’s pupils dilated, at a loss for words. It was hard to argue that logic.

Solonar looked from Cithrel to Eric and his scowl deepened. Why, Eric had no idea. “Fine,” he growled, conceding.

After one final hard look, the raven-haired prince stormed out. Eric stifled a smile. It gave him a little satisfied

thrill to see that he wasn't going to be staying with a psycho, oath or not.

The second prince sighed, a look of pure amusement on his pierced lips. "That male is awfully transparent despite overflowing with guile."

Eric frowned. "What do you mean?"

"That's for me to know and for you to find out, lovely," Luthais said, as he side-eyed Cithrel with a rueful smirk.

Eric followed Luthais's line of sight and saw that Cithrel looked after Solonar with narrowed eyes before he wiped his face clean of emotion. Eric stifled a yawn then, his eyes watering involuntarily. An action that didn't escape Cithrel's notice.

"You need rest."

*I'm exhausted.* "I am a little tired."

Luthais cupped Eric's cheek with a ring-covered hand, the metal warm under the prince's fingers. "Dream well, lovely."

Eric nodded before Luthais exchanged a cryptic look with Cithrel and left. Then, it was just the two of them. The awkward atmosphere grew strained, worsening as the silence dragged, all while Cithrel's gaze roved over Eric.

Finally, the prince jerked his chin towards the door. "Let's go then." He held his arm out, gesturing for Eric to go first.

Eric trained his eyes on the detailing of the stone floor, his face heating at the offhand gesture. With only the sounds of their footsteps echoing down the palace halls, Eric's thoughts drifted to the Fae next to him. Now that he was back here, for how long he had no idea, where did the two of them stand? Cithrel had attacked Eric multiple times in their last few encounters, and there wasn't so much as a word spoken about it. In all honesty, Eric was furious at Cithrel. He never saw Eric as an individual, someone who was worthy of freedom. His heart twisted from the sting of that thought. There were still so many unspoken words, unresolved feelings,



between them. Still, the small gesture was enough for Eric to realize Cithrel really did seem different, even if only by a fraction.

“Whether you believe me or not, I’m glad you’re back.”

Eric stiffened, forcing himself to keep looking forward and not at Cithrel. His jaw ticked, emotion threatening to bubble over. What was he supposed to say to that? So he didn’t say anything and kept silent, letting the prince’s words linger.

Cithrel sighed, sounding beyond tired. “I understand that I forced your hand into returning, and I would do it again and again if it was my duty, but it’s not lost on me what it has cost you. I’m sorry, Eric.”

Eric snapped. He whirled on the Fae prince, anger blazing. “You’re *sorry*? You know what this place did to me and even after all that, you still didn’t care enough about me to let me be free. If you know what you did, then don’t you dare say you’re sorry because we both know you’re not.”

At the blatant rejection of his apology, Cithrel bristled, his anger rising to meet Eric’s. “If that’s how you feel, I won’t bother apologizing for my actions in the future.”

They glared at each other, fuming. Eric gave a pitiless smirk. “We finally agree on something. That’s your problem, Cithrel. You never say anything until it’s too late and by then your words are just cruel.”

Cithrel’s intense expression wavered for a moment—Eric’s words had landed a blow—but he didn’t say anything otherwise. The two of them stood there, frustration poisoning the space around them. Finally, Cithrel turned his back to Eric and stormed off towards their rooms.

The rest of the walk dragged, with Eric looking out the palace’s gothic windows, the glass stained with the petals of the brightest flowers of the palace. They didn’t so much as glance each other’s way. Cithrel’s words clung to Eric’s thoughts, worming their way in. The apology bothered him.

He was pretty sure Cithrel had never apologized in all the time they knew each other until then. But Eric meant what he said. The apology didn't mean much when Cithrel wasn't sorry for what he did. Cithrel even admitted he would force Eric back here again. There wasn't a trace of regret in his cold tone and that made Eric's temper flare.

His teeth ground together as they made their way up the stairs to the long hallway before they reached Cithrel's private quarters. He wasn't going to be swayed by the Fae prince's words, even if they came from his gorgeous lips.

"Welcome." A pleasant voice broke through Eric's train of thought. "I'm glad to see your return, Marked One."

Warmth filled Eric's chest as he closed the space between him and the first Fae who ever showed him kindness. "It's good to see you, Hinni." Eric stopped in front of her. "You look well."

She was still the same as before, black bottomless pits for eyes that shone in the light, limbs like tree branches, and a smile that reached her eyes when she looked at Eric.

Cithrel strode past them, his muscled shoulders tight. He kept his back to Eric when he bit out a single command to Hinni. "See to him." Then he was gone through the door.

Hinni nodded once, her magic no doubt sensing the turmoil between Eric and Cithrel, but whatever she noticed she made no mention of it. Her black gaze met Eric's again.

"Thank you. The prince commander treats me well." She kept her hands clasped in front of her. "I've been ordered to be under your charge as your personal servant, Marked One." When Eric just looked at her, she clarified, "He thought you would be more comfortable having someone you knew with you if you were to stay in the palace again."

Eric swallowed hard. He felt like an asshole now. The fourth prince, for all his secrets, still wanted to give Eric something. Hinni's pit-black eyes shone with sympathy. She leaned in, her voice dropping. "I told you he was more than his reputation."

Eric didn't know what to say to that. He glanced around his new home and a nostalgic feeling washed over him.

It was basically like a penthouse suite with how large the space was. The entire place was clad in smooth wood from floor to ceiling, engraved with whirling patterns and branches stretching out and growing on their own. Throughout were several tall windows that overlooked the Imperial Gardens. Some windows were completely overgrown with wild flora, but it only made Cithrel's private quarters that much more whimsical and exotic. The warmth was a stark contrast to the fourth prince's icy personality.

Eric glanced past the two long plush-looking settees that surrounded the fireplace at the end of the dim-lit hallway. A single door at the end was currently closed. Cithrel's room.

Eric's cheeks warmed at the memories of that room. The night they shared in there, in that bed....

He shook his head, killing the thought immediately. That time didn't matter anymore and that was never going to happen again. It should have made him feel better knowing that, but somehow his heart twisted as a sense of loss surged through him.

Hinni's face melted into a formal serenity. She dipped her head and bowed low. "It's been a difficult day for you. May I attend to you after your meal?"

His mouth watered. He hadn't noticed it until she mentioned it but he was starving. When was the last time he ate, this morning before class? That morning on campus already felt like ages ago and it was still the same day. God, he just wanted a bath.

"Perhaps you'd prefer to bathe first?" She crooked her head with a knowing look.

Eric almost cried. "God, yes."

Hinni followed Eric and directed him towards the bathing room. "I'll bring a tray of food when you've finished bathing."

"You know me so well, Hinni."

The scent of Hinni's aether flitted in the room. "I can feel your emotions, albeit vaguely. I would like to do what I can to ease the strain in your heart, Eric."

Eric swallowed the lump that formed in his throat. He had done his best not to think of it since he came back to Alonetha, but now that he'd survived the less-than-happy reunion with the Aloneth family, he was left with the raw pain of saying goodbye to his brother. Again.

He just nodded, no longer in the mood to talk.

"I'll return later, Eric."

The bathing room was even more luxurious than a spa. Smooth wood lined every surface throughout, just like the rest of Cithrel's space, but in the middle of the room by the massive window was a huge tub, already full and billowing steam. His clothes were gone in an instant and he sunk into the hot water.

Eric moaned as the scented waters soaked into his wearied limbs and aching muscles. The aroma of lavender filled the bathing room, his favorite scent, along with a faint trace of citrus. He submerged himself entirely in the water, drinking in the silence of being underwater as all his thoughts drained away.

When Eric came out of the bathing room, steam rolling out behind him, his aching body felt better. He wandered into the open space with just a towel wrapped around his waist where Hinni left his tray of food. A goblet and decanter of wine waited on the side, the way Hinni knew he preferred it. A mountain of meat and honey bread waited for him. There was even a side of cheese. Hinni stood by, hands clasped in front of her, serenity on her features.

Normally, Eric would have covered his scarred flesh—ruined from six years as Lord Aimar's slave—but Hinni had seen him before and if she was going to tend to his more recent wounds after he ate, there was no point if he'd just have to strip again. Once he was done devouring everything, now fully sated with the near-euphoric meal, he let Hinni get to work.

They sat in an easy quiet as Hinni massaged several salves into his bruises and small wounds. After choking down a sinister-looking vial of some medicine, Hinni seemed satisfied.

“I’ll show you to your room. The second prince demanded your wardrobe be filled by his personal outfitter. He insisted he was the only one in the palace who knew anything about fashion. So I hope it’s to your liking, Eric.”

Eric couldn’t help but smile. He could only imagine what that conversation must have been like between him and Cithrel. Moreover, just what kind of clothing was he going to be stuck with if Luthais was in charge of his outfits?

The room had a sitting area to lounge in and a door leading to a bedroom, with richly colored green bedding that looked plump and warm. He was so tired he almost whimpered with relief. All he wanted was to bury himself under the sheets and sleep for a small eternity. Hinni wished him good night and vanished as quietly as ever.

Eric inspected the massive inlaid wardrobe in his bedroom and his eyes went wide. Everything was so vibrant and luxurious. There was clothing made of every fabric imaginable and the aura of magic swirled from the wardrobe. He knew these were sewn and imbued with a concentrated aether. He found a loose black shirt and pants that were impossibly soft to change into.

Just as Eric was about to pull his shirt over his shoulders, shocked at the impeccably soft fabric, Cithrel appeared. Arctic eyes focused on Eric’s naked chest, the indifferent mask cracked, and his eyes widened.

Panic surged in Eric. He didn’t want to see the look of revulsion on Cithrel’s face at the sight of his scars. “What are you doing here? Get out.”

Cithrel averted his gaze immediately. His tone was strangely broken when he spoke. “I know it’s less than ideal, but there have been assassins sent for you, Eric.” He shifted, uncomfortable and struggling to find the right words. “All it

takes is a second for them to kill you if they infiltrate the palace again. This is for the best.”

He couldn't argue when the prince put it like that. Eric liked being alive. “I know,” he sighed.

“I'll leave you to get some rest.” Cithrel cracked his neck with a groan. “Now that you've returned, there will be countless eyes on you and none of them allies. I can protect you from assassins, but there's only so much I can do amongst the silver tongues of nobles. We'll have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“I'm sorry, what?” Unease slithered its way back into Eric's muscles. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“There's a lot we have to discuss in the morning, but now that the Marked One has returned, it's a given that you'll be in attendance for Alonetha's social season. The empress will want everyone to know that you've returned. Her reasons are her own, but you'll need to be prepared.”

The bad feeling spread through his body. He didn't want to hear it, but he asked anyway. “What are you saying?”

It was Cithrel's turn to sigh. “Tomorrow the political war game begins...with drinking and dancing.”

## Chapter Four

Eric knew this nightmare was different from the rest because the last time Ilphas Raxidor had haunted his dreams, it was just before the monstrous King Krysos of Belfir invaded and abducted him. The Fae warrior, Eric's predecessor as the Marked One, came to Eric that night and warned him, a challenge almost.

The spirit of Ilphas stood before Eric in an otherwise endless space of darkness. It reminded him of being under Elasuin's power. The red-haired Fae covered in battle scars grinned at Eric, as if the sight of a human was hilarious to him, let alone one with aether running through his veins.

"Running away won't work," Ilphas said and leaned forward, his grin inches from Eric's face. "Not anymore."

Eric frowned. He guessed what the dead Fae meant, but it didn't make sense. He wasn't running away; he was already here in Alonetha. It hadn't even been a day and he was already exhausted by the Fae's way of speaking in half-truths.

"I'm not running anywhere." Eric turned to leave. "But why are you in my head?"

The grin never left the Fae warrior's face as his head cocked to the side. Then he repeated the words again, and again, and again. Ilphas's voice rose and rose each time he repeated himself, his words raking along Eric's mind.

Eric tried to cover his ears, anything to muffle the ominous chant, but it had no effect. It was more than he could bear. His eardrums were going to burst. Blood trickled from Eric's ear and along his jaw until it dripped down his chin. He screamed.

Eric bolted awake, his mouth already open with a silent scream. He gasped and felt his own body, ensuring he was whole. There was no more darkness, no Fae ghost. The bright morning sun had moved to its highest point in the sky. Several hours had to have passed, but Eric felt like he hadn't slept at all.

A shadow passed over the sun filtering in through the arched windows. His bleary gaze followed the dark until it settled on the tall figure standing over his bed.

“Go back to sleep. You should get more rest,” Cithrel’s voice sounded from near the window.

“I’m fine,” Eric said. His voice sounded anything but fine.

Cithrel said nothing but remained where he stood, waiting.

Sleep wasn’t going to happen anymore and the last thing he wanted was Cithrel watching over him. Eric swore to himself and flung the bedding off. He was drenched in his own sweat and had a throbbing headache. As he padded towards the bathroom to scrub the nightmare from his skin, he was glad to be back for the first time since returning to the Fae city.

The gigantic oak wood bathtub that looked as if it was carved from the palace itself stared back at Eric in the midday sunlight. He felt his bleary, sleep-deprived eyes begin to water at the sight. He had missed the massive magical bathtub that had infinite hot water.

It was too soon after he slid into the soothing hot waters when a light knock sounded against the bathroom door. Eric swiveled as Hinni’s soft voice flitted through the door.

“Apologies, Eric, but the prince commander wishes to speak with you over breakfast.”

The asshole. “I understand. Thanks, Hinni.”

When Eric came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, he caught sight of himself in the mirror. Insecurity reared its ugly head as Eric looked down at his bare chest that was more scar than anything else. It was a sign of what he was and would always be in the eyes of most Fae—a slave. His bedroom felt suffocating as Eric swiftly dressed, desperate to cover his body. He came out of his room in a combination of what Cithrel and Solonar usually wore. The fabric was a deep ebony with emerald embroidery and the detailing of a black doe over his coat’s breast on one side and embroidered thorns



on the other. His coat looked extravagant, fitting of the Imperial Family, which unfortunately made sure he would stand out in any room he entered.

“Good morning, Eric,” Hinni greeted, her frame even more petite next to Cithrel, who stood with thick arms crossed. “I’ll give you two some privacy. I won’t return until it’s time to prepare for the banquet.”

The scent of freshly toasted bread and something that smelled like bacon wafted through the entire main floor, assaulting Eric’s senses. His mouth watered as if he were starved and hadn’t just eaten a mountain of food the night before. A delectable-looking meal with a wooden goblet and a pitcher of water waited at the large wood table, marbled with black stone and crystallized jade. Eric clapped a hand over his mouth, stifling a laugh as he realized what Hinni had specially made for him. A sandwich.

“It smells delicious, thank you, Hinni.” Eric quirked his mouth and Hinni nodded before she saw herself out as quietly as she had entered.

He wasted no time and downed a few cups of water before he picked up the sandwich and bit into heaven.

Before Eric could take another bite, he felt Cithrel’s eyes bore into him. He looked up, half-expecting to see no emotion, but instead Cithrel looked at him with a burning sort of impatience.

“Say what you want to already.” Eric rolled his eyes.

“We need to talk about the social season and what is expected of you.”

*Great.*

“And what’s that?”

“Our empire is at war, Eric. For millennia, the Marked One has been a symbol of Alonetha’s power. The empress requires you to uphold that symbol.”

“Of course she does.” Cithrel looked pensive and Eric’s stare clouded. “What else?”

“It means you’ll constantly be in the presence of the nobles during the social season and wherever she deems necessary.”

Eric glared across the table. “You mean I’m your shiny little piece of propaganda.”

Cithrel just stared back, his face expressionless.

“If it means my brother is safely hidden away from the world of the Fae, then fine. I’ll do whatever you say.”

Eric shoved the rest of his breakfast into his mouth and barely chewed or tasted it. It didn’t matter anymore; he’d lost his appetite. The whole time Cithrel sat there, watching him. Whenever Eric looked his way Cithrel looked ready to say something, but never did.

He finally broke his silence. “That’s it? You don’t have anything else to say?”

Eric looked up at that. “What else is there to say? My brother’s life is in your hands. I don’t have a choice.”

Cithrel moved to reply but Eric was already walking away from the prince. When Eric came out into the large expansive sitting area, though, Solonar was there pacing around the richly marbled wood floors, the gold in his pointed ears glinting in the sun with every pivot.

At the sound of Eric’s approach, the crown prince’s head snapped up and the strange look on his face vanished. Cithrel was at Eric’s side in an instant. The tension in the air was immediate.

“Am I interrupting something?” Solonar smiled, exposing his sharp teeth.

“Yes, you are.” Cithrel’s face remained placid, but Eric noted the tendons flex in the fourth prince’s hands.

The crown prince’s smile spread too tight. “Good.”

The air crackled with another battle of male dominance and Eric stepped forward to defuse it. “Why are you skulking around here, Solonar?”

Both princes looked down at Eric, their domineering gazes now bent to him. Something flickered in Cithrel's gaze and Eric found himself wanting to know what that look was when Solonar stepped into Cithrel's line of sight.

"I'm here to make sure he's not just pawing at you, and is actually delivering the missive," he purred.

Cithrel bristled. "Don't touch him."

The room went still. Solonar was slow to turn, while his head swiveled to look down his nose at his brother. "That sounded like the fourth-born was trying to tell the future emperor what he can and cannot do."

Cithrel met his brother's sickly-sweet words with a look that could freeze hell over. "Good to know you can still hear."

Murderous intent filled the space in the room, its weight slamming down across Eric's shoulders. Out of instinct, Eric faltered back a few steps. His brain screamed at him to get away. What the hell was going on? Eric felt his heart thump too hard. Why didn't Cithrel say anything to him this morning? Why wasn't he looking at Eric? Whatever the message was, it was bad.

His heart sunk as a horrific possibility flashed through his mind. What if Cithrel had failed to watch over Bryce and Krysos's assassins found him? No, he was being paranoid, Bryce was fine. But... what if he wasn't? Full-blown panic gripped him as his thoughts spiraled out of control into dark places.

Then Solonar's sharp tongue cut through the air. "If you won't tell him, I will."

Eric's chin jerked up and he looked over at Cithrel, who grimaced at his brother, his eyes like shards of ice. But he didn't argue.

"I'm glad we understand each other, brother." Solonar withdrew. His cat eyes found Eric, the pupils narrowed. "Cithrel has something he would like to share with you, Eric."

He held his hand out to his brother, prompting him to speak.

The fourth prince dragged his wintry gaze to Eric, searching for something in Eric's expression.

"There was a body nailed to the palace gates." Cithrel gauged Eric's reaction and obviously didn't like what he saw because his next words were solemn. "Carved into the body's skin was a message for you, Eric."

The floor warped and Eric was suddenly unsteady on his feet. The reminder of how sinister the Fae world was swallowed Eric whole. In this world, a human body was just as convenient as a piece of paper. He knew without asking the victim was human, knew that a human body was its own message, a declaration of bloodshed.

Still, his lips moved. "What does it say?"

Cithrel and Solonar exchanged a look, letting Eric dangle helpless in the yawning silence. Cithrel lifted his chin and met Eric's question with his usual mask of apathy, of total detachment. "*Welcome back, Marked One.*"

"No...." Eric's voice trailed off, losing the will to speak.

"They'll be coming, then." Solonar's jaw tightened, his normally impish disposition turned grim.

Fear coated Eric's blood, his bones, seeping into every piece of him. God, he hoped his brother was alright. At least if Krysos knew that Eric was back, it meant his attention would solely be on him. It was better if Eric drew the Fae king's fury.

"They're likely already here," Cithrel said, his tone flat.

"Who's coming?" Eric's chest felt tight, anxiety holding a death grip on his heart.

Solonar sighed dramatically. "Keep up. Assassins, Eric. They'll be coming to kill you."

Eric couldn't help but glance over at Solonar, at the black markings of his oath that peeked above his high collar.

The oath that bound him to Eric was perhaps the only thing that forced Solonar to help Eric. He was glad to see it, now more than ever with Fae coming to kill him.

The crown prince must have noticed because his tone went honey smooth. “Rest easy, Eric. If you just ask nicely, I’ll be more than pleased to show you more.”

Slowly, Solonar began unfastening the clasps of his tight jacket, revealing more and more skin. Eric gaped at the crown prince as he started to strip.

Cithrel moved faster than light and stood off against Solonar, blocking Eric’s line of sight. “Go any further and I’ll rip your hand off.”

“My, my, what a temper you have.” Solonar dropped his hands but left his chest half-exposed, the picture of comfort. “You’ve always been so serious, but this is quite an exceptional reaction. This is why there have been so many rumors since dear Eric’s return.”

Eric’s brow furrowed. A second later, Solonar put a hand over his mouth although his smile was obvious. “Oh, should I not have said anything?”

At Cithrel’s darkening expression, Solonar grinned even more. His amber eyes flashed with fire before he shoved past Cithrel and passed Eric on his way out. He paused at the door and glanced over his shoulder, feline eyes zeroing in on Eric through strands of raven hair.

“My offer still stands, dear Eric. My little brother can be so possessive, but all you have to do is say please and I’ll take good care of you.”

Solonar’s words drawled, but the insinuation was like a lead weight crushing down on them. Then the crown prince was gone.

His hands shook. The rest of the day had gone by too fast and before Eric knew it, he was dressed in finery fit for royalty and on his way to the banquet in the palace’s grand hall. The bags under his eyes made him look ghastly despite his grandiose attire, the dark purple a sign of his sleep

deprivation. Now he faced the reality of his situation. The Fae king wanted him dead and he knew exactly where Eric was. Instead of doing something about it, though, he was on his way to a party to be paraded around.

Cithrel accompanied him, of course. The two of them walked in weighted silence, Cithrel lost in his own thoughts, a pinch in his brow.

Eric rubbed absently at the ridges of old scars across the back of his hands. Scars Lord Aimar had given him. He sucked in a sharp breath and let it out through pursed lips. It was hard not to still fear his old master and nightmares of his years as Aimar's pleasure slave haunted him even now. The Imperial Merchant would certainly be at the banquet. He never missed an opportunity to flaunt his status and power.

"Are you alright?" Cithrel asked.

Eric blinked and looked around, noticing that they were outside the grand hall of the palace. Massive double gilded doors stared back at Eric in challenge, mocking him, daring him to walk through and face his fears.

"I have to be," Eric said but it lacked conviction.

"I'll be at your side tonight. 'Don't worry."

"It's foolish for you to make promises you can't keep, brother." Solonar appeared like a wraith, hands held behind him. "Mother wishes to have a word with her darling dog."

Cithrel looked ready to beat the hell out of his brother, but he was clearly torn. His sense of duty was infallible. "Wait for me. I'll be right back."

"Don't worry, I'll take good care of him."

Those words were anything but comforting. Eric hoped Cithrel would be back soon. He cleared his throat, loathing the fact that he was still this scared.

The crown prince pulled his upper lip back. "The fear oozing off of you is insulting."

"I know," Eric huffed. His nails dug into his palms before he shook his hands out. He could do this; he had to do

this. “I just haven’t been amongst the nobles for a while.”

The raven-haired Fae prince kept his feline gaze trained on Eric, piercing him where he stood. “I am the crown prince, Eric.” He stood tall, towering over Eric. “I am one of the most powerful Fae in the entire fucking empire and I am oath-bound to protect you with my *life*. You don’t need to be afraid when you stand next to me.”

He waited for Eric to disagree. When he didn’t, the prince cast his gaze to the doors again. When Solonar looked back at Eric, his predatory eyes softened a fraction, and a crooked smirk appeared. “Then shall we?” He gestured to the doorway.

The heavy weight of guilt in Eric’s chest reminded him of why he came back to this cursed city. He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin in answer. “After you, Crown Prince.”

Without hesitation, the crown prince strode past Eric and thrust the doors open, giving himself a grand entrance, and more importantly, leaving Eric behind standing by himself. Eric cursed inwardly. He should’ve known that was what Solonar would do.

All attention turned to the now wide-open double doorway, first to their future emperor, and then to Eric, the aether-blessed human. The murmurs started then but Eric didn’t hear them. Someone who Eric had forgotten in his fear of his former Fae lord was standing and staring at him. She hadn’t recognized Eric then, when he was first brought into the Throne Room before the royal family—but she did now.

Baroness Olaera’s sylphlike form turned to face Eric, her hawk eyes trained on him. The female Fae who made her fortunes and status through the slave trade—who made Eric’s flesh and blood as good as gold coin to her.

She looked the same as he’d last seen her. Short blue slicked-back hair with skin like dusk only highlighted her demanding form. High cheekbones accentuated the harsh line of her thin lips, which spread across her face like a maw. A bodysuit, a blue so deep it was almost black, hugged her

birdlike frame with a semi-transparent skirt that pooled down and around her legs. The mantle made of crow feathers shone like oil as it hung over her shoulders. Eric remembered the rustle of that feathered mantle as she walked by him when they first met. That was when he had earned his first scar after being kidnapped.

“Greetings, Marked One.” The baroness dipped her head. “The empire is honored by your presence.”

It was all Eric could do to nod in response to the hollow gesture. The empire was honored, but she wasn’t. Images of his friends and fellow slaves, Garret and Elena, flashed through his mind’s eye. He flinched. If anyone saw it, they didn’t say a word about it. The rest of the nobles greeted him in a similar manner before he drifted further into the grand hall and ballroom.

A wiry Fae with a tail like a whip shambled by, offering Eric a crystal glass of wine which he took without thought. He sipped the murky blue liquor as his gaze roved over the crowd. The relief that filled Eric was bittersweet. Lord Aimar was nowhere to be seen, but neither was Cithrel. He wished Cithrel was at his side right now and not off somewhere getting his next orders from the empress. When Eric served as his attendant in the past, they’d fallen into a comfortable routine. He felt safe at the cold prince’s side, even if he didn’t trust him.

The baroness remained close by, eager for the crown prince’s attention as she spoke with him. Eric didn’t want to be anywhere near the sadistic baroness, but he knew better than to go off on his own in a room full of wild animals. So instead, he let his attention roam over the rest of the nobles in attendance tonight. Then he spotted someone peculiar. There was a noble he’d never seen before that seemed to stand out amongst even the Fae.

A female being stood off to the side of the main throng of nobles and could have passed for a Fae or a nymph. She had the grace and stillness of the Fae, with their otherworldly presence, and yet there was an energy that emanated from her,



much like the energy the merchant nymph Creusa had. The kind of raw wild power Nature herself commanded.

As Eric looked closer, he noticed one of her eyes glimmered like a sapphire while the other was a foggy green. Her skin and hair glinted a metallic silver, but part of her face was covered in branches and leaves that looked like willow. Her lilac-colored gown was exceptionally revealing, entirely backless as well as open along the sides so that branches could grow freely from her shoulders with leaves sprouting along her ribs.

The female was bewitching\_and staring back at him. Eric jerked his head down, suddenly finding the stone veins and roots engrained in the floor more interesting than anything else. He felt multiple sets of eyes on him, embarrassment heating his cheeks.

“Marked One?” A shrill voice asked.

Eric’s back straightened, a chill at the nape of his neck. The baroness waited for him to answer, the same grotesque smile on her face. “Yes, my lady?”

“The crown prince was telling me about your return.” Her birdlike form preened in her mantle. “And of the recent message the Fae king sent.”

The air rippled with heat, threatening to ignite the entire grand hall and ballroom. Ash assaulted Eric’s senses before the smell of smoke stung his nostrils, burning his throat with each inhale.

“Yes, my lady.” Eric held in a cough in from the smoke coating his throat. “It seems the Fae king knew almost immediately of my return to Alonetha.”

The feathers ruffled around Olaera as she continued to eye Eric with her hawk gaze. Eric watched her expression turn carnivorous. Her voice grew low and soft. “Is that an accusation?” It seemed she wouldn’t be deterred from goading Eric. “Are you insinuating that one of us nobles, loyal to the empire, is a traitor?”

Eric's lips parted a fraction to argue with the witch of a female, to tell her he wouldn't be surprised if she was a traitor, faithful only to coin. But before he could get a word out, Solonar's voice cut in.

"Your crown prince is *telling you* that there is a traitor." His voice carried throughout the room. "Why so many questions, Baroness Olaera? I do hope you're going to cooperate with our efforts."

The birdlike noble's hawk eyes blinked once as the corner of her mouth quirked. "Of course, Crown Prince."

"Good," Solonar said and smiled, but it was anything but pleasant. "Then you won't mind if we speak to you first."

Olaera's smile thinned. "It would be my honor, Crown Prince."

Solonar flicked his fingers at a nearby count. "Helloron," he drawled. He didn't bother to say more because the count knew exactly what he meant.

A breath later and the court disbanded, except for the baroness and the female Eric had been staring at for much too long. Shit. It was embarrassing enough that she caught him staring, but now she probably thought he was looking at her as if she was a suspect.

Eric ran a hand through his curls in an effort to calm down. He didn't want to have either of these conversations. Maybe the floor would swallow him whole and he could disappear.

Solonar didn't bother to rise from his chair and instead lounged further. His ornate coat clung to his body, accentuating his arms, which Eric could see were corded with lean muscle. His body wasn't full of brute killing force like Cithrel's, but there was a sinister way about the crown prince. As if his body was honed to perfection by the aether thriving in his blood.

He needed to focus, not look at the raven-haired prince. Especially when Solonar caught him looking just then. A knowing grin formed on his lips.

*Great.* Turning his attention back to the birdlike Fae, Eric hardened his jaw, willing his features to smooth out.

“I do hope this won’t take too long, Your Highnesses,” the baroness crooned. “I have some stock the lord is very interested in.”

Eric stiffened, his face paling. She said that on purpose to provoke Eric, to watch him squirm, a bug for her to pick at.

“I won’t keep you long, baroness,” Solonar drawled, though his voice hardened like granite. “You will soon be on your way.”

The baroness cleared her throat but didn’t press it further. She clasped her hands together. “Whatever you require, Crown Prince.”

“The body that was left at the palace gates had your aether’s scent on it.” Solonar eyed the dark liquor that swirled in his cup, but his leisure belied a serious undertone. “Do you have any idea why that is?”

The baroness’s voice sharpened, cutting at Eric again even though she didn’t look his way. “Perhaps a dissatisfied customer left it there and the traitor simply took advantage of a fortunate opportunity.”

Solonar still didn’t look up. “Perhaps. Was the body someone you had previously sold?”

This time the baroness did glance at Eric, hawk eyes gleaming. “I deal with so much stock, it’s hard to keep track of them all. I find it difficult to tell most of them apart.”

Eric’s stomach roiled. He didn’t know if he was going vomit or claw her eyes out. The things she was saying, they were all her truths. She treated all the humans she stole and sold off like nothing more than animals—something she could profit from.

“My lady.” The crown prince’s voice simmered, any trace of leisure now vanished. “I do hope you have records, or some proof, of where you were last night as well as of your goings-on for the past several months.”

Baroness Olaera went preternaturally still. Her eyes looked like they had glazed over. It was one thing to be insulted by the future emperor, but it was another to have her life at his mercy.

“I keep detailed logs, Crown Prince,” she said. Her voice was quiet and wholly compliant. “It includes all of my interactions as well as my whereabouts. I’ll have one of my servants bring it to the palace for inspection.”

She dipped her head, making a show of her respect for the crown prince. Eric swallowed down the fear, letting out a silent breath. The birdlike Fae knew she had been out of line, but it still surprised Eric to have Solonar suddenly defend him like this. Some things were different since coming back here after all.

“Oh, one more question, my lady.” Solonar’s words once again half-hearted. “What is your official contribution to the war efforts?”

The direct question took the baroness off-guard. Her high brows furrowed a fraction, hawk eyes blinking rapidly. “I will of course supply whatever the prince commander deems necessary. The empire will be victorious once again.”

She looked between Solonar and Eric, trying and failing to decipher the meaning behind the question.

“And what of everyone’s *role* in the war?” The crown prince’s voice hung on the word. Whatever the meaning behind it, understanding flashed in her hawk eyes, and her expression darkened. “No matter how ridiculous, the choice was made. It should be an honor to fulfil one’s duty.”

Eric frowned. He looked to the prince. What were they talking about, and why did Solonar bring up the war all of a sudden?

The crown prince downed his glass’s contents and straightened his crimson and onyx coat. “Thank you, my lady.” He gestured to the door. “You may go see to your business deal. I look forward to reviewing your logs.”

“Of course.” She lowered her head. “Thank you, Crown Prince.”

As she turned to leave, though, her mantle rippled around her like wings, the black feathers rustling and grazing Eric’s legs. He shivered but didn’t look away when their eyes met. The baroness had a look of pure predatory rage. A thirst that had gone unquenched.

“It’s wonderful to have you back, Marked One,” she said over her feathered shoulder, her gaze piercing as she locked eyes with him. “I look forward to seeing what you can do.”

Then she was through the doors and gone from their sight.

“That female thinks too highly of herself,” Solonar remarked. “She’s grown bolder with her greed since receiving more land.”

“She’s a monster,” Eric said, not realizing he’d spoken out loud.

The crown prince’s jaw worked, but he continued with what he was saying. “I suppose her greed will be forever kept in check by the marquise, though.” Solonar’s head shifted ever so slightly, catching Eric’s hazel eyes. “Careful around her. The truth she offered was full of cracks.”

An involuntary chill swept over Eric’s skin. The crown prince was able to sniff out everything she omitted immediately. Without Cithrel by his side, Eric was beginning to feel the full weight of the dark depths of the palace. Then he caught up to what Solonar had just shared with him.

“Wait, what happened to the archduke’s land?”

Archduke Laen had been murdered by the Fae king with the help of Cithrel’s former knight, Malor. Malor was the Fae who had helped ambush and slaughter everyone on the archduke’s estate. Eric wondered if Cithrel had to atone for his own knight turning against the empire. Pity swelled in Eric’s chest for the fourth prince. He’d trusted the knight and it proved catastrophic.

“It was sectioned off to several nobles.” Solonar broke through Eric’s train of thought. “There wasn’t another elder Fae who could be trusted enough to take so much territory, and the nobles are much too greedy for one to inherit all that land.”

“How many others inherited his land other than the baroness?” Eric tried not to think about what the baroness would do with all the extra land.

“Three other nobles.” Solonar’s attention shifted from Eric to someone behind them, with a mysterious glint in his eyes. “The noble I mentioned earlier, Marquise Esta, is the Imperial Accountant. A calculating and pragmatic female. Fortunately, she is one among few Fae without a hunger for more power. She was chosen specifically to keep the rest in check.”

“Why the other two, then?” Eric wondered why a lady he’d never heard of was one of four nobles to be selected. Especially when the first two Fae that were given more land was the Imperial Accountant and now perhaps the wealthiest Fae in the city, the baroness.

“Helloron also received a section, as he is little more than an aristocrat with a penchant for release,” the crown prince drawled, glancing over his shoulder as someone made their way over to them. “Next to my dear brother Luthais, he indulges himself more than any other Fae I’ve met. Even with growing greed, he would just use the additional land and wealth for his own activities rather than for anything that could go against the Imperial Family.”

“And the lady?”

“Perhaps I can answer that.” A lilting voice spoke up behind Eric.

He whirled to see the bewildering Fae that wasn’t quite all Fae, more like a nymph, standing before him, the picture of elegance. Still, there was something that swirled, turbulent, within her that Eric couldn’t place.

His face flushed, mortified, as he recognized exactly who the Fae was.

“I am new nobility. Lady Vessa.” She placed a thin hand with small branches breaking through her skin over her chest and dipped her head in one fluid motion. “I can see the questions in your eyes, Marked One. Allow me to answer them for you. I am half-Fae and half-nymph. They call my kind the Impure.”

## Chapter Five

Eric didn't know what to say. After all his time in the Fae world, he hadn't heard anything about the Impure. The name felt wrong in his mind. He didn't want to say it out loud, yet the lady said it with ease. Several other questions formed in his mind once she answered his unspoken thought.

"I see," Eric said and shifted on his feet.

The scent of springtime blossoms began to float in the air. It was at once refreshing and alarming. Eric's gaze froze on the lady's face. It was the scent that aether gave off, he was sure of it. She adjusted herself, the branches along her body rustling, and smirked.

"You're wondering why you've never heard of my kind," she said, once again answering his unspoken thoughts, or rather his feelings. "Apologies, Marked One. My blessing from the aether sometimes acts of its own volition. It can be unruly living inside my mind. Sometimes others' feelings are too strong for the aether in my veins not to react."

Goosebumps rose along Eric's arms. It was unnerving enough that she could sense thoughts, but somehow it was worse that she couldn't necessarily control it. She was a dangerous being to be around if she was one of few who could sense when he was lying. He resisted the urge to squirm.

"I'll do my best to restrain it," she assured, her tone lilting. "I've already sensed some of your questions, so would you prefer me to address them?"

"I don't wish to make you uncomfortable, Lady Vessa." Eric looked apologetic. He fought the urge to bristle; if he reacted too much she would just feel that, too. "It's a party, after all. I want you to enjoy yourself."

"My kind are quite rare, and generally frowned upon," the lady continued on in her pleasant tone. "It's uncommon for us to reach adulthood, whether from abandonment or due to our unstable aether."



“Still a welcome addition to the Imperial Court, Lady Vessa,” Solonar interjected, an aloof smile on his lips.

“You honor me, Crown Prince.” She lowered her chin.

Her branches raking against each other grated at Eric. His chest constricted with his throat; the muscles too tense. A memory flashed through his mind of a hand covered in bark and sap pressed too hard over his mouth, cutting off his air and screams.

He ground his teeth together, putting all his effort into keeping his face even in front of her. His grip on his glass tightened. The memory flashed again, relentless. This time he remembered the sting of tears in his eyes as fear coated his veins.

“I appreciate your honesty, my lady.” Eric forced a smile. “But I won’t take up any more of your time tonight. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

He was about to slip away from Solonar and Vessa when someone approached.

“My lady!” An all-too-familiar voice rang out. “You’re just the noble I was looking for.”

Eric stilled, his spine rigid to the point of aching as the demon from his nightmares with all-white eyes sauntered over to him.

Lord Aimar had a toothy grin from ear to ear as his gaze locked onto Eric, enamored by the prize he found. As the lord approached and Eric stood stuck in place, it was all he could do to upend the contents of his glass. The warmth from the liquor spread through Eric’s body and soothed the growing tumult of emotions inside him. Rage, fear, and revulsion coated his aether, soaking his veins with a fervent desire to rip the Fae lord to pieces.

Aimar stopped in front of Eric, sucking his teeth as he watched him lick the liquor from his lips. Eric’s hand was close to shattering his glass, he gripped it so tight. He wasn’t sure if he was breathing as he stared into those eyes. He felt his old master’s aether snake out and crawl along his skin,

testing Eric's mental fortress for any cracks to slip through and impose his own will. It was then he thanked all the long, sleepless nights and grueling days where he trained himself to strengthen his control over his own aether. He was never going to be enthralled again. Eric pursed his lips, his eyes hooded with drink, and took the lord's measure.

"Greetings, Marked One." Aimar inclined his head in greeting. His red hair was braided tightly on one side, while the rest hung loose down his other shoulder. "It's wonderful to see you again."

Eric's jaw hardened, knowing the sick bastard meant every word. He was obsessed with Eric, even more obsessed with torturing him, bending him to his every sick desire. It was an effort to stop his vision from draining to monochromatic, letting his own aether loose and ripping the lord's head off with his brambles and thorns right then.

"Greetings, my lord," Eric managed, his voice gruff. He needed another drink and to be anywhere else. "If you'll excuse me, I have business elsewhere."

Before Eric could step away, a hand darted out and latched onto his wrist. "Surely you can spare me a moment of your time, dear pet," Aimar purred.

Eric ripped his hand away as if he'd been burned by the stoked flames of hell. His face contorted with fury and alarm as his heart thundered. Panic began to bubble and it took Eric a second to collect himself and force his breathing to settle. The uptick in Eric's heart rate didn't go unnoticed by the lord, and a sinister knowing smile ghosted across his thin lips. He knew the power he still held over Eric. He may not belong to Lord Aimar anymore, but Eric's mind was still chained to him. Knowing that made him sick to his stomach and made his blood blaze.

The power of his aether soared and Eric's muscles went taut as he fought to maintain control over his magic. The hunger to kill swam in his thoughts, on the verge of overwhelming him. His fingers twitched. It might be a good thing to just kill the lord now and be rid of him forever.

“It’s good to see you, Lord Aimar,” Vessa interjected, interrupting the tempest of Eric’s bloodlust. “I hear your business in the mountains went well. You must be pleased.”

Eric blinked, banishing his chaotic thoughts and stamping down his unruly aether. He felt Solonar’s eyes on him, but he paid the crown prince no attention. Instead, he fixed the lord with an intense glare.

“I’ll ask you not to touch me, my lord,” Eric spat. “I like to keep my attire clean. Furthermore, if you address me as ‘pet’ ever again, I’ll ensure your tongue is burned out by the crown prince himself.”

The Fae lord’s white eyes thinned at the threat, but he smoothed a hand down the front of his own coat, the fabric contouring around him. Several black buckles held the lord’s bright blue outfit together, his long coat hanging to his knees, exposing pants that wrapped around his legs like hundreds of black and blue silk ribbons. Eric pitied whoever dressed the lord for tonight. They no doubt suffered several whippings in order to achieve such a look.

“I can appreciate the importance of one’s looks.” Aimar licked his lips again. “A habit I’m sure you learned from me. I’ll be sure to keep you in immaculate appearance.”

The Fae lord’s eyes gleamed, his all-white irises shining with dark promise. Eric knew that look too well. The look that said his definitions of immaculate and beauty were different from everyone else’s. Aimar’s vision of perfection was to see flesh split and torn, to watch crimson blood pour from his slaves’ veins.

To Aimar, torture was flawless.

“All the same,” Eric said tightly, “I prefer to maintain my own standards. I’ll take my leave, my lord.”

This time Eric spun on his heel, his eyes fervently searching for someone with a fresh goblet of liquor for him to drown his thoughts in. As he honed in on a tray full of goblets brimming with dark violet liquid, he was halted in place once

more by the Fae lord. Except this time, it was because of what the red-haired devil said from behind him.

“I look forward to seeing you in the future, Marked One. Now that my business in the mountains has concluded, I’ll be a frequent visitor.. You know the baroness well, I’m sure. In fact, I think I saw the two of you conversing a moment ago. Perhaps we can continue our talk then.”

Eric’s eyes stared holes into the polished wood floors of the palace’s grand hall. He couldn’t move. His heart hammered in his chest and the pounding filled his ears. Then the roaring in his ears grew louder and he wasn’t sure if it was his blood pumping or the unbridled wrath that stirred in him. The need to tear the baroness’s world apart drove Eric to near insanity as he stood there, trembling.

The rich, warm-toned grain of the hardwood flooring bleached until it was black and gray, while the aether-lit grand hall dulled to a pallid off-white. Everything faded, color draining away as Eric’s aether swelled in a demand for violence.

Eric looked down at his arm where the lord had touched him, and he seriously considered cutting it off. After he’d escaped Lord Aimar last year, he had sworn the piece of garbage would never touch him again. Now his own limb was an affront to his vow.

The outrage continued to grow in Eric, to the point of bursting, and with a sliver of horror he realized his vision had begun turning scarlet amidst the black and gray.

*Shit.*

He needed to get out of here, away from everyone, or he was going to kill someone. Maybe all of them. They didn’t deserve to live, so they should just die.

*No.*

Then Eric was running, his conscience at war with his power’s command for death and decay. He recited that he wasn’t a killer over and over as he shoved through the bodies of drunk and dancing nobles, ignoring their rude hisses and

sneers as he passed. They had no idea the massive favor he was doing them. A little shove was a small payment for their life.

It felt like an eternity in the depths of Lucifer's stronghold until Eric was finally out of the palace's grand hall and in the near-abandoned Imperial Gardens. He gulped in the cold night air, letting the calm rustling of branches soothe his raucous thoughts of massacre.

He wasn't like them. He wasn't.

But, even long after Eric managed to shackle and lock away the hunger of his aether coursing through him, the thoughts of revenge for everything Aimar and Olaera stole from him refused to be silenced.

How was he supposed to endure being around his old master, his tormentor, and the Fae responsible for taking his freedom, the baroness?

The answer was simple. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

Eric cracked his neck and then set to pacing about the gardens. Those two may be nobles, but if he was trapped in Alonetha, he would have his revenge. He told Cithrel he would do whatever he wanted as long as he kept Bryce hidden from the Fae. So who was to stop him from taking whatever else he wanted? He needed to deal with this problem and deal with it now. For his sanity and for other humans. For Garret and Elena. Eric was no savior, but if he could destroy the two monsters that treated humans like cattle, he could save countless others from suffering the same fate he did.

Checking to make sure he was still alone, Eric began meandering down a path in the gardens, following a trail of bioluminescent plants. He chewed on a fingernail as he thought. The hatred burned in his belly for the lord and the baroness. His steps quickened and his thoughts wandered to a darker place. Maybe Aimar's constant presence during the social season would be better for Eric. Maybe, just maybe, he could get rid of that piece of trash for good along with Olaera. The two of them were hideous beings inside and out.

Revenge seared brighter and brighter as Eric convinced himself that this was good for him. The lives he could be giving back to countless humans were adding up in his mind. If he got rid of the lord and the baroness, it would be devastating for the capital city. But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. Solonar had said so himself—the nobles were bloated with power and with their own selfish desires. With them gone, someone had to inherit their business and land. Who better to do that than someone without the same desires of the Fae? The Marked One.

Eric bit off a piece of his nail and spit it on the ground. An inhuman glow shadowed his features from the plants, painting him like an unearthly being of reckoning. He could do it. Really, he might be the only one who was even capable of doing it.

“Shall I order your own personal gardens to be constructed, little Eric?” Eric whirled as Solonar swaggered his way down the path towards him. “This seems to be the only place I can find you when you're not on your back for my brother.”

His voice trailed off, letting Eric's imagination run right into the gutter. His cheeks flushed. The glowing flora lit up around the crown prince as he passed the way fire ignited from a spark. His sanguine-colored coat hung loose down his shoulders with a high collar that wrapped around his neck like leather. It more than masked the Oath of Protection branded into his flawless skin.

Eric peered up at Solonar through a narrowed gaze. “Is stalking me your favorite pastime?”

Feline eyes widened with the glee of the hunt. “What will you do if I say yes? Run and hide? Oh, how I love the chase. Especially when the prize is you.”

Eric scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. If the crown prince wanted to play games with him, then so be it. “You're the crown prince. I'd think it shameful for you to be fawning after a human, even if he's blessed by the aether. Even more so

considering the rumors swirling around him being at the fourth prince's side."

It wasn't a lie. Everywhere Eric went, he heard the whispers about him. He commanded more respect since his return, but that didn't stop the gossip amongst the wealthy and powerful. With Eric firmly planted at Cithrel's side, and the fact that Eric was once a pleasure slave, the palace was alight with talk about their involvement.

It was even true, once. But that time had long since passed for Eric. Now Cithrel was a means to an end.

Solonar's smile faltered, and a hint of annoyance edged into his words. "Don't ruin my fun, Eric. I'm far less pleasant when I'm in a bad mood."

"You said so yourself how embarrassing it was for Cithrel to be at my side so much." Eric arched a brow in question and in challenge. "You're oath-bound to me, but isn't it unnecessary to follow me around like this? After all, I think I'm well looked after with Cithrel. Think of how much the nobles will talk if you keep hanging around me. What should I tell them when they inevitably approach me, asking about their crown prince? Should I tell them the truth?" Eric tapped the side of his neck, exactly where Solonar's tattoo was that he worked hard to hide.

"Careful, little Eric." Solonar's lip twitched. Then in a blink, he was inches from Eric's face and his warm breath caressed Eric's cheek. "I think in your dear prince's comfort you forget that I can easily take you away from my brother and keep you all to myself. I'm more powerful, therefore it's my right. Both as the stronger Fae and as the heir to the throne."

"Then why haven't you done it already?" Eric's voice rose now, his temper flaring. He wasn't going to back down now. "If you're so powerful then why haven't you done a damned thing? No. I think for all your talk, you're not as free to do what you want as you claim."

"You infuriate me. Is that what you want? Do you want me to rip you away from Cithrel, lock you up in my own private wing of the palace? I won't warn you next time you

step out of bounds. I'll just take what I want. All you see is what you don't have and you ignore how much you've been given. Your human greed is maddening."

Eric blinked, taken back by Solonar's words. He took a step back but Solonar took a step forward, not giving Eric any space.

"Don't touch me." Eric glowered and tried to shove Solonar away, but the crown prince caught his hand with ease.

His grip on Eric's wrist constricted, leaving no room to escape. Solonar leaned in until his lips grazed Eric's ear, involuntarily giving Eric gooseflesh. "I've been much more generous than you realize. Remember that next time you think about insulting me."

Eric just stood there and watched Solonar blink out of sight, leaving him alone in the gardens. He was dumbfounded by what Solonar said. It made his blood boil, but there was nothing Eric could say to refute the crown prince. He was right. Solonar was stronger than Cithrel, and in the Fae world, he could do as he pleased.

Eric hung his head, mortified and ashamed to realize that the crown prince really was being generous to him\_and to Cithrel. So why was he letting Eric remain at Cithrel's side all this time? He hated his younger brother, didn't he? Why do him any favors, and for that matter, why do anything for Eric either? Eric was the reason Solonar was oath-bound. The black markings all over his body were a shameful reminder that he was tied to Eric against his will.

A chill ran along his spine then and dread crawled across his skin. Someone was watching him, and he was all alone out here. Before anything could happen, Eric dashed back inside to the safety of the grand hall and ballroom.

Eric grinned as he spotted a friendly face. "Luthais!"

The second prince turned. His entire body was decked out in thin silver chains. They were all over his face, which was even more striking with his features imbued with aether to show off a myriad of colors. The chains carried on along his



long navy coat and his charcoal pants. His boots were dark and covered in several leather straps.

Luthais beamed back at Eric. “Lovely! It’s good to see you.” He eyed Eric’s empty hands and looked appalled. “It’s a banquet, lovely. Why don’t you have any wine in your hand?”

He needed another drink. “I’m just as devastated as you are.”

The second prince flicked his wrist and a crystal glass full of wine appeared in his other gloved hand. His own glass refilled itself as well. Eric took his glass with a twinkle in his eye.

“Drink up, lovely,” Luthais said. “Wine gives courage and makes one apt for passion.”

Eric did as he was told and drank deep, relishing the sweet heat that slid down his throat. “By the way, Lu,” Eric said after swallowing, “How do you manifest alcohol when your aether only lets you manipulate your own shape?”

Luthais gave Eric a conspiratorial look. He beckoned him closer with a gloved finger. “Just a little party trick, lovely.”

Eric watched as Luthais made one of his gloves vanish, revealing a hand that was as red as a ruby, dotted with shining black spots. Most importantly, it was not Luthais’s hand. Luthais twirled his fingers and the scent of berries filled the small space around them. Then Eric watched as his glass refilled itself.

“You’re right that I can only manipulate my shape. But what’s not widely known is that I gain the abilities of whatever shape I take. These hands belong to my personal viticulturist. He makes some of the finest wines in the empire.”

Eric’s eyes widened. That kind of power was amazing. His capabilities had to be infinite. “That’s amazing, Lu.”

Luthais just snorted and tipped back his entire glass. He clicked his tongue. “Tell that to my mother.”

“She doesn’t agree?” Eric guessed where this was going.

“My father always demanded perfection, lovely.” As Luthais talked, his hands shifted between his own, Eric’s, Solonar’s, Cithrel’s, and the rest of his family. Each time he shifted he used their powers. His face contorted the longer he shapeshifted and he eventually let out a sigh. Eric just stared.

“Whether I wanted to or not, he ensured I could change my shape and fully utilize whatever aether’s shape I took. It was incredibly painful. The side effects lasted years, sometimes.”

“Side effects?” Eric’s voice went quiet, sadness pitting in his gut.

“If I take on a shape whose aether is more powerful than my own, it tears me apart from the inside out. It rebels against my own weak blood. But that never mattered to my dear father, so I eventually learned to live with the pain. After quite some time, I found I could even revel in it. Find a release I’d never known.”

Eric’s heart lurched, breaking for Luthais at the childhood he had. The torture his own father put him through for so many years.... Several things fell into place then about Luthais. His gentle nature, despite the façade he showed his family. He could have more power than his entire family if he so chose, yet he stayed in the background.

“I’m sorry you had to go through all that. It must have been awful.”

Luthais gave him a soft smile. “That’s very kind, lovely. But that’s the world of the Fae. Power is everything. If you have enough of it, you can do whatever you want.”

Luthais’s words sunk into Eric’s mind, implanting themselves deep in his thoughts. What he went through, what Cithrel must have gone through to turn out the way he did. If Emperor Volodar treated one child like that, he would have done the same to the rest of them. Eric felt sick to his stomach

at the untold horrors of what the princes and Lyari had to undergo.

“Enough moping, lovely.” Luthais materialized his glove back on and refilled his glass, before hooking his arm through Eric’s. “This is a banquet and there are several nobles to appall with my debauchery.”

Eric let himself be dragged into the throng of the grand hall, forgetting his plans for the night and unaware of the empress’s eyes on him.

“You’re drunk,” Cithrel said, as he half-dragged Eric up the last flight of stairs.

“Liar,” Eric slurred.

Was the banquet already over? It was so hot and he was exhausted.

“I’m Fae. We can’t lie.”

“Yeah, right,” Eric garbled. Wait, did he say that out loud? “Where did Lu go?”

“You waved goodbye to him and cried when he found a charming aristocrat to take back to his private estate,” Cithrel muttered, shoving open the door to his private quarters.

That didn’t sound right. How long had they been walking? As soon as Eric’s face hit the pillows, he let out a groan that bordered on sexual.

“Sleep while you can. The empress wants to see you first thing tomorrow morning. There are matters she wishes to discuss with you.”

Eric was already half-asleep and didn’t really hear what Cithrel said, but he agreed anyways.

He’d think about everything tomorrow. Including about how he was going to destroy Lord Aimar and Baroness Olaera.

## Chapter Six

Eric's head was splitting. Memories from the night before had come rushing back when he'd woken up that morning. To say he was mortified was an understatement. Cithrel had practically carried him back to their room. What a mess. On top of that, he'd been foolish to make himself vulnerable by getting so drunk. There were Fae hunting Eric, and with a spy in the palace it would be all too easy to get to him.

He slipped into a pair of leather sparring pants and a fitted quilted linen shirt. There was no telling what the empress wanted to discuss. His nerves gnawed at his insides. She couldn't possibly know about what he planned to do, how he planned to send the slave trade into disaster before he took it for himself.

He ran a hand through his curls with a scowl. Whatever she wanted to say to him, he just had to play along. If anything, it gave him the perfect opportunity to make his first move.

As he made his way to leave, Eric set his jaw, resolute. He was not going to be a prisoner ever again.

"Good. You're ready."

Eric's heart sputtered at the sound of Cithrel's voice, which took him by surprise. Paranoia and heat warred for dominance in his chest as his heart thundered. His steps faltered for a second, but he did his best to collect himself, fixing his features into a calm façade.

"Sorry about last night," Eric said, hoping that if Cithrel picked up on his nerves he'd think it was embarrassment and nothing else. "Things got a little out of hand."

"It's fine." Cithrel already had his back turned and was halfway down the hall by the time Eric looked up.

*Asshole.*

Eric jogged after the prince and chewed his lip, thinking about the night before. For all his faults, Eric felt safe with Cithrel and trusted him to keep his word. He knew Cithrel would protect him, even if it was only because it was his duty.

“Thank you,” Eric said, keeping his eyes on the hallway in front of him and not the hard lines of Cithrel’s muscles under his armor. “For keeping me safe last night.”

He felt the air shift around Cithrel, but his pace didn’t slow. When Cithrel didn’t reply, Eric finally turned to face the prince against his better judgment. Those barren blue eyes were filled with something Eric hadn’t seen in a while. He stopped the thoughts before they could start. Eric bit down on the side of his cheek, forcing his thoughts to more modest places, and stared mute at the angel-faced prince.

Cithrel’s jaw worked, like he was going to say something, but instead he just quickened his pace. The air around them felt like a storm cloud as he passed by Eric. He was probably way off, but he thought Cithrel was embarrassed about something.

They moved through the palace a hell of a lot faster now that Cithrel was on edge. The vaulted ceilings, covered with ivy and otherworldly flowers, made their brisk pace echo with a harsh rhythm. Moments later, they were greeted with the bright morning sun and a steady breeze of spring as the empress’s private courtyard doors swung open, waiting for them. The smell of blossoms gusted through the doors as the wind ruffled Eric’s curls. It was serene and he couldn’t help but exhale in relief as he strode into the courtyard.

“Welcome, Eric Becker,” Empress Nithroel said in greeting. “This is my first time seeing you since you’ve returned. You’ll have to excuse me, but you were otherwise indisposed last night.”

Eric lifted his chin to look at the empress. She lounged in a chair that looked more like a bed, wearing a loose, pale purple dress with complex whirling patterns that cascaded down her body with a slit revealing her crossed legs. Eric

noticed she was barefoot and the grass and nearby flowers gravitated towards her, the grass trying to wrap around her feet. Her silver hair looked like it was spun from the moon. Each strand shimmered in the morning sun and was braided in a halo around her head.

Behind her like statues were her servants that resembled trees. Both wore plain charcoal shifts that hung around them loosely. Past her servants stood the empress's deadly shadow, her personal guard, Sir Saelihn. He was barely visible in the dark, his hood pulled over his features, which Eric knew to be beautiful but haunting.

"You honor me, Your Imperial Majesty," Eric replied. "I must apologize for my actions last night. I beg your forgiveness."

He felt piercing eyes on him as he bowed his head low in the courtyard. The sound of Cithrel's retreating footsteps told Eric he was leaving him alone with the empress.

Eric swallowed. Things were different now. He had the emperor's aether running in his veins—he was the Marked One.

"That's unnecessary. It seems my child is still lacking in conviction. Luthais is more focused on his drink than his responsibilities." Nithroel spoke fleetingly, her voice tinged with disappointment.

Eric bit back a scowl. She was just as responsible for the abuse her son endured in his lifetime. Yet, she had the nerve to be discontented with him. What kind of a mother treated her children like that?

When he stood tall, Eric flicked his wrist and let a little of his aether seep from him. Rancid and decayed thorns burst from his palm and up from the ground before him, writhing and growing together. A wave of dizziness spilled over Eric's vision, but he gritted his teeth until it was done.

Just when it felt like he was going to vomit or pass out, he didn't know which, he finished.

Withdrawing his magic, Eric slumped into a blackened and grotesque high-backed seat of his own making. Thorns curled around Eric where he sat, closed in and ready to devour him. His head throbbed and he felt a trickle of blood about to fall from his nose, but it was worth it to see the look of displeasure cross Nithroel's face for a fraction of a second.

As Eric swiped the blood from his nose, he was surprised to see a faint smirk from the empress, somehow pleased with Eric's stupid gesture. She cast him one final, soul-swallowing gaze with her mauve and silver-ringed eyes before she continued, looking utterly unbothered.

Nithroel gestured with delicate fingers. "But that's not what I'd like to address. I've summoned you to discuss the shifting powers in our city and in my palace."

When the empress said it, Eric felt the claim in her words. The palace was hers and hers alone. He shrank back into his seat, forcing himself not to look away.

"Yesterday, yet another one of the city's enchantment barriers was broken and blood was spilled in my city. I will not tolerate this treachery within my treed city. I must intervene."

Eric's knuckles whitened as he gripped the arms of his black throne. Her words cut through to his frantically beating heart and gripped it in her teeth. The aura emanating from him demanded obedience. He realized that this was just a glimpse at what kind of mother she was to her children. Deep, cold dread lodged itself in Eric's bones.

No traces of spring remained in the private courtyard as it became barren winter and Nithroel turned her attention back to Eric. "This *weed* in the empire stems from a single root—some noble who's chosen the Therion child's side." She all but spat the word out, as if uttering "king" was poison on her tongue.

Not that he blamed her distaste. Eric didn't have any fond memories of the Belfiran ruler, King Krysos. Krysos Therion's magnificence rivaled the empress's, with his deep, richly bronzed skin and dark curls that haloed his chiseled features. Krysos got as close as one could get to a god. But his

cruelty was bottomless, a never-ending hunger to dominate all that he deemed beneath him. Eric had experienced it first-hand; he had the broken bones and near-death experience to prove it.

“Cithrel informs me that the two of you have struck a deal. In exchange for your brother’s protection, you’ll do as he says. Am I correct?”

“It’s true. I made that deal.” Eric was pinned to his chair. The empress nailed him in place with her ethereal gaze. He didn’t know how he managed to hold her gaze.

“The traitor will need to be dealt with, but discreetly.” Nithroel carried on, eyeing her long-pointed fingernails. “My empire is one of unquestionable strength. I can’t have knowledge of a traitor getting out amongst the nobility and aristocrats. Do not speak of the matter any further apart from the Fae in this room until you have proof.”

Eric’s mind ran through the possibilities of the empress’s plan. He knew what she was about to ask him. Not ask, tell him, since she knew he couldn’t refuse. His nails dug into the arms of his own ebony chair even further, his skin cut by the thorns within. This was his chance to take back what was stolen from him by the Fae; he could strike a new deal.

The empress raised a single brow, which was so like Solonar Eric couldn’t help but notice the resemblance. “I want you to take care of the traitor,” she said. “You are a symbol of the empire now, and under our protection, but that protection comes with a price. Your obedience. Find the noble allied to Krysos and take care of them.”

Eric’s prediction was right. She wanted him to be their propaganda piece in the light of day and their own personal weapon in the shadows. She wanted him to become a killer. What she didn’t know was that he was prepared to do whatever it took to get his revenge. Her demand would simply pave the way for him.

“I’ll do as you wish, Your Imperial Majesty,” Eric said, leaning forward. “But I require something else if you mean for me to become a killer.”



No one breathed, not even the empress. His chest swelled and he held the air there, locking it away until he heard what Nithroel had to say in response. Her otherworldly gaze flashed as she took in Eric's reply.

Sir Saelihn moved; a statue come to life. He leaned in to Nithroel's sharp pointed ear and whispered something so quiet Eric had no chance at hearing. The empress didn't react to whatever her personal guard said, never taking her eyes off Eric all the while.

"Apologies, Eric." Nithroel's voice was light. "I would like to hear more of what you have to say."

Her words were inviting, but in reality, it was anything but polite.

Eric kept his chin level as he watched Nithroel regard him, almost like her silence was a test of his willpower. A fire could erupt in his thorns, and it would do nothing to the Antarctic chill that swept through the room. The Fae waited in preternatural stillness. The only sound in the room was Eric's breaths, which held the subtlest tremor.

Nithroel uncrossed her legs and leaned forward in her chair. Any semblance of relaxation lifted from her, revealing one of the reasons she was the uncontested ruler of the empire. Eric felt an overwhelming pressure weigh down on his shoulders, his chest, every piece of him as the power of her aura filled the air. It made every breath a strained effort. Christ! His muscles screamed and his bones groaned.

"I must admit," she said. "I'm curious as to what it is you seek with enough desperation to forfeit those mortal morals."

Eric squirmed in his seat, his fingers scraping at the arms of his chair for purchase—anything to control the anxiety that began to shoot through his veins. But the decision was made. This would be worth it. He let his breath settle and leveled his gaze with the empress's.

"I want control of the slave trade."

“Ahh. I see now. You wish to protect your kind. How pious.”

Eric’s expression hardened and his gaze clouded. Nithroel was wrong. He wasn’t a hero; he was a selfish bastard.

Sure, he could save their lives. But he knew he couldn’t stop the Fae from abducting and selling more and more humans. They lived for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Even if he managed to stop them for now, the Fae would just continue in their ways once Eric was dead.

It was a good thing, though, that the empress had just misjudged his intentions.

He felt a little inadequate with how easy it had been for the Fae to believe he was so pure-hearted. If she only knew how dark and shattered his insides were.

“You think too highly of me, Your Imperial Majesty.” Eric lowered his gaze a fraction, feigning embarrassment. His heart thudded in his chest and he hoped the Fae’s hearing would assume it was simply nerves. “I have reason to believe Baroness Olaera and Lord Aimar are working together towards their own selfish ambitions. I know the lord well and he’s always coveted any opportunity to gain higher standing, to gain power for himself. I’ve witnessed him bring exotic and rare humans to the baroness so that she might owe him certain advantages. I was a lowly slave back then, so I was never privy to what those advantages were. Nonetheless, now that the baroness has gained even more land and wealth, I suspect the two of them have grown fat with avarice.”

Eric glanced up at the empress and bit back a grin when he saw her intense gaze, deep in thought. “Go on.”

“The crown prince suspects her as well. If I can control the slave trade, I can better observe the baroness and her private dealings. The lord frequents the baroness’s estate as well. He has many slaves.”

“Saelihn, bring in Cithrel.” Nithroel flicked two fingers, “I’d like to hear his thoughts on this matter.”

Saelihn moved like a light flickering. In several flashes of movement, he was gone from the empress's side and then back again, as if he never moved. Then Cithrel materialized before his mother.

Cithrel's wolfish demeanor shifted as soon as he spotted Eric, like he had forgotten Eric was there. Eric slouched in his chair, irked by the fourth prince's guarded expression. He knew Eric too well for his liking.

Refocusing his attention on Nithroel, Eric watched her appraise him, mulling over his words. His mind warred with itself. The pulse at Eric's throat thumped erratically.

"Eric wishes to take over the slave trade in exchange for his compliance in eliminating the traitor in the capital city. He suspects the baroness and the lord. What do you think, my son? Should we give him such a lavish gift?"

Eric stole a look at Cithrel. He was all business, his face wiped clean of all emotion, leaving only cold calculation. Eric was forced to wait in the oppressive atmosphere while the prince assessed Eric's proposition.

"If the objective is to draw out the traitor in our city, then perhaps we can let Eric oversee the slave trade on a temporary basis. It would serve to investigate the baroness and lord."

It wasn't a bad idea. In fact, Eric didn't give a damn about the slave trade. If he could manage it, he hoped he'd run the whole thing into the ground. All he needed was to get into the slave trade, then he could do what needed to be done. It would be so satisfying to see that vile baroness seething as a human took her wealth from her.

Finally, the empress tilted her head, resting her cheek on a raised fist, and regarded her prey before her. The bated silence in the room was thick and hung over their heads, until finally a small smile appeared on the empress's blood-red lips.

"Then you can work with the baroness to maintain the slave trade, Eric." The victory that ignited in Eric's heart was

short-lived as Nithroel continued. “With Saelihn as your escort, of course. I’ll inform the baroness of the situation.”

Eric opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. What was he supposed to say, anyways? He couldn’t say no to that, but with Sir Saelihn tagging along it would be almost impossible to do anything without the empress knowing about it. She didn’t trust him and was sending her own spy along with him.

Regardless, this gave him a chance. It was good enough. Eric got to his feet slowly.

“I’ve given you my word, Eric.” The empress didn’t smile, but there was a more-than-pleased glint in her eye. “I expect you to keep yours.”

It was done. Eric dipped his head. “Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty. You’re very kind.”

As Eric turned to leave, with Nithroel staring after him, he decided to enjoy the small victory. A smile crept across his lips as he left the courtyard. He could finally get rid of those two poisonous Fae.

Cithrel was at his side in an instant, blocking his path. “What do you think you’re doing?” He towered over Eric, nostrils flared. “This isn’t a game, Eric. Your life is in constant danger and you think it’s a good idea to walk right into their hands?”

Eric sucked his teeth. “So you already suspected Olaera.”

Cithrel opened his mouth and then closed it again while some of his frustration died out. “The less you know, the better. If she had any suspicion that someone might be able to prove she’s the traitor, it would force her hand. If she’s the one responsible for everything, then she would make sure to kill you. And now you’re going to be near her constantly.”

Cithrel had a point. Eric was so focused on destroying Olaera and Aimar he didn’t consider his own life and potential attacks from the Fae King.

*Damn it.*

“I’ve already made a deal with the empress.” Eric shot Cithrel an accusing look. “She asked your opinion. You could have said no, so why didn’t you?”

The fourth prince bristled. “She’d already made her decision when she summoned me. She just wanted to see how I would react and to watch your reaction.”

Eric frowned at that. “Why would she do that?”

“There’s a lot you don’t understand about the empress,” Cithrel said.

*No shit.* “I’ve gathered that.”

Eric bit his lip. If she was already going to let Eric have the slave trade, then what else was she after? He had to anticipate that she knew he was up to something going forward, then, even if she didn’t know exactly what.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Cithrel asked.

Eric shot a look back at the prince, who huffed, waiting for Eric to say something else. Was the empress trying to get Cithrel to spy on him, too? He couldn’t think why else she’d call him in to watch his reaction if it wasn’t so that he could reach his own conclusions about Eric.

He couldn’t trust Cithrel. It was as simple as that. All the prince did was keep things from him. Eric couldn’t risk his only chance at revenge on someone who would easily help him one minute and throw him in the Black Thorn the next.

“I’m not the one playing games here, Cithrel. I’m doing whatever it takes to survive this hell you dragged me back to. Maybe you’re the one who needs to realize my life isn’t a fucking game.”

Cithrel’s knuckles whitened as his fists tightened. Eric had touched a nerve. Good. It served him right with the emotional whiplash he always put Eric through.

“I’m just trying to keep you safe, Eric. You have to believe that.”

The look of pure hurt on the prince's face drew Eric up short. His resolve faltered, seeing the vulnerability in Cithrel's wounded gaze. The Fae couldn't lie and Cithrel's admission left no room for interpretation.

Eric swallowed the lump in his throat. When he spoke his voice was hoarse, raw with emotion. "I believe you. But, I don't trust you."

"Then I'll earn your trust."

Where was this side of Cithrel coming from? He was completely different from before, even from the side of him that was filled with domineering lust. The memory of that night together came to the forefront of Eric's mind then and he felt his face flush. He hadn't been with anyone since Cithrel. He still remembered how good it felt to have the prince's hands on him, the feel of his hard unrelenting mouth on his. Eric felt his body reacting to Cithrel without wanting it to. Then, before he could think better of it, he stepped closer to the angel-faced prince.

"I don't think that's possible for you." Eric's eyes grew hooded. "But I can't stop you from trying."

The Fae prince looked down at Eric, no doubt feeling the closeness of their bodies, and he crooked a smile that had Eric's willpower hanging by a thread. "I think I know where to start."

Eric stopped the lewd thoughts before they could start. If he started sleeping with Cithrel, it would only complicate things. He stepped away from the prince and turned his back on Cithrel, knowing almost every Fae hated that. To his credit, if it pissed off Cithrel, he didn't give any indication that it did.

"Wait," Cithrel called out. "There's someone I think you'll want to see."

Eric stopped, his brows pulled together. "Who?"

They came up to the great doors of the annex to the library and Eric was as giddy as a child. He didn't care if Cithrel saw him like this. He wanted to be in this place again, but he also had some things he wanted to look into, like the

baroness's family, along with some other nobles. Cithrel didn't need to know that, and if he did discover what Eric was doing, it would be easy enough to brush it off as him investigating the baroness like the empress asked.

As two Fae guards pushed open the doors before them, Eric looked on as the light from the Imperial Library spilled out into the hall and washed over them. It was just as grand as he remembered.

Trees formed the colossal bookshelves that lined the great space, their trunks growing out of sight, with engravings of a black doe on the shelf ends. The library itself was knowledge and nature coalescing. The books looked like they went on forever, with little alcoves for studying.

Standing before them, though, was a familiar hunched over figure. Eric didn't hide his smile.

"I knew you'd be back, creature."

The ancient Fae librarian pursed his lips, his eyes filled with static homed in on Eric. It had been a while since Eric was last in the library and saw the librarian. Apparently, the only librarian; Gnosus was the only Fae in the library Eric ever saw.

"It's good to see you too, Gnosus."

The librarian just grunted and the lines in his face deepened as he turned his attention to Cithrel. "And what do you want, pup?"

Eric watched as Cithrel straightened, holding back annoyance at the nickname. It looked like he bit down on his lip hard enough for his teeth to cut through.

"Greetings, Archivist." Cithrel gave a curt nod. "I have some matters I wish to discuss with you."

Gnosus's static eyes sparked, the only indication that Cithrel had his attention. Then he turned and started his way down a row of books. "Hurry up, then."

As the two made their way down the aisle of books and began to drift into the shadows of texts, the librarian paused.

“The books are attuned to your power now, creature. They’ll come to you, whatever you seek.”

Then they were gone and Eric was alone.



## Chapter Seven

Eric turned and went in the opposite direction, towards the grouping of trees that grew independent from the bookshelves. Maybe Gnosus knew more about what Eric planned, though he didn't know how he knew.

His thoughts paused when he rounded a corner. This was supposed to be the spot, but it couldn't be right. Instead of where his sproutling should have been stood a tree already twenty feet tall. The tree appeared ordinary at first glance until he started to look closer. Its branches expanded and hung delicately, blooming a myriad of blues, purples, and a strange dark green flower. Everything about it made it seem like it had been spliced together from different trees entirely. Yet, despite the chaos, it grew in harmony.

Was this really his tree? Had it grown this much in just the past year? Eric's mind struggled to sift through his conversation with Gnosus the last time he was here, but he couldn't for the life of him remember what the librarian told him. The only thing that stuck in his mind was a single question.

*Who are you, creature?*

*Eric Becker.*

*Then you are Eric Becker.*

Something about that mundane question grounded him, reassured him in a way. He supposed that was what this tree represented: his resolve. It certainly looked different from all the other great trees that grew in this annex of the palace, surrounded by all these ostentatious and primordial texts.

Eric looked at the trees surrounding the one that was his and took in their great forms. Each tree was unique, all different colors. The bark on one rippled like water whereas another's looked like jagged rocks from a mountainside. Some had branches as sharp and unforgiving as knives and another appeared as soft as down with leaves like feathers. Really, his tree now seemed to be the most normal in comparison.

If his tree was only a year old, just how old were some of these other ones? Were they all trees of the Marked One? If that was true, then one of these represented Ilphas. He figured the most dangerous looking one was the Fae warrior's.

Eric glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting Cithrel and Gnosus to be approaching. When he was still alone, he knew he needed to make the most of this opportunity. He made a mental note to ask Cithrel later about what he needed to discuss with the librarian. Eric cast one more look at the tree as it stood grand in the sunlight, then turned on his heel and left it behind.

The only part of the library that Eric actually knew how to navigate was the Unseen section, but he had no desire to go there. Those books peered into this mind like another entity and the last time he went in there he blacked out.

If what the librarian said was accurate, though, then he just had to wander through the shelves until something called out to *him*.

So that's what Eric did—roam. He roamed a lot longer than he wanted to until he found himself in a dark and dusty area of the library that looked like it had been more than a while since someone last walked through. When he looked back over his shoulder, he sighed, knowing he was way too far into the library to see the gigantic twin doors of the entrance.

He passed a little sitting alcove, the reading nook carved from a great tree. It reminded him of the last time he was here with Cithrel. That interaction with the fourth prince had been all kinds of disastrous.

Eric's face crumpled, remembering something odd. That black book, the one that sent his powers into a disastrous frenzy whenever he touched it, was from the Unseen section and yet, somehow, he'd plucked it from the shelf like any other regular book. Did someone take it from the Unseen section, or was what Gnosus said the answer? Had that book really answered Eric's desire, even back then?

A shiver at the nape of his neck pulled him from his thoughts. An eerie feeling began to crawl its way over his skin

the longer he stood in the yawning silence of the library. Just as he was about to turn around and give up, there was a pull.

It was hard to describe, since it didn't quite feel like anything, and yet, it was like something snagged inside him. Eric shifted until he found the direction where the pull strengthened. Then he followed it, which led him deeper into this untouched section.

*This way.*

It was like the book he wanted spoke directly to the aether in his veins. Here, the books jutted from their shelves at awkward angles, like they weren't quite put away properly, or as if they struggled to free themselves from their place in the shelf.

Finally, Eric stopped in front of a particularly dusty book, its cover unsurprisingly blank. The sensation of being pulled snapped like a cord drawn too tight. It suddenly made sense to Eric why the Fae never had titles on their books. He knew they used their aether to sense what they sought, but he'd never truly understood it until now. The unnatural feeling on his skin thickened, and a sheen of cold sweat formed.

Eric swallowed as he reached for the book, knowing he needed this information for some reason he didn't yet understand. He exhaled a shaking breath, hard enough to blow off the top layer of dust from the book, stirring the stagnant air around him.

When he opened the book, pages scattered and began flipping of their own volition, the heft of the book increasing with each turn. This was the part of the Fae library Eric didn't enjoy—the individual wills the books seemed to possess. Shortly after opening, though, the pages stopped flipping and rested open on something Eric didn't realize he wanted to know about.

The headline on the page read, in thick scrawling Fae lettering, *The Impure*.

Eric stared at the words, his brain frozen as he failed to process what he was reading. Why did this book beckon him?

He was looking for information to help him with the slave trade, or that hawk-eyed banshee, Olaera. It didn't make sense that he was holding a book about Lady Vessa. His fingers still clutched the book tighter, wanting to keep the book just in case. Just as Eric was about to leave his fingers felt like they were burning.

No, there was definitely something wrong with this. A distinct urge to put the book down washed over him, threatening to drown him. It told him to put it down *now* and move. The urge to move screamed, incessant until—

“Eric?” It was Cithrel's voice. “Tell me where you are right now.”

There was a tinge of worry to the hard edge in the prince's voice. Something wasn't right.

A swirl of dust curled around Eric's fingertips and he instinctively turned out of the way. A split-second later, a small circular blade spun through the air where Eric had just been standing and buried itself in a book hanging from the shelf.

Eric spun around in time to see another three metallic circles come whizzing towards him from the shadows. His feet carried him without thought and he was able to dodge another two before the third sunk into his thigh.

He yelped as the metal cut through his clothing and blood trickled from the wound. His aether surged to life in his blood, an inferno lit with gasoline, igniting with a fury. Then Eric was running.

“Eric!” Cithrel shouted, but he sounded close and far away all at once.

Then he scented something twisted in the air, hiding just underneath the smell of dust and old paper. Mold.

*Shit.*

There hadn't been any sign of Krysos's assassins since Eric came back to Alonetha. Yet, somehow there was one hunting him down as he raced through the labyrinth of books. Every footfall sent a jolt of pain up his wounded leg. Blood

continued to trickle from his wound as he sprinted. His lungs burned.

He wanted to shout out for Cithrel, but if he did that then the assassin would know exactly where he was. Eric had no idea where his assailant hid, or if there was more than one. Damn, this was bad. Sure, he'd been training to stay in shape and had improved his control over his aether, but it was nowhere near strong enough to use without debilitating pain.

He didn't really have a choice, though. He'd have to endure it if he didn't want to die in the library.

Eric's aether pulsed through his veins, twining with his blood and circulating through his body, filling every fiber of his muscles with power. It pushed him faster and faster, barely feeling the wound on his thigh, until the world around him blurred as he ran with supernatural speed.

His heart thundered in his ears, the constant ringing drowning out the sound of his footsteps thudding on the stone floors. He couldn't have heard the assassin moving even if he wanted to. If Cithrel called for Eric again, he was too far away to hear.

Another blade slammed into a shelf to his left and Eric bolted to the right. His exhale of relief was cut short when a rogue knife appeared from the floor underneath him and shot up along the back of his calf before lodging deep into the muscle.

Eric bit down on his tongue, hard, tasting iron to stifle his hiss of agony as his leg was shredded. The scent of mold was in the air again and he realized with a pang of horror that running wasn't going to help him much longer.

His leg was slicked with hot blood as he limped forward, knowing more blades would be coming for him from all directions any second now. If he didn't do something he was as good as dead.

His aether surged again, with enough power to ignite his blood, and thorns began to grow out of his own flesh. The stench of rotted earth slammed into him as his black vines and

thorns tore through the back of his clothes. They continued to grow, spidering their way down his back until he had an entire mantle of thorns behind him. They coiled and squirmed around him like a living shield. With his festering bramble protecting him, Eric tore off the rest of his tattered shirt and began wrapping it tightly around his leg, wincing as he worked.

A wave of dizziness overcame him for a moment. The shock to his system of using his magic sent a crack of ringing ache through his skull. Eric swayed on his feet, stumbling forward and whimpering as he put too much weight on his injured leg.

He wished the fourth prince was here right now. He felt so helpless isolated and being stalked. No, he knew better than to trust Cithrel. But if there was one thing he could rely on, it was Cithrel keeping his word when he gave it. He said he'd keep Eric safe, so he would. Eric just needed to stay alive until Cithrel could get to him in this damned maze. He could feel some of his thorns crawling up his back, searching for more purchase, for more blood. So, Eric had to take his chances with his aether.

Before his vines could sink their barbs into his flesh, Eric felt the floor melting underneath him, the world around him bathed in gothic shadows. Thorns erupted out of the ground underneath him, spilling over one another like hungry beasts desperate to escape.

The sound of rotten earth squishing against itself sounded at Eric's feet as he felt the press of the assassin's blades embedding into the thorns at his feet. His blackened spines from his back snaked towards the ones on the ground, the entirety of them entangling together.

Eric started moving again, his mind focused on escaping his attacker, and kept forming an impenetrable and ghoulish path of putrid thorns under his steps. He couldn't move fast though; each stumble was an effort not to fall down. The feeling in his bandaged and bloodied leg burned and it was getting harder to move it with each step. It wouldn't be long before the Fae King's hired killer would be on him. He

just had to hope his control over the aether would be faster than the assassin's.

Unlikely.

The red blood that his black vines absorbed was a problem, too. He was losing blood, a lot of blood. He wondered if there was other aether at work that was keeping him from Cithrel. The prince should have been able to get to Eric by now. He needed help—he needed something he could use.

The ground and walls around him quaked and threw him off his already unstable footing. He crashed into his own fetid vines that rose to meet him and cushion his fall as if they were sentient to their master—for now.

Eric groaned at the impact of his leg wound digging into a thorn and felt it pulse as the vines lapped up his own blood. A cry of rage filled the library, the emotion echoing throughout the annex and pressing against Eric's skull. He didn't know if that was Cithrel or his own voice. His head was ringing, and stars danced across his sight.

A shadowed figure emerged from a row of books to Eric's left. He watched as predatory eyes shone back through the dark, all the while unable to see any color while he controlled his aether. The Fae assassin was cloaked to cover all its features apart from its gaze. Then it blinked out of sight again.

Eric twisted onto his back and let more and more of his magic pour from him. Writhing and grotesque blackened vines spewed from his palms and made a cage around him just as his attacker dropped from nothing back into reality on top of him.

He gasped, his chest heaving, as he watched the assassin's knife sink through a gap in his thorns and nick his shirt. He threw more thorns out but he was too slow, his blood loss clouding his concentration. The throbbing at his temples began, his human body reaching its limit of wielding the aether.

The Fae killer slammed against his wall of thorns again and again, its weapons grazing Eric each time. Each time the metal dug in a little deeper.

Christ, he needed something, *anything*.

Before he could get to his feet and fight, the walls shuddered again. Then they began to move.

The wall shook the entire library, down to the stone and the great trees that grew within it, before it vanished entirely and the black iron gates of the Unseen section emerged.

The books were attuned to his power now—they'd come to him, whatever he sought. Eric's eyes widened and then he was moving as best he could towards them. His spine tingled and his leg stung with each movement but he kept going. He kept crawling despite the assassin cutting and slashing at his back, tearing apart his barrier of black vines and barbs. He didn't slow when the invasive thoughts began.

*It's so lonely in here. Won't you keep me company?*

*You smell so good, come closer.*

*I'm starving. I'm starving. I'm starving.*

*I can give you power, more aether than you could ever imagine. All I need is a little blood. Just a little.*

Eric gnashed his teeth together, ignoring his headache that threatened to splinter bone, and kept crawling. For once he was thankful that his aether ate away at his body. The pain was so intense it blocked out the call of the dangerous volumes. It wasn't until he felt the persistent blades cease slicing into his back that he stopped.

He looked over his shoulder with a mixture of relief and dread as he saw the Fae assassin trudge towards a disfigured-looking book, its covering and spine muddled as if the fabric sagged with age the way humans did when they grew old.

Eric clapped his hands over his ears in an effort to muffle out the books that spoke to his mind, unable to look



away from the Fae that was snared by the aged book. Eric's lip crooked maliciously.

*Good riddance.*

Just as the books all but shrieked, a demand for attention, the Fae cloaked in shadows reached out and grabbed the book. The entire forbidden catalog of books in the Unseen section fell quiet as a single voice resounded in Eric's mind.

*It's been so long since I've feasted.*

Eric's blood ran cold as the sagging book's cover shifted and molded itself to the Fae assassin's arm before it dug into the Fae's flesh as if it was no more than butter. The Fae wailed in pain and terror as the book snared it and then ripped off all the skin and muscle down to the bone.

Black blood and muscle splashed onto the ground as the assassin struggled to free itself from the death grip of the forbidden book, but for all of its struggling, the Fae couldn't move. The Fae slipped on its own puddle of blood and chunks of loose flesh as the book's sagging cover stretched and elongated itself again, like some sort of reptilian monster unhinging its maw to devour its prey.

Bile rose at the back of Eric's throat. He couldn't look away from the horror of what he saw unfold. The monstrous book flayed the assassin alive, peeling back the Fae's skin and sinew, before devouring it all.

The Fae killer's screams lasted so much longer than Eric thought they would. It wasn't until they stopped with an abrupt gurgle that Eric vomited all over his protective cage of thorns. They writhed but then tightened their stranglehold on each other, reinforcing themselves around Eric.

It was like even his aether knew that whatever that thing was across from him, it was not a book. Eric was on his hands and knees, gasping for air after gagging, when he heard the sound of something thunk on the ground.

He looked over and saw that the rumpled-looking book that had just finished eating the Fae assassin alive now laid with its pages open, facing Eric.

Eric's nostrils flared as he fought to control his breathing. Every nerve in his body cried out in alarm, his muscles locked with fear. No invasive thoughts came at first, at least until a wave of light-headedness washed over him and he seemed to remember with belated alarm that despite his bandages, his leg was still bleeding.

*I can smell you. You're going to taste exquisite.*

Then the sagging and defaced book started slinking its way over to Eric, steadily and impending. Its fabric covering scraped along the floor and echoed with a sickening unnatural thud each time.

Eric needed to fight, he needed to use all the aether he had left, or this, this *thing*, was going to devour him. But as he opened the chains on his imprisoned and uncontrollable power, his body reached its limit. He'd reached his limit when he had entered the Unseen section, but now the pain immobilized him. It was too much for his mind and body to take.

He was out of time.

He felt his bones scraping together, threatening to shatter as the pressure of the raw aether burned through him. The veins at Eric's neck bulged as an ungodly scream tore through his body, pain igniting him throughout.

He was going to die, either from that monstrosity or from his own power. His blood was on fire, burning up his insides. He just didn't know what would consume him first.

The hideous fleshy book slunk closer, leaving a trail of black blood behind it.

Tears streamed down Eric's face as his vision began to tinge red in between the pain wracking his entire body relentlessly. His aether was feasting on him instead of protecting him. At least that's what he thought, until the red in his vision began to grow.

The red kept growing brighter and brighter until it hissed orange, yellow, then blue. It wasn't Eric's aether at all.

The scent of smoky wood burning and fresh ash filled the Unseen section.

It was Solonar.

A wall of scorching fire combusted from thin air just as the carnivorous book reached Eric's thorns. The power of a pure-blooded Fae's aether, it seemed, was more potent than even forbidden Fae texts because an instant later, the book combusted.

Its wails filled Eric's thoughts against his will, warring with the pounding of his own persistent headache. Still, Solonar's flames did not let up. They continued to burn brighter and hotter until the fire had a black core, its flame white.

The forbidden book went silent and fell into a pile of ash.

Eric's body slumped, with exhaustion or relief or a combination of both. He was drained completely. He'd never used so much of his power. Somehow, his aether withdrew within him and the blackened vines disintegrated around him.

"Eric," Solonar breathed, suddenly at his side. "This is going to hurt."

The prince was so warm and he felt so cold, painfully cold. "Warm," Eric managed to croak.

It was hard to see much more than two bright amber eyes staring down at him through a veil of raven black hair. Where did the crown prince even come from? Where was Cithrel? He was so tired.

"Sorry." Eric's eyelids fluttered.

He fought to keep them open, but they were just too heavy. Everything was too heavy and he was in so much pain. He was so tired.

Sleep. That was what he'd do. Sleep.

"Oh my, an apology from you." Solonar's voice sounded far away. "Don't think I'll let you forget that, Eric."

Just as his headache began to subside and the world fell into a comfortable and quiet darkness, Eric's veins lit with a fire. This heat burned like an old friend and a stranger all at once, mixing with his blood. Then it burned hotter, moving through him faster until it reached his chest.

His ribcage swelled as he sucked in a sharp, painful breath. Eric's eyes shot open as intense heat coursed through him. Manic, his hazel eyes darted around until he focused on those familiar cat eyes.

Solonar's brows pinched together in concentration, his long slender fingers splayed across Eric's leg, where his entire back calf had been split open. The Fae prince grimaced, exposing his canines as he pumped more of his own aether into Eric, healing him.

Eric gasped again; this time steam billowed from his mouth. It was hot, too hot. His own body scalded him from the inside out.

"Stop," Eric said, reaching for Solonar. "Please. It hurts, stop."

The raven-haired prince's attention darted from Eric's leg to his face. There was a complicated web of emotion unfolding before Eric. Worse than that was what the prince looked like.

Solonar's skin was a mess of gashes and bruises. Golden blood dried and flecked his skin all over. If he wasn't a pure-blood Fae prince, Eric was sure he'd be dead by now from his injuries. Yet here he was, hunched over him, drowning Eric with his own Fae power.

"Move, hellion." Gnosus appeared behind them, his hunched form ambling forward. "A prince that can't even wield his aether to heal properly thinks he's fit to rule. Pathetic."

The bleeding had at least stopped from Eric's leg, but everything else roared in agony and his organs felt like they were being boiled.

“Relax, creature,” the ancient Fae said and hunched over him. His onion skin pressed against Eric’s arm. “You did well. You called the books, and they answered.”

Where was Cithrel?

Eric frowned, but before he could move or say something, he fell under the power of Gnosus’s aether. Parchment assaulted his senses as pages fluttered all around him and then began adhering themselves to his skin.

Panic overwhelmed Eric and his eyes went wide, but he couldn’t move. Gnosus had all but mummified him. Then a final page flapped over his face and the world went dark.

## Chapter Eight

When Eric's eyes opened again, the ancient Fae was gone and so was the library. Light faded from the windows across the edge of his bed, signaling night's approach. He tried to move but let out a groan when his muscles ached in protest. Then a rough palm pressed against his cheek. It was warm, comfortable, familiar.

Eric looked up and saw Cithrel seated at his bedside, his frozen blue eyes melted as they searched Eric's face for an answer to an unknown question. It was all he wanted to sink into the bed and rest his head next to the fourth prince and sleep. He'd grown so used to being around him that he hadn't realized what a comfort it was when he was protected by Cithrel.

But Eric didn't say anything. He doubted he ever would—not when Cithrel and Eric both kept their secrets. It was what kept the line firmly drawn between them.

Yet, as he felt the warmth of Cithrel's palm radiating through him, his thoughts negotiated with him. If it was just sex, surely that didn't cross the invisible line between them. His muscles clenched, knowing that was a shit idea, but liking it more and more each second Cithrel kept his hand on Eric.

Eric's thoughts must have been written on his face because Cithrel pulled his hand away. Though Eric noticed the gorgeous Fae prince looked reluctant to do so. At least, that's what he told himself the grimace was for.

"How are you feeling?" Cithrel asked, his voice thick.

Eric cleared his throat and sat up straighter. "Tired. But otherwise fine."

It was true. Other than how fatigued his muscles felt, his headache was gone and his leg moved without any issues. Whatever creepy magic Gnosus used on him, it worked.

"The Archivist's aether is quite unique," Cithrel said, leaning back in his chair, "even by Fae standards."

No kidding. Eric thought he was being buried alive and then he was just, gone. “What was that magic?”

“That was his healing magic. Elder Fae like him find strange ways to master all different realms of shaping their aether.”

Eric shivered. He liked the old librarian, but it was still creepy. “I’ll have to thank him later.”

“He was doing what was necessary,” Cithrel said. His hands tightened into fists, and his gaze darkened. “Since I couldn’t be there for you.”

“Couldn’t?” Eric hung on that word.

Cithrel wasn’t there, after everything he promised, and then Solonar of all Fae saved him. Eric didn’t hide the hurt that flashed across his eyes at the memory of bleeding out, in pain, wondering where his protector was.

“I shouldn’t have left you alone in the first place. If I was there—”

“Then what?” Eric asked, leaning closer to Cithrel. He couldn’t help himself. “What would’ve happened if you were there?”

Cithrel’s blue eyes sharpened as his gaze bore into Eric. “Then I would have protected you.”

Eric’s lips parted. The way the prince just spoke ignited something deep within him. He didn’t know why he always wanted Cithrel to open up to him, but every time he got a glimmer of the real Cithrel, he wanted to see the whole thing.

“But you can’t always be at my side, Cithrel.” Eric cleared his mind of longing thoughts. He had to take advantage of this opportunity. “I need to be able to defend myself. I have all this power in my body and I can barely control it.”

Cithrel withdrew a little, and he already mourned the closeness. “Elasuin pushed you too far the last time you trained. He tortured you, used your mind against you.”

“Then you can train me.” Eric leaned forward, his voice edging on pleading. “I saw you, Cithrel, you’re the stronger Fae than your brother. You can train me to be strong. I can handle it.”

The fourth prince eyed him, incredulous. “Is that so?”

Eric grimaced, biting back the churn of his gut. He needed to wound Cithrel, twist the knife, or he would never agree to train him. “You weren’t there in the library, Cithrel. I was afraid and angry. I was looking for you, waiting for you to come for me and you never did. I don’t want to feel like that again. I gave you my word to stay in Alonetha if you kept my brother safe.”

“And I have kept my word,” Cithrel said, his expression suddenly furious.

“Thank you for keeping him safe, truly.” Eric softened his voice, and luring Cithrel in, he touched the prince’s hand. “But if I’m to stay in Alonetha, then I need to be able to protect myself.”

Eric watched as Cithrel lifted his attention from Eric’s hand on his to meet his gaze. Those pools of cool blue searched Eric’s face; for what, he didn’t know. Eric wasn’t positive, but Cithrel almost looked afraid.

Then the Fae prince spoke, voice so low Eric almost didn’t hear. “Alright. I’ll train you.”

Before Eric could stop himself, he lunged forward and wrapped his arms around Cithrel in a tight hug. “Thank you!”

Cithrel went utterly still, every fiber in his body going rigid. Eric pulled away in an instant, regret tinging his features. “Sorry. I know you don’t like to be touched so easily.”

Cithrel swallowed, struggling to keep his mask of indifference in place. “I’m... alright.”

But Eric saw the cracks, saw the fear hidden behind his apathetic façade. The Fae prince said he was alright, but Eric saw the loophole plain as sunlight. Physically, Cithrel was alright. But mentally he was in tatters. Eric thought of his



conversation with Luthais at the banquet. Luthais was pushed far past his limits, forced to endure immeasurable pain and trauma, all for the sake of having more power. The scars that left on Luthais ran deep. Looking at Cithrel right now, the strong and infallible Prince of Blades, fighting not to break down at being touched, Eric knew Cithrel had scars of his own that were still yet to heal.

“If you want to talk about it...” Eric let his words trail off, watching the prince’s expression.

“I don’t,” Cithrel said, getting to his feet immediately. He wouldn’t look at him, but Eric saw the mask was reforged and flawless again. “I should let you rest. We’ll start your training when you’re fully healed.”

Then he was gone and Eric was left alone, feeling a little more sympathy for Cithrel than he would’ve liked. He laid back in bed and curled up. There wasn’t time to try and crack open the prince’s heart and there wasn’t room for the prince when Eric’s heart was already devoted to the destruction of those who ruined him. The faster Eric healed, the closer he was to accomplishing his goals.

As Eric got ready for the day, his frustrations from the past week bubbled to the surface, no longer willing to be ignored. He didn’t want to feel weak and helpless, not with the old emperor’s aether in his blood. He’d already gone face-to-face with a Fae king. He just needed to be better, better than any murderous Fae that came for his life. And to his credit, Cithrel had agreed with Eric. Except now, Cithrel kept putting off his training, giving a different excuse every time he brought it up.

Eric had an almost permanent scowl on his face as he inhaled his breakfast, barely tasting anything. It wasn’t until he heard Hinni’s voice that he snapped out of it.

“Eric?”

“Sorry, Hinni. What?”

Hinni gave him a small smile. “You seemed deep in thought.”

They both knew he was seething, but Hinni was always so delicate and considerate with her words. It's what made Eric like her even more.

So he quirked his lips, brushing his curls away from his face so he could give her his full attention. "Apologies. What were you saying?"

"She was going to announce my presence." Cithrel stood at the entryway, arms crossed over his muscled chest.

Eric's eyes widened, lips parting at the sight of the prince. He wasn't in his usual prince commander armor, but instead was stripped down into the plain clothing all the Fae soldiers wore to train in. Which meant....

Cithrel watched the thoughts on clear display on Eric's face because he grinned. "Are you ready to start your training? Or are you too deep in thought?"

Eric pursed his lips, his cheeks heating. How long had the prince been standing there without him realizing it?

Eric shoved out of his chair. He dipped his head quickly to thank Hinni and then scurried over to Cithrel at the doorway. Without another word, Cithrel stalked out of their shared living space and they were on their way to the training grounds.

Eric was jittery with energy. Excitement and nerves were alight, and every step had a spring to it. He was finally going to start his training. He would get stronger, strong enough to stop any killer that came his way. Strong enough to get rid of Lord Aimar and the baroness.

"Are you prepared?" Cithrel's question pulled back Eric's attention.

He nodded, expression pointed. "I'm ready. I can handle it."

Cithrel snorted with a look that bordered on affectionate. "I know you can."

As they neared the center of the training grounds, Eric was aware of several things, none of which he had a good

feeling about. First, there were dozens of other Fae warming up and chatting with one another as Eric and the fourth prince entered. All their attention turned to Eric upon his arrival and a tenuous silence followed. Second, Elasuin stood with his arms crossed, a natural fury weighing on his shoulders, glaring at Eric the entire time. At least Eric spotted Rhistel off to the side, who bounded over with an infectious smile when he noticed Cithrel and Eric.

“Eric Becker!” He shouted, even though Eric was barely a couple feet from him.

His bubbling personality made Eric wonder at what age the innocence and joy was stripped from the Fae to turn them into malicious creatures. Elasuin confirmed Eric’s thought by managing to look even more furious at Rhistel’s friendly greeting.

“Rhistel,” Elasuin bit out, his words sharp as razors. At the command, Rhistel went painfully rigid in a flash, but a conspiratorial smile played on his mouth.

“I hope you’re ready to train, Marked One,” Elasuin said. The third prince used honorifics, but every word that left his lips promised trouble. Eric kept his gaze level with Elasuin’s. This was his chance to get stronger, for himself and no one else, so he wouldn’t be intimidated by any Fae.

“Of course, Your Highness.” Eric offered a skin-deep smile.

“Good.” Elasuin matched Eric’s honey with venom. “Because if my dog of a brother doesn’t train you properly, I’ll make sure to fix his mistakes.”

Eric’s temper flared. He hated this arrogant bastard. “I appreciate your concern, Your Highness, but I’m sure that won’t be necessary,” Eric said through grinning teeth.

“Start running, Eric,” Cithrel said.

Eric ran more than he thought humanly possible. He ran until he saw black at the corners of his vision and then he ran some more. Cithrel was serious when he asked if Eric was prepared. The only thing Eric was focusing on today was

letting the aether act like a battery, or steroids, replenishing his energy as he spent it. Apparently, there was no better way to do that than to make Eric run for an eternity.

All the other Fae cast smug looks in his direction, some daring enough to whisper insults at him as he ran by. Rather than running around the entire palace, Eric circled the perimeter of the training grounds so Cithrel could ensure Eric maintained his aether's charge in his muscles, and so Cithrel could easily monitor the area. Unfortunately for Eric, that put him on full display to be mocked by every other Fae soldier in the vicinity.

As Eric's lungs threatened to combust in his chest while every muscle in his body was on the brink of shredding to pieces, he kept himself distracted with Cithrel. Alone with his thoughts, he felt safe enough to admit he still wanted the fourth prince, even if he was a secretive and cold bastard. He knew there were pieces of him that were kind and vulnerable. Hinni wasn't wrong about that.

To his surprise, Eric caught the fourth prince stealing glances at him as he ran, even though he pretended not to. It made Eric's muscles tighten with a filthy excitement. He wanted Cithrel to see what Eric had to offer. Eric told himself he wasn't offering the prince a damn thing yet, but if Cithrel showed up in his room late at night, Eric wasn't confident he'd turn the angel-faced prince away. Not when he remembered how good they felt together.

*Shit.*

He needed to stop thinking like that. Eric was here to get his revenge; he didn't have time for the prince. Besides, it didn't matter to Cithrel if they slept together. He'd always choose the empire above all else.

The burning in his lungs finally passed so far beyond painful that Eric blocked out thoughts that weren't helping him focus on breathing. It wasn't long after that when Cithrel finally clapped his hands together and barked for Eric to stop running.

Eric collapsed into a puddle of limbs on the dirt path around the training ring, his chest rising and falling with every incendiary breath that tore through his esophagus. He heard footsteps headed his way and knew if he didn't get up, he was going to be dragged to his feet. With a groan, Eric managed to get back on his feet, albeit swaying.

"Pathetic," Elasuin spat, his permanent snarl exaggerated as he took in Eric's disheveled appearance. "I should make you start all over again. If you used your aether properly you would have barely broken a sweat, even if you're human."

Eric had had it with his being human being thrown into his face, as if he were an abomination. "I've never even tried to do that before. I think I did fine."

"It was an insult to the blessing flowing in your dirty red blood." Elasuin's forest-green eyes shadowed with his temper.

Maybe it was because of how exhausted he was and his control wasn't as strong. But Eric felt his own vitriol rise to the surface, setting the aether in his veins to boiling. "Shut up."

The third prince's lips pulled back as he let out an animalistic snarl. "What did you say to me?" The question was alarmingly calm.

"I said shut the fuck up." Color began to drain from Eric's vision as he loosened the chains on his aether.

"Eric." Cithrel's cold voice called from behind him. Then Cithrel was at Eric's side, faster than lightning. "His training is none of your concern, brother. See to your own soldiers."

The two commanders stood off against each other, glaring daggers and poison. Eric's anger guttered as he stood between the two Fae. If he couldn't control his emotions, then he wouldn't stand a chance in this world for long.

Elasuin finally huffed, his snarl deepening. "Don't bring him here if he can't keep up."

Cithrel didn't take his eyes off his brother until he was far enough away to take his anger out on his own Fae soldiers. Then the fourth prince turned his icy stare on Eric.

Every part of Eric's body burned and ached. The muscles in his legs had gone soft ages ago. He looked up into arctic blue eyes, and the coldness in that gaze was as refreshing as if every part of him was on fire.

"You're sparring with me," Cithrel said, withdrawing his hand. "I won't allow you to let your emotions control your aether. It just makes you a liability."

Eric fought the urge to grimace at the absence of Cithrel's touch. Christ, he needed to focus and not obsess over the bastard. He had more important things to worry about, like mastering his powers and finding a way to get the slaves out of Alonetha.

"How come I'm not sparring with any of the other Fae?" Eric glanced at the soldiers, who had all already engaged in their fights, each one moving as fast as lightning.

"You're nowhere near good enough to fight any of them."

"Thanks."

Cithrel shrugged and turned to face Eric, his arms still crossed in front of his chest. "Prove me wrong then." He eyed Eric with a disinterest that stung and ignited an anger Eric didn't know he had.

These Fae and their superiority complexes. "No problem."

Eric woke the aether slumbering in his blood and ignited it, forcing the heat of his power into every tissue and fiber of his muscles. He charged Cithrel, who stood statuesque. His vision blurred to monochromatic as his hand morphed into a blackened claw, ready to slash across the fourth prince's face.

A second later, Cithrel was behind Eric, arms still crossed, without so much as a look in Eric's direction. What a son of a bitch.

“Problem?” Cithrel asked, his tone apathetic.

It was a problem. “No.”

Eric lunged, again, and again, gritting through the intensity of his limbs being lit ablaze by the aether flowing through him. Every single time he moved, though, Cithrel had already anticipated it and dodged. A few of the other Fae soldiers stopped their own sparring sessions to watch.

Eric’s jaw worked and he did his best to ignore the sets of eyes on him, studying and judging him, the Marked One. He charged toward the fourth prince and at the last second pivoted on his heel, lunging for Cithrel’s blind spot, his blow aimed at the Fae prince’s kidney.

Just as easily as before, Cithrel moved out of the way with blinding speed. He made it look like he never moved at all, as if Eric just missed.

Cithrel looked down at Eric, his arctic eyes hooded. “Still think you’re good enough?”

Eric scowled and charged again. “I am.”

The fourth prince evaded him with a sigh of exasperation. He actually *sighed*.

Frustration seeped into Eric’s vision as more and more of his aether poured out of him and still, Cithrel never deigned to uncross his arms. Eric couldn’t stand it. He wasn’t even worth enough for the Fae prince to take him seriously. The way he looked at Eric stoked the flames of his anger.

Almost all of the Fae elites watched the two of them spar now, their attention focused solely on Eric. Elasuin and Rhistel stood off to the side, too. The third prince sneered at Eric’s failed efforts to land a blow on Cithrel, like he knew the punch line to a joke before Eric did. What an asshole. Eric was determined to make that angel-faced bastard hit the dirt.

He was not lesser. He was more than just a human.

His knuckles blackened, the skin pulled taut across his bones, and he felt a weight press down above his head, just as red bled into his line of sight. The scent of rotten earth filled

the air, mixing with the faint traces of citrus from Cithrel's aether.

Cithrel's glazed-over eyes snapped into immediate focus, widening with a look of shock. A smirk played on Eric's mouth at seeing the fourth prince finally react. Cithrel had just enough time to throw his hands up before Eric was on him like a wraith.

Either side of his head ached and his temples throbbed as he crashed into Cithrel. Black claws that were Eric's hands dug into Cithrel's shoulders, slicing through the silver metal of his chest plate like it was nothing and digging into his flesh.

They toppled to the ground with a resounding crash, kicking up a storm of dirt and dust. Eric's chest was heaving, a malicious grin spread wide on his face, his vision painted red. He looked down at the fourth prince who had managed to block Eric's true attack despite being on his back on the ground.

The mask of indifference shattered, leaving behind pools of bottomless deep blue that swallowed Eric whole. The wicked grin fell from his face and reality came crashing back.

His red-tinted vision faded and the world came back into focus. Eric's claws were still sunk into Cithrel, and he ripped them out as if touching the prince burned him. Bright gold blood painted Eric's fingers as the black receded from his skin.

He shoved to his feet and put some distance between them, horror dripping over him. He wiped the blood from his fingers down his pants, watching the gold smear across the fabric. He spun around and realized that everyone looked at him, no longer with a curiosity or humor but with something that was closer to fear. That couldn't be right, could it?

"I'll say it again," Cithrel called from behind Eric. "Do you still think you're good enough?"

Eric looked away from the Fae who glared all around him and met Cithrel's hardened expression. He couldn't tell if the prince was pleased or pissed off. Not that it mattered; Eric



had learned his lesson the hard way. He understood what the real question was now. Did Eric think he was good enough to control himself and not give in to the aether, to the bloodlust and hunger for death?

“No.” Eric let his head dip, his curls falling into his face. “I don’t.”

“Good. Then we can actually begin.”

Eric just nodded, unable to lift his head. He was nowhere near ready to take down the baroness and Aimar and free all the other humans trapped in this forsaken place. He needed to be better, not for his sake, but for theirs.

Eric had the dawning fear that for the first time, he didn’t feel like a human.

## Chapter Nine

“I don’t want to drink another tonic, Hinni,” Eric said, craning his neck to avoid Hinni’s latest mixture. “No matter how much you promise it’s going to taste better.”

“Eric,” Hinni chided, her tone similar to a displeased mother’s. “I’m your attendant and the prince commander instructed me to tend to your injuries. You must drink it. It will take care of the last of the bruising from today. And truly, it does taste better than the last one.”

“Just because something tastes better doesn’t mean it tastes *good*,” Eric said.

Hinni sighed, concern glinting in her huge all-black eyes. She knew what Eric was feeling, could sense his emotions and his overall state of being. In fact, she knew better than anyone exactly how sore Eric had been for the last week. It had been non-stop training. If he wasn’t running until he wanted to puke or pass out, then he was sparring with Cithrel. Which meant he spent more time slamming into the dirt than he did anything else. The fourth prince was the closest thing to a god of war that Eric could imagine. The way he moved when they sparred was indescribable. Every breath, step, and movement was calculated and elegant and yet somehow also vicious and merciless like a lightning storm.

Hinni kept staring at Eric, her wide eyes pleading. If Eric didn’t know any better, he’d think she was trying to guilt him into it.

“Alright, fine.” Eric snatched the vial of despicable liquid off the table, fixing it with a look of disdain. “But you have to make me some stimulants for tomorrow morning because there’s no way I’m going to survive another social event without a drink in my hand.”

Hinni gave a graceful nod, an obvious smile on her tree-like face. “Thank you, Eric. I’ll leave the prepared vials in your chambers for sunrise.”

Eric tipped back the small glass bottle of murky medicine and immediately coughed and gagged when the liquid touched his tongue. He sputtered, and after forcing the medicine down his throat, he gasped. His entire face was red, a fresh look of agony on his face.

“I knew it! Hinni, this tastes terrible.”

Hinni’s voice was pleasant. “It does taste better than the last one.”

“And I said just because it tastes better doesn’t mean it tastes good.”

Hinni just smiled and stepped away from Eric, appraising his outfit. As she did, the aching in Eric’s muscles and bones faded. For all his complaining, Eric had to admit that Hinni was a gifted apothecary. Her tonics and potions always healed him in an instant. She understood exactly how to tailor her skills to a human’s needs.

Hinni clasped her hands together, stepping away from Eric. “You’re ready. I’ll inform the prince commander. Try to get along tonight.”

Eric’s lips formed a thin line. Eric wasn’t the one who had trouble playing nice with others. Not that it mattered—Eric was here to get his revenge, not to fall back into the mess that was him and Cithrel.

He’d been obsessing over seeing the baroness and Lord Aimar again tonight. The baroness had no doubt been informed by now that Eric would be overseeing her precious slave trade by her side. The look on her face must have been fuming when she was told. It must have been glorious.

While he waited for Cithrel to appear, he stared at himself in the mirror. A sleek form-fitted jacket hung from his shoulders. The top half was a deep green color, which Eric was sure matched the green Cithrel always wore, and the bottom half was pure black. Embroidered on his chest was the black doe, as always. Every piece of clothing Eric wore now had the symbol of the Aloneth family emblazoned on it. What was unique about the jacket was the high collar that clung all

the way up his neck and the absence of fabric along his shoulders and collarbone. Several black chains hung over the bare skin of his shoulders and went all the way down to his hips. His pants were thankfully plain, just slim fit and black. A pair of polished black boots completed the outfit, their buckles asymmetrical and gleaming.

“You look magnificent.”

Eric spun around to look at Cithrel. He had no idea how long the prince had been standing there, or how long he’d been staring at Eric.

His attention shifted to take in Cithrel’s outfit, and was stunned. It was just like his armor, except instead of shining silver metal he wore a silver-and-emerald jacket and pants that clung in all the right places. Tonight, Cithrel even donned his diadem, its prongs nestled around his forehead. His hair was what really pulled everything together, though. Instead of his usual myriad of tight and intricate braids, there was a single loose braid that pulled his hair from his eyes. The rest of it hung loose around his shoulders like white gold.

“You look....” Eric paused, struggling to find a word to do Cithrel justice. “Good.” He failed.

Cithrel gave a roguish smile that set his arctic eyes ablaze. “I’m glad you think so. Shall we?”

Eric’s heart thumped hard in his chest. He felt like he was back in high school going to prom or something. The fluttering didn’t let up as they made their way to Marquise Esta’s estate.

He remembered Solonar telling him about the female noble, but he was yet to meet her. He hoped she wasn’t strongly aligned with the baroness or Lord Aimar, otherwise tonight wouldn’t be pleasant. Not that it would be anyways. It would be a night of glances and glares from every other Fae in attendance.

Regardless of title, Eric was still a mere human.

They came up to the Virdove estate, Esta’s home, and Eric stopped short. He didn’t have the luxury of walking

around the capital city as a slave and hadn't had that even when he lived in the palace. So he'd never seen all the lavish mansions the nobles all lived in. The marquise was no exception.

Solonar had said she was pragmatic, but the marquise's estate was the epitome of pragmatism. The building was built of the most plain and smooth stone, a calming gray color, and the mansion while it was massive as expected of nobility, it was basically a giant square. There were plain Doric columns that lined the front of Esta's mansion and the door was featureless in detail. The only touches of intricacy and extravagance came from the massive tree that grew out of the front corner of the house. It was the showpiece and anchor of the entire estate. The thick branches bowed around the house and its massive deep green and blue leaves coiled about the branches before they tilted skyward. The vibrancy of the ingrained bark and the color of the leaves made the mansion and the entry of her estate look even more pristine and efficient.

"The marquise is particular," Cithrel said next to Eric, guessing at the reason behind the wide-eyed look on Eric's face. A look that said he didn't know whether to be impressed or frightened.

"I can see that," Eric mumbled.

When Eric made his way inside, the marquise's architectural and design choices followed through. Everything was plain stone and crisp wood, clear angles, and minimalist furnishings. She only had what she needed and nothing more. A servant passed by and swiftly deposited a drink into Eric's hand before flitting away again.

Then they were inside and everything shifted. Gone was the obsessive compulsive, and in its place was a party full of bright colors and chaos. The abrupt change in scenery was jarring and if a drink hadn't been put in Eric's hand almost instantly, he was positive it would have given him a headache.

Cithrel led them further into the throng of Fae. As their bargaining and chattering filled the expansive space of the

mansion, Eric scanned the ballroom. The baroness would surely be in attendance. And no matter how much it made his skin crawl and his rage burn, Eric had to hope Lord Aimar would be somewhere nearby, too. The more he could get them talking, the more he could use that against them. It didn't matter if they were the traitors or not; Eric would make them the traitors. So he was going to pull on any loose thread he could find until it all unravelled.

“Who are you looking for?”

Eric looked back at Cithrel and saw the almost imperceptible crease to his brow, heard the suspicion in his voice. They were hardly inside the mansion and Eric had already slipped up. Cithrel suspecting Eric of anything was his worst-case scenario.

Eric was quick to smooth out his features. “Is Lu not here yet? It seems odd for him to miss a party.”

He met Cithrel's scrupulous stare and waited, not letting himself look away. Eventually, Cithrel sucked his teeth and looked away, almost like he was annoyed. “Luthais was summoned to the palace to see to some private matters. He won't be attending tonight.”

“Private matters?” Eric frowned. “Why now? Isn't it expected of the princes to attend court social events?”

A nagging thought picked away at him. Was Luthais being punished for drinking with Eric at the last banquet? After what he learned that night, he wouldn't put it past the empress to do something cruel. Her favored son had disobeyed her once, and she'd punished him by permanently chaining him to Eric.

“I don't know what he was summoned for,” Cithrel said, but his tone implied he guessed the same thing as Eric. “So you'll have to make do with me.”

Eric couldn't fight his grin. “I suppose I will. I'm going to need another drink, for starters.”

Cithrel looked at Eric's empty glass like it insulted him, but without a word he flicked a finger up. Eric jumped

when a lanky Fae dressed in servant livery appeared at his side, taking his empty glass and placing a full one in his hand. The Fae should have been over seven feet tall, but his limbs were crooked and bent, as if all of him was trying to shrink in on himself. Eric wondered how that Fae ever ended up as a servant with a body like that, but before he could say thank you the servant was gone. He just vanished. It sent a thrill of ice down Eric's spine. He didn't think he'd ever get used to how the Fae could move.

Eric sipped at the shimmering orange liquor that swirled in his glass, enjoying the tingle it sent across his tongue and down his throat. As he drank, he felt lighter, more alert even. Well, this drink was dangerous, but surely it couldn't be more dangerous than the personal stash Luthais kept at his private house.

"That's alpine *energeia* wine." Cithrel's mouth quirked. "It looks like you enjoy its taste. It takes our palace viticulturists decades to properly ferment the mountain flowers and their fruit."

Eric took another sip, revelling in the heady lightness that surged as he swallowed it down. "It's fantastic." Eric licked his teeth. "You're not drinking?"

"One of us needs to be alert." Cithrel looked stern but his low voice betrayed his amusement with Eric.

"Yes, sir," Eric mock saluted. "If you're not drinking, then you should be alert enough to dance with me. Unless..."

Eric trailed off, glancing down at Cithrel's calloused hands. He wanted to feel the rough warmth of the prince's hands on him, but lately his conscience reminded him of what the princes must have gone through growing up. It wasn't right to ask him, but Eric wanted to know anyways. Or, rather, he hoped Cithrel meant what he said about earning Eric's trust. If that was true, then maybe the fourth prince would open up to him.

"I can dance." Cithrel leaned in close, holding out a hand for Eric. "Can you?"

Eric downed the rest of his drink, thrilling from the zip of the liquor. He took Cithrel's hand and waggled his brow. "If you remember, Lu and I were amazing dancers together. After all, we managed to escape right in front of you."

Cithrel glowered as he pulled them onto the dance floor. "I remember."

Eric noted the heat of the prince's palm against his back, the protective splay of his hands around Eric, as if claiming him. He didn't know if he liked it or hated it. Still, the prince was holding Eric and touching him with no issue. So he only had a problem if another touched him, not when it was the other way around.

### *Control.*

Eric could understand that. If power was everything to the Fae, then being powerless was a nightmare. A death sentence.

"You can ask." Cithrel had crooked his neck to whisper in Eric's ear, sending goosebumps along his skin. "I owe it to you."

Eric's heart soared regardless of his mind's better judgement. Thinking it and having it happen were two very different things. It turned out Cithrel was indeed a Fae of his word. Cithrel spun them around the room, his hold firm and his steps lithe.

Eric opened his mouth and then closed it again. Finally, though, he gave in to his curiosity and said, "You don't have to tell me, but if you do, I'd like to know what happened to you. Why you can't stand to be touched."

Cithrel's steps didn't falter as they danced, but he slowed his pace. His hard blue eyes melted then and he looked at Eric with a bittersweet smile. Eric waited, counting the seconds away before Cithrel continued.

"How much did Luthais tell you?"

Eric cleared his throat, shoving down the rising lump. "That your father wanted you all to be perfect, basically. Luthais told me a little about what he went through, what he



suffered when he was forced to use his aether, even when it hurt him.”

Cithrel nodded along, looking thoughtful. “Then you know his expectations were going to be met one way or another. I was no different than my siblings.”

Eric squeezed Cithrel a little tighter as they slowed to barely a sway. It was an effort to keep his face even. His heart ached for what he was about to hear. What kind of a being was the former emperor, whose aether lived inside Eric now? A being who fought for equality and change but hungered for power to the point he was willing to torture his own children. Marrying the two sides of the emperor felt impossible. Eric couldn’t align them.

“The emperor made us manipulate and control our aether as soon as it manifested within us. I was a small Faeling at the time. I worshipped my father as a child. All I wanted was to gain his approval, his favor. And I excelled. I was quick to elevate my aether. My power grew exponentially, faster than my siblings. In my pursuit of approval, I didn’t realize what my actions would do, what they conveyed to my siblings.”

Eric’s chest constricted, his breath tight. “It’s okay,” he whispered.

Cithrel held Eric tighter, more for himself than for Eric, he realized. “What do you think it looks like when the fourth-born child is faster, stronger, more adept, more powerful in every way than the first born, the third born?”

Eric’s stomach dropped, dawning dread filling the void in him.

*No.*

“Solonar couldn’t take it. Seeing my power grow with each passing year, getting closer to his own level of power. But he couldn’t be the one to personally deal with me. He needed to take care of any threat to his throne, but he needed to do it discreetly. So he turned my brothers against me. Luthais was in near-constant agony, and I could see how much he hated us brothers being pitted against one another for

dominance, all in the name of power. He did the bare minimum to keep our father at bay and nothing else. He didn't hurt me, but he never helped me either."

Cithrel took a shuddering breath, their dance all but halting for a moment while he collected himself. Eric watched as the memories from centuries ago replayed in Cithrel's mind still fresh. Then he withdrew behind his mask and Eric saw just how much he needed that mask; it was more of a shield than anything. A means of hiding behind.

"Elasuin was easier for Solonar to manipulate, though," Cithrel continued, his voice detached and cold. "Solonar convinced him that he would be the first to fall under me as the third-born son. That was all the motivation Elasuin needed to begin torturing me. Whatever it took for me to know my place—to not overstep."

The Fae prince's voice cracked, and he stopped talking. Those blue eyes that always looked so impenetrable, an impregnable fortress, were shattering before Eric. He was drowning in the misery behind Cithrel's eyes. Eric couldn't breathe and his face crumpled. There was nothing he could do for Cithrel as the Fae broke in front of him. He felt so damned useless. It was selfish of Eric to bring it up, to make him delve into his traumatic past. Regret welled in him. Just as he was about to tell Cithrel to stop, the prince soldiered on, determined to finish his story.

"Solonar watched as I was slowly and painstakingly broken by Elasuin. At first, I fought back. But after Solonar intervened a few times and I was overpowered, I learned to take the torture Elasuin doled out. The illusions were always different, a new form of pain presented each time, but one thing was the same. Whatever Elasuin showed me, he made sure I was always pinned down, by dozens of hands, and that I was powerless. They touched me and no matter how hard I struggled, they held me down, immobilized me. I stopped trying to please my father then and only did enough to keep up, but I was careful never to surpass Elasuin, or Solonar, for that matter. He was the real manipulator, after all. Because of that, though, it made the emperor angry. Anger that he took

out on me, but I didn't fight harder. It was much easier to take my beatings from the emperor than from my brothers. Sometimes I can still feel them, the filthy hands on me. It's suffocating."

"I'm so sorry, Cithrel," Eric choked out. His throat was thick and tears threatened to spill over. He wanted to hold Cithrel, to cup his cheek and tell him everything was going to be okay. But that would be a lie. Cithrel still couldn't stand to be touched and Eric wasn't his protector.

"It's alright. Now you know, so hopefully you can understand some of my actions in the past." Cithrel leveled his focus on Eric, ensnaring him with a ferocious look. "Solonar is dangerous, Eric. He might be oath-bound to you, but that doesn't mean you're safe from him. He's incredibly smart and cunning. If there's a way for him to get what he wants, he'll find it. No one is above him; there isn't a being he won't use to fulfil his desires."

They had long since stopped dancing and Eric was stunned, frozen in place. They looked at each other then, Eric's hazel eyes muddled with fear and heartache. Cithrel couldn't and promised he wouldn't lie to Eric. He knew as well as Cithrel did that Solonar wasn't to be trusted, but still, somehow something about what the prince said about Solonar didn't add up.

"I understand." Eric managed a smile, brushing away his concerns for a later obsession when he couldn't sleep.

"You look like you could use a drink, Marked One."

Eric's blood went ice cold, freezing in his veins. His entire body tensed at the sound of the sinister voice of Lord Aimar.

He turned slowly, still in Cithrel's arms like they might start twirling on the dance floor any second. The Fae lord stood with a sickening smile spread across his face. Those all-white irises focused on Eric, drinking in every inch of him, filled with lust and dark desire. He wore emerald, much like Cithrel always did, except his fabric was intricately woven. The material wrapped around his slender body in an

extravagant and brightly-colored pattern and was held together with carefully placed needles. His boots were silver clad and tied from toe to calf. Even his hair was braided in impossible patterns. It made Eric's stomach churn to see the pathetic imitation of Cithrel on the Fae lord.

"I'm not thirsty, my lord," Eric said, eyes stony.

"Pity," Aimar said smoothly, looking unbothered by Eric's rebuff. "I could've sworn that look on your face just now was one of thirst. Perhaps another kind."

Eric glowered at what Aimar insinuated. He was a sick bastard and Eric wanted nothing more than to rip his fucking head off right now.

No. No, he needed to calm down. He needed to be patient. The lord's time would come, sure enough.

"You must be mistaken," Eric mused, shoving down his emotions. "You often are, after all."

The lord's snivelling grin fell and his white eyes widened with irritation. "Indeed, Marked One. After all, it was my mistake to buy defective livestock in the first place. I thought my favorite pet would like to have some company, but those two humans proved to be detrimental. A costly mistake. One I won't make again."

Eric's nostrils flared. That son of a bitch! He saw the color draining from his vision, shifting to shades of black and white. How dare that sick monster talk about Garret and Elena like that. Eric was going to make him pay for those words.

Cithrel clamped down on Eric's arm then, sensing Eric's aether before anyone else. He kept his steel gaze on Aimar, though. "Are you forgetting your prince, my lord? It seems your mistakes continue."

The Fae lord bit down on his tongue, forcing himself not to bite back. Cithrel's touch was enough to calm Eric down and bring him back to the reality of his situation. Eric needed to do better. He couldn't be baited so easily, or he really would lose control.

Aimar collected himself and then turned to Cithrel. "Greetings, Your Highness. You honor the empire with your valor."

"Thank you, Lord Aimar," Cithrel replied, voice monotone.

A wave of cold washed over their conversation, courtesy of the prince. An icy air that had no other meaning than "fuck off."

Just then, as if frigid atmospheres were her home, Baroness Olaera appeared. Eric didn't think the mood could drop any more, but her appearance plummeted temperatures to sub-zero.

"Good evening, Your Highness." Olaera lowered into an elegant bow. "Your presence honors me. Marked One."

The baroness tacked on the last part, casting a dismissive gaze towards Eric. But she was smart. She wouldn't make the same mistake twice by ignoring Eric. Wretched woman.

"Baroness Olaera," Cithrel said, giving a curt nod. "The empress has made it known that the Marked One will be joining you in overseeing the slave trade. I look forward to your collaborative efforts."

Olaera's lips thinned at the same time as Aimar's eyes widened from shock. It looked like the baroness had been informed but hadn't made it known to any of the other nobles. Eric cast a sideways glance at Cithrel. He wondered if Cithrel knew the corner he was backing the baroness into. Either way, Eric suppressed his smugness.

"I do as Her Imperial Majesty wishes," the baroness said, though her voice lacked any emotion. She looked livid. "I hope it won't be too much for you tomorrow, Marked One. It could prove difficult overseeing the livestock that you were once part of. Will it not be hard to sell your own kind?"

Eric's hands hung limp at his sides, and he wished he had a drink again. She was right. It was going to be horrible, having to walk through the baroness's estate, to where she ran

her *business*, and look into the eyes of people like him, people who had lives of their own, and now their freedom was stripped from them, leaving them naked and broken. But he was doing this for a reason. He needed to take everything from the baroness to ruin her, to utterly destroy her existence. And Lord Aimar along with her.

“No problem at all,” Eric assured, his voice even. On the inside, though, he was withering. “I look forward to it.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“I think I will go in search of a drink. I’ll let the three of you enjoy your conversation of war.”

Eric had no idea if they were actually going to discuss the war, but he didn’t care. He needed to get away from them before he lost it. He felt himself getting too emotional again and he needed some air, some time to collect himself.

He couldn’t find the front doors fast enough and was relieved to see he was alone outside. Letting out a heavy sigh of relief, Eric breathed deep in the calm night air. It wasn’t long after that a figure appeared from the shadowed streets of the capital city.

Eric squinted until the figure came into view. A smile crooked on his mouth of its own volition. “I didn’t think you’d make it.”

“Did you miss me, lovely?” Luthais asked, sauntering, and oozing pure sex appeal.

He was dressed plainly compared to how he usually was. Even his face was mostly bare, save for a few metallic studs. Whatever he was pulled away to do, it seemed to prove taxing for Luthais.

“I did miss you,” Eric replied, with a sigh. “I don’t suppose you want to sneak off together again, share a drink?”

“It’s like you’ve read my mind, lovely.” Luthais gestured for Eric to lead the way and Eric hurried down the stairs of the Marquise’s estate.

He never ended up meeting Marquise Esta, the Imperial Accountant. Not that he cared—he wanted to get away from this mansion as quickly as possible. He threw a mental apology to Cithrel, for abandoning him without a word.

Eric didn't want any more misery for the night. After hearing about Cithrel's childhood and knowing what he would have to endure tomorrow alongside the baroness, he wanted to forget about it for a few hours.

"I think I still have a few bottles of my personal stock," Luthais mused.

Eric flashed a knowing grin at Luthais. "Good."

## Chapter Ten

Eric let the prying thoughts drift away as he strode into Luthais's sitting area, finding the second prince right where he left him, splayed out half-naked with a crystal glass of wine in his metal-clad hand.

Eric ran a hand through his unruly curls with a heavy sigh.

"It wasn't that bad, lovely," Luthais said, the deep red swirling in his glass. "It'll fully heal in a day or two. Healing magic was never my strength growing up."

"It felt that bad." Eric poured himself a glass before he slumped in a divan across Luthais.

Halfway to Luthais's private house, they thought it would be a good idea to see who was the better runner and raced to the second prince's house. Except they got a little too competitive and Eric had had a bit to drink, which led to Eric being tripped up by his own magic and skidding across the cobblestone streets and into some less-than-soft carpets of flowers that were more thorn than petal.

"At least Cithrel wasn't there to see it," Eric snorted. "He would have been fuming."

Heat tracked down the back of his neck, remembering just hours ago when he and Cithrel had been in each other's arms, dancing. The prince had laid himself bare to Eric, and Eric ran off. He chewed his lips, an inkling of guilt prodding him.

Luthais's light demeanor flecked away and his words sobered. "Be glad you have Cithrel to train you. The training grounds can be a much more unforgiving arena."

Eric felt a tingle run along his skin as his nerves tickled with apprehension. Cithrel's confession came back to the forefront of his thoughts. Eric didn't blame Luthais for not intervening and stopping his brothers from tormenting the fourth prince. Luthais was still young and trying to survive the



horrible environment he was thrust into. But Eric was furious about what Solonar and Elasuin did. Most of all, he was furious about what they all had to go through, that that was their childhood.

“Cithrel told me about what happened between him and Elasuin and Solonar. Was it really that bad growing up in the palace?”

Luthais’s purple eyes flashed, so fast Eric wasn’t sure if he imagined it, making him look like an enraged fiend. Then it was gone and the prince smoothed the edges of his coat. “It’s complicated, lovely. Let’s not discuss matters darker than what we’re already dealing with at present.”

Eric swallowed. That said more than an actual answer could have. The palace, and likely the being whose powers Eric inherited, seemed darker and darker. “Right. What do you think I can look forward to tomorrow?” he asked after taking a mouthful from his goblet.

“Judging from how much venom spewed from Olaera when my mother informed her you would be joining her, no more vitriol than usual. She’s just upset that her precious wealth is being taken from her, although it’s temporary.” Luthais’s lips quirked.

“At least Sir Saelihn will be there.” Eric gestured while holding his goblet. “Though I think I can count the words he’s spoken to me on one hand.”

Luthais gave Eric a funny look. “Surely he’s said more than five words.” He swirled his drink again before he downed the entire thing in one overly erotic gulp. A tendril of blood-red liquid trickled down his lips and throat. He didn’t bother to wipe it away.

“I guess that’s a specifically human figure of speech.” Eric said, amused. “Hey, has it really been millennia since the Fae last interacted with humanity and the rest of the world?”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed, but the severed world has no connection to the aether.” Luthais rose to his feet and slouched out of his velvet coat.

“Imagine half of your blood turning to sludge in your veins as soon as you stepped through a Fae Path into the severed world. Our kind’s connection to the aether is so potent that any break in that connection is physically painful.”

He suspected as much before, but he wanted to be certain that was the reason and not some other truth the Fae hid behind his back, like constantly pumping him full of their aether to keep him from withering away in the palace last year, or how whenever he felt sick Solonar gave him another piece of his near-scalding aether. An involuntarily wave of warmth crept along his flesh at the thought.

Luthais bent in an awkward position, showing off his exceptional flexibility. “Very good, lovely. It’s one of the reasons my brother argued for you to be left alone in the severed world.”

Eric’s eyes widened. He wouldn’t admit how bad he wanted to know the answer, which one he secretly hoped had fought for him. “Which brother?”

A mischievous grin spread wide across Luthais’s face. “It wouldn’t be very fun for me if I told you, now, would it?”

“You asshole!” Eric grabbed a small plush pillow from his divan and chucked it at Luthais.

The second prince dodged the pillow with supernatural fluidity. He let out a throaty laugh at Eric’s sad attempt. “How charming.”

Luthais straightened, finally finishing his strange stretching routine. He didn’t say anything, but in the next moment the aroma of clay filled the entire main floor of the manor. When Eric looked at Luthais again, she had long waves of black hair with painted crimson nails and a sultry black smattering over her eyes. Her sheer clothing clung to every inch of her thick curves and left nothing to the mind to imagine. Luthais looked like a reincarnation of Aphrodite, her sensual body draped with lust.

When she moved towards the front door, Eric frowned. “Where are you going?”

“These past few days have lacked any sort of entertainment, lovely.” She winked over her bare shoulder. “So, I’m going to find some.”

“You’re just going to leave me here drinking alone?” Eric’s mood soured.

“Pouting doesn’t look good on you, lovely,” Luthais pressed her painted fingers against the oak wood door, “I will admit I am curious to find out which one of them will get here first.”

Then she was through the door and Eric was alone in the large and yet somehow cozy manor.

Or so he thought, until he saw something stir from the corner of his eye. Eric whipped around and faced Cithrel, who stood on the other side of the open space, bathed in the shadows of the dimly lit manor. How did he even get in here without Eric noticing? Then again, this wouldn’t be the first time Cithrel slipped into a room unnoticed.

As Cithrel stepped towards Eric, his arms uncrossed and Eric got a good look on the rare occasion where the prince wasn’t clad in his imperial armor or court attire. Eric’s chest twanged, letting him know just how much he liked seeing Cithrel this way and how much he missed it.

A dark charcoal cloak hung off the Fae prince’s shoulders. As he pulled back his hood, loose blond waves, just like earlier, fell around his face except where his pointed ears poked through. A loose cream-colored shirt with the front undone revealed the broad chest Eric had memorized. Even his black training pants were simple, Cithrel not requiring anything more. Although, Eric puzzled over why Cithrel would have left the party to change and then come find him.

Eric felt his face warm the longer he stared, but he got to his feet to meet Cithrel halfway. “You found me a lot quicker this time.” The words were quiet but wobbled anyways.

“I made an educated guess.” Cithrel’s eyes took in Eric, or rather seemed to devour Eric, raking up and down

over every inch of his body. “And I wanted to see you.”

The words were charged and Eric felt every syllable like a lightning strike to his heart. He took another tentative step towards Cithrel. All rational thought vanished when Cithrel stood before him like this, so close to the version of the prince only Eric saw. There was only one singular thought, one unspoken feeling, within him.

“Well, you’ve seen me,” he teased.

Cithrel never took his eyes off Eric as he closed the space between them. “That’s not entirely accurate.”

Eric shivered, like his body understood Cithrel’s words before he did. “Oh?” His hand hovered over the Fae’s chest. Felt the heat that radiated from the prince.

He wasn’t going to touch Cithrel. He was determined to wait for the prince to make the first move. Eric stood there, biting his lip, but he hoped he wouldn’t have to wait long as he felt himself stir.

The prince’s arctic gaze melted into crystal seas as his forehead rested against Eric’s, the space between them finally nonexistent. They stood there for a moment, breathing in the other. Then their eyes met.

Cithrel moved so fast, fast enough to take Eric’s breath away, and suddenly he was pinned to the wall with Cithrel’s calloused hands digging into Eric’s thighs, holding him in place. Then his lips crushed against Eric’s, starved. He was rough, but it was exactly what Eric wanted. What he needed.

The Fae prince’s hand grabbed a fistful of Eric’s curls as he claimed Eric’s mouth, his tongue demanding more of him, hungry to taste every piece of him. A moan wrapped around Cithrel’s tongue as Eric pressed himself closer, like he couldn’t be close enough to the prince.

Cithrel loosed a low growl as his other hand began to undress him, ridding Eric’s shirt of its chains in one violent motion. Eric’s body reacted, hardening, eager for more. It had been a year since they’d been together like this, but it felt like yesterday. Part of him knew this was going to be a disaster but

he just wanted to be fucked, right now. He was tired of thinking.

Eric let the prince play with his body, claiming his flesh and doing whatever he wanted with him. He wanted to make Cithrel crave him and to feel every ounce of pleasure he knew the prince could give him.

Cithrel's length pressed against Eric, making Eric even harder. His hand unknotted from Eric's hair and slid down his chest before it hovered at his pants.

"Eric." The prince's voice was throaty.

"Don't stop," Eric panted.

A second later Cithrel had his pants undone and pressed Eric further against the wall. Eric fumbled with Cithrel's shirt first. He wanted to see him, feel more of him. The prince, suddenly impatient, pulled back and pulled his white shirt over his head before discarding it. Then he pounced on him again, his mouth finding Eric's.

It felt like an eternity before he undid Cithrel's pants and his considerable length sprung free. Eric's erection twitched in anticipation. He writhed in Cithrel's rough grip, his body reacting on its own.

"Do you want me?" Cithrel moved to bite the side of Eric's neck, just below his ear. His words hummed in Eric's ear and made him shiver.

"God, yes. Please."

"You're mine, Eric." The fourth prince growled.  
"*Mine.*"

Eric shuddered at the claim, and he didn't know if it was from fear or anticipation. Or both.

"Yes," he breathed.

Cithrel's calloused hand had a hard grip on Eric's hip, hard enough that it would bruise but Eric didn't care. Finally, Cithrel's hand slid along his bare skin, along the dusting of hair on Eric's lower abdomen, before finding his hardness.

Eric sighed into Cithrel's waves of hair as the scent of citrus clung to the prince. He missed being touched, missed it feverishly, had neglected it for too long. Why had he let himself fall to the wayside? Was he waiting for this, to be touched by Cithrel? It didn't matter now.

Cithrel jerked Eric's attention back to him with a nip on Eric's lower lip. A faint taste of copper saturated Eric's tongue but he ground further into Cithrel's hand. He wanted to move with Cithrel, but the Fae prince gripped the back of Eric's neck with his free hand and held him in place. The prince was going to take his time with him.

The pleasure was all at once rough and exquisite.

Slowly, Cithrel gripped Eric and began moving his hand, taking long strokes. The pace was agonizing and the look on Cithrel's face told Eric he knew it. Eric let himself drown in that blue gaze, eyes that would have him no matter what.

"Am I interrupting something?"

The burning in Eric turned to ice at the sound of Solonar's voice across the room. He snapped to attention, expecting to see a smug look on the crown prince's face, but instead a simmering rage radiated from Solonar's gaze.

It wasn't fair, but Cithrel was already dressed and had moved to stand in front of Eric, giving him time to cover himself again. The absence of the fourth prince's touch pricked at him with immediate withdrawal. His body mourned the loss of it. He really needed to get a handle on that sensation.

"I saw that Luthais left and assumed Eric was alone." The crown prince's eyes roved over Eric again, his amber eyes locking onto Eric's bare waist. He then flicked his attention back to Cithrel. "I can see, however, that's not the case."

"Then leave," Cithrel ground out.

"I would, dear brother." Solonar stepped into the open space, closer to Cithrel. His entire body looked relaxed, but Eric saw the way his hands hung at his sides, readied for an

altercation. One he was probably about to start. “But if you’re busy fucking the human, then how are you protecting him?”

Eric’s face heated as the words backhanded him. He and Solonar were barely getting along. After what Cithrel told him, he wanted to murder Solonar. The insulting address stung coming from Solonar that much more.

“Do I look like I’m fucking anything right now?” Cithrel crossed his arms and the muscles of his chest strained against his shirt.

Solonar strolled around the open space, taunting his brother. “In a way, it’s good to know that at least someone’s allowed to touch you. It was pathetic to watch the Prince Commander of the Imperial Army flinch away from hands that dared stray towards you at any social event.”

Eric’s eyes widened. He didn’t know Cithrel’s aversion to touch was so widely known amongst the nobles. It was hard to imagine the ridicule he endured every social season. Eric understood too well the feeling of unwanted gazes following him everywhere.

Cithrel’s eyes hardened to ice. “You always use your words to lash out like a spurned child, but tonight you’re especially irate.” He closed the distance between his brother with frightening Fae speed, the air stirring like a hurricane in Cithrel’s wake. “I wonder, is it jealousy? That you want what’s mine. You call me pathetic, but what kind of dismal state must you be in, pining after something that isn’t yours? And to make matters worse, that something is a human. The mighty Crown Prince of Alonetha is humbled because his cock goes unloved by a human.”

Eric saw the shift in Solonar. If he wasn’t already looking at him, he would have missed it, the change in the crown prince. His eyes hardened into jewels, his shoulders broadened, every feature of his face smoothed into one that radiated violence. Cithrel had gone too far, but it was clear he didn’t care.

Eric was assaulted by a tempest of scents and aether in a split-second. Citrus and fresh air churned and clashed with

smoke and ash. He was glad for the time he spent meditating along with his other training because without the ability to react in an instant, he would have been thrown back-first into the stone table.

A breath later, a cage of rotten and grotesque thorns formed around Eric, protecting him from the explosion of fire and Fae-made steel. The room erupted into bright red as Solonar launched himself, hands clawed like a rabid animal ready to eviscerate its prey, with his entire body bathed in unnaturally hot flames. They coated him like a second skin, armor made of magical fire. The fires burned hotter and brighter at his hands, while the heat hissed and turned a furious blue.

Solonar's hands that brought death clanged against Fae-made steel as Cithrel materialized twin blades. They were the only thing that kept Cithrel's throat from being ripped out and burned to ash. The room roared with the blaze of Solonar's fire and he snarled, enraged, as the clang of blades rang out. The sound cut at Eric's senses.

Eric's hands outstretched to maintain the constant pouring of his blackened vines and thorns to replace the ones that burned away in the intense heat. Sweat dropped from his forehead and neck as the temperature in the room rose.

The oak wood walls started to smoke with the residual heat of the room, threatening to combust the entire manor. The sound of hissing flame and unbreakable steel collided over and over, the cacophonous sound growing louder and louder.

Eric's eyes couldn't follow the princes through the barrier of thorns he'd created, even with his temporary aether-fueled vision. Everything had faded to black with occasional hues of red. He could still make out the manor walls around him, though. They began to blacken, the wood and stone now scorched.

The living, breathing power of the Fae pumped in Eric's veins in an urge to let more of it out. Eric glanced around the main floor and saw that as the brothers fought without regard the building was going to be destroyed. His



brain didn't have time to unpack and deal with the fact that they were fighting over him, but in the most disturbing way possible. It didn't feel good to be used as a source of shame.

Eric shook his head. He didn't have time to think about it, especially as the pounding of aether began to grate at his skull. His body couldn't maintain this kind of power for long without painful side-effects. He needed to do something to stop them.

"Did I strike a nerve?" Cithrel shouted over the din of their battle. The fourth prince barked out cruel laughter.

Eric kept his hands out, palms wide, and stepped closer to the raging battle. His skin protested at the sharp increase in temperature, feeling the heat sear through the thorns as they burned.

"I'll melt your fucking blades in your chest." Solonar's teeth bared.

The smell alone of so much aether mixing with everything around them burning made Eric gag. He needed to end this. His body couldn't take much more of using this much power at once.

Eric closed his eyes and the muscles in his upper body hardened with a strained focus. He willed the aether that wanted out so badly to flow freely through his blood, channeling it to his palms.

*"Stop."*

The house detonated with Eric's power in a flash. Obsidian thorns appeared through the floor, the walls, the ceiling, from everywhere and in an unending torrent. The sound of slithering filled the space. The overwhelming amount of vines was enough to snuff out Solonar's fires, to snare Cithrel's weapons and rip them from his grip, before they wound their way around the brothers' limbs and pulled them taut. The princes' fury quickly turned from shock to a futile effort to be free. It was all they could do to not be ripped apart by Eric's fetid vines.

Satisfaction bloomed and flourished in Eric's chest, seeing them both immobilized and at his mercy. The aether in Eric's blood sang, pleased to be freed with such vigor. It wanted to be loosed even more, its thorns ready to sharpen and tear flesh from bone, to drink Fae blood and grow even stronger.

Eric's muscles ached and his satisfaction faded to worry. He felt the aether ready to take over, to take control of him. No. No, that couldn't happen.

"Eric." It was Solonar.

The two locked eyes. Solonar's feline gaze fell to a sudden calm, as if he was unbothered by the threat of his arms being torn from his body. The crown prince kept his focus steady on Eric.

Those amber panther eyes didn't flicker or shutter. They stayed wide, conveying a single message.

*It's your power.*

He was right. This was his power, and if his body was starting to fall to fatigue, then it was his power to call back. These thorns were *his*.

Eric gritted his teeth and felt the revolt of his muscles, the strain screaming at him as pain gripped him. Still, he didn't stop and began to pull the aether back. Willed it to come back to him, to go back to its slumber in his veins.

Time moved painfully slow as the room's festering darkness receded back towards him, withdrawing with an animalistic reluctance, thrashing and fighting the entire time as Eric called it back. But he didn't break his hold over them, even when he felt warmth drip from his nose, the taste of hot copper falling onto his tight lips.

It wasn't until the last of his thorns vanished back inside his freckled skin that he collapsed, gasping and out of breath. The air stirred and a blink later, Solonar and Cithrel were at his side.

Solonar crouched over Eric, like Eric was something precious he needed to guard with his life. Though, with the

charred tattoo that kept him oath-bound, Eric supposed he did need to protect him with his life.

Cithrel waited in the wings, barely restraining his bloodthirst as he was forced to watch Solonar care for Eric. The crown prince kept a hand at Eric's back as the other laid on Eric's chest. A deep warmth spread across his chest as the healing fires stoked beneath his skin. The feeling of charged aether flowing freely through his nerves made Eric squirm. It didn't feel right, having the sensation of foreign aether mixing with his own in his body, fusing with his magic. Not that he had a choice, though. His head throbbed, and dizziness overwhelmed him.

The room spun and stars danced across his vision while the crown prince worked on him, pumping him full of aether to undo the damage the magic did to his human body.

Eric didn't meet Solonar's or Cithrel's gazes. He kept his blurry sight trained on the hardwood floors that were now gouged and charred. Luthais had let Eric into his private haven and now Eric was responsible for it being destroyed like this.

"I'm sorry, Eric." Again, Solonar was first to speak. An apology, no less.

Eric blinked in surprise and found himself looking up at the raven-haired prince. His breaths were shallow, stressed, as he looked into the pools of amber. He was all too aware now that the crown prince was almost cradling him, he who moments ago was enraged at the accusation he might have any feeling other than malice towards Eric.

With a sniffle, Eric wiped at the blood on his face. The chill that dropped the room a hundred degrees was at his back as Cithrel looked on. It seemed to be the one thing Cithrel couldn't do with his aether: heal someone. In the past he always called his sister Lyari to heal Eric, to pump him full of more energy, likely, or Hinni, with her tonics. But Cithrel himself never tended to Eric. Not being able to do that with his magic must have bothered him then, because he seemed murderous waiting there.

"Thanks," Eric mumbled.

The corners of Solonar's lips quirked, but he pulled his gaze away from Eric and said nothing else. A moment later, the almost too-warm feeling in Eric's chest began to recede. The uncomfortable sensation was a lot like when Lyari's plants grew and crept under Eric's skin. He was glad to feel the aether withdrawing.

"You're done, brother." Cithrel's powerful body moved so fast that he was in between Eric and Solonar with one blink. "You can go now."

"The oath choking my neck and strangling my body disagrees." Solonar got to his feet and reached his hand around Cithrel to extend towards Eric.

Belatedly, Cithrel realized he hadn't offered Eric his hand, but that didn't stop him from slapping away Solonar's offering. The crown prince eyed his brother, his body going rigid in the way only Fae could, but he made no move towards aggression.

A second later, Cithrel reached down to help Eric to his feet. His rough grip remained wrapped around Eric's waist after he was standing. Cithrel marked his territory with that gesture and Solonar received the message with a sinister clarity. Except, Eric didn't know if he liked that the fourth prince called Eric *his*.

Now that the fog of their sexual tension lifted, it was hard to know if the two of them sleeping together again was a good idea or not. His body had a clear answer, but that wasn't good enough. Not in this world.

Running a hand through his knotted and dirty curls, he took stock of their surroundings. Everything was a mess, including himself. Eric bent down and picked a spot to start cleaning.

"I'll have some servants come to rebuild this so Luthais doesn't throw a fit and destroy everyone's reputation within a thousand miles."

"Shut the fuck up." Eric didn't bother with turning to face the crown prince.

“Such a sharp-tongued human,” Solonar purred. Eric’s nostrils flared. He wasn’t going to be goaded. “I still can’t believe my father chose you,” Solonar mused out loud. “Persistent water droplet.”

Eric’s free hand turned into a fist and he shoved away from the crown prince to leave. A second later, though, Solonar had moved so quickly that he was in front of Eric before he could stop and Eric walked right into him.

It was like walking into a brick wall if the wall was all lean muscle. The crown prince was slender, but his supernatural form was harder than precious stone. Solonar looked down at Eric, feigning an innocent smile.

“Watch your step,” he said, his voice honeyed.

Cithrel moved to intervene but it was too late.

Eric snapped.

His vision drained and half a breath later, his forearm was pressed against Solonar’s throat. He slammed the crown prince’s back against the stairwell wall. “I don’t want you here,” he said through gritted teeth, “or anywhere near me. You’re the *last* person I want bound to me. If by some sliver of a chance I actually need help, it won’t be from you.”

The playfulness vanished from Solonar’s smile, leaving behind a frightening sneer that was all teeth. His eyes gleamed. “Don’t think that because of these Markings,” he said slowly, “you’re untouchable. You’re still just a weak, fragile human. If it wasn’t for me, you would have never even tasted your precious idea of freedom. You never escaped, Eric Becker. I let you go. Remember that.”

A jolt of fear ran down Eric’s spine as Solonar shoved his arm away and stormed out, the heavy wooden door closing with what sounded like wood splintering. He looked over to see the door charred and cracked where the crown prince’s magic had loosed itself.

Eric rubbed at his arm where the Solonar had shoved him away. Despite his rage, Solonar was careful not to push him too hard. The crown prince was always very careful to

take note of every detail, no matter how seemingly insignificant.

He shouldn't have done that or said any of that. Getting on the crown prince's bad side was the last thing he needed if he was going to destroy the slave trade. Eric doubted the future emperor would appreciate him destroying a main revenue stream.

Still, what Solonar said struck him. He was right. Eric might not have made it back home if it weren't for the raven-haired prince. He was trapped in the horrific realization that even with all the aether flowing in his veins, he still felt powerless.

The awful feeling followed him all the way back to the palace and to his shared living quarters with Cithrel. Thankfully, the fourth prince didn't bring up the altercation with Solonar. Neither one of them brought up what they'd almost done, as if it was a giant mistake.

He peeled off his fine fabrics and padded his bare feet to his enchanted tub. His thoughts fragmented into a million pieces as steam filled the wood and marble-clad bathroom. If he got involved with Cithrel again, he knew it would be temporary. They couldn't have a future together, not the way Eric imagined being with someone. For all Eric knew, Solonar was bound to Eric for the rest of his life. He pictured the acrimonious relationship the two brothers seemed to have with each other, and him stuck in the middle.

Eric chewed his lip, brows pinched together. What exactly did Cithrel feel for him? What was the prince's end goal of trying to earn Eric's trust? What did Solonar feel, for that matter? How was it the cat-eyed psychopath felt anything for Eric but disdain?

The bath water came to a dripping halt and he wished he could shut his brain off, too. His thoughts stayed out of focus and cloaked in a thick haze after the bath and even after he crawled into bed. Finally, Eric didn't dream.

## Chapter Eleven

The empress's personal guard waited for Eric at the entryway of Cithrel's private chambers as soon as he was ready for the day. Saelihn's hood was pulled up to obscure his face and he never spoke a word, as always.

Hinni was quiet in the presence of Saelihn out of respect and Cithrel was nowhere to be seen after their interaction last night, so the entire morning was weighed down by a discomfiting silence. As they walked to the baroness's estate, he knew it would only get worse. Olaera disliked him at the best of times, never mind how she would treat him now that he was trying to take over her trade and main source of income. She was a greedy Fae and no doubt had plans to make Eric's life a living hell.

Eric supposed that would only make completing the empress's request easier, though. If Olaera let anything slip in her anger towards him, it could serve to help him frame her later on.

"You finally decided to grace me with your presence, Marked One." Olaera's voice bled through Eric's thoughts and pulled his attention. "And you brought a friend. I do hope you're not scared of me?"

A vicious look shone in her eyes, belying her pleasant tone.

Eric simply nodded, matching her cordial tone and adding an over-the-top smile. "Good morning, Baroness Olaera," he beamed, ignoring her earlier jab. "Apologies for my tardiness. Sir Saelihn's presence was a personal request from Her Imperial Majesty, so I do hope you take no issue with him."

Olaera's smile tightened. "Of course not. Follow me."

She didn't wait for either of them and turned on her heel, her feathered cape flowing behind her. There was an elegance to her power. She walked with poise and a presence that commanded obedience. The heels of her boots looked as if

they were made of horns, or bones, Eric couldn't tell which, and with every step she took, the sound of a predator followed. All the guards in her employ looked afraid of her, though she must have paid them exceptionally well for them to keep working in fear.

Eric bit back a grimace, hating the sight of that cape and the harsh memories tied to it. It was what she always wore, even on the day Eric met her for the first time in the holding cells where she kept freshly brought in livestock.

Eric shot Saelihn a sideways look to see if he noticed anything, but if the guard did he made no show of it. The three of them walked in bated silence with just the sounds of teeming life coming from the forest around them. Until they got closer to the buildings and caged-in arenas Eric knew all too well.

The sounds of shouting and pained moans hit him like a battering ram first. Humans begging and crying out grated against his ears, the noise a personal torture. He knew the baroness was looking at him, so he forced himself to school his features into a neutral expression. He couldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing she had the upper hand.

"It's been a while since you were last here, Marked One," the baroness said, her words conversational though her hawk eyes bored into him. "Though it was during a much different time. I wonder how much of these facilities you remember?"

"A different time indeed, my lady," Eric replied, avoiding her cruel gaze. "Though I only ever saw the chambers and areas I was personally housed in. I'd like to see all your trade's facilities, so I can take note of the state of things. I'm sure there will be need of many improvements."

Eric had no idea how well she ran her "business," but it felt good to be able to lie and insult her right to her face when she didn't have the luxury to do the same. He saw the tick in the Fae's jaw. It was the only sign his comment irritated her, but that was satisfying enough.



“What’s mine is yours, Marked One, no matter how temporary it may be.” She made a point of emphasizing their arrangement wasn’t permanent. The Fae were possessive beings. “I am curious though, apart from the obvious, why you’ve taken such an interest in my business? I can’t help but think you would be more inclined to oversee the foreign trade alongside the Imperial Merchant. After all, that’s where you have the most knowledge from your last five years here. And you have an intimate relationship with the lord as well.”

Eric’s nails dug into his palms, no doubt drawing blood. This Fae noble knew how to twist the dagger. She knew well the kind of sadistic noble Lord Aimar was and she knew that when the lord bought him all those years ago, it wasn’t as a labor slave, but as a sex slave.

If she wanted to play this type of game that was fine by him. The crown prince always claimed Eric was a terrible liar, but Solonar didn’t realize that was how Eric managed to survive so long with a sadistic Fae lord. He was a great fucking liar.

It took Eric a moment to collect himself before he replied. “I’m flattered you have such a keen interest in me, my lady, but I thought given my background with this city and with the gifts that I was personally blessed with, there would be more opportunity to improve this trade. If you think I had an intimate relationship with the Imperial Merchant and with foreign trade, then wouldn’t you say I have a much more intimate relationship with the slave trade? After all, a mere six years ago, I got see firsthand how you ran your business. If that’s how you still run things, then I’d say there’s much more room for improvement here than with Lord Aimar. I told the empress as much and so she sent Sir Saelihn with me to act as her eyes and ears. If you were the empress, wouldn’t you be curious if one of the most lucrative income sources of your empire was being mismanaged?”

Baroness Olaera whirled on Eric, her hawk eyes wide with fury and her talons clawed. She had a look that told him she was ready to pluck out his eyeballs and cut off his tongue. In the same motion, though, Sir Saelihn moved.

Before the baroness could even look at Eric a second longer, Saelihn had a blade as thin and sharp as a needle, almost invisible to the eye, pressed to Olaera's neck. She went as unnaturally still as the Fae always did; her bird eyes hardened to stone. It didn't matter that she was a noble and member of the empire's court. Eric was personally selected by the previous emperor to represent Alonetha. With a title such as the Marked One and backed by the empress, compared to her, Eric was untouchable.

Eric knew it and so did Olaera because she lowered her gaze in submission. "Apologies, Marked One. I hope you don't take insult to my actions. I was merely taken aback by the thought that the empress may suspect me of being disloyal to the Alonethan Empire. It sounds ludicrous that I might purposefully mismanage my business."

*Got you.* "I understand, my lady. Let's continue. I'm sure the sooner you prove your loyalty, the sooner your mind can be at ease."

Olaera's talons picked at themselves but she merely nodded, a strained smile on her thin lips. "Absolutely. Follow me."

Eric nodded, a grin smeared on his face, before he trailed behind her. She took them first to the outdoor cages that passed as arenas, where slaves learned how to properly serve their future masters. This area was mostly for the labor slaves, or for the people who resisted the Fae and had to be publicly broken. Eric remembered vividly watching others' skin being flayed in plain view to show everyone else what happened when you disobeyed.

Rage simmered under the surface at the memory, but Eric kept his temper reigned in. He needed to be patient. He'd fix things later and get all these people stolen from their lives out of this hellish city.

"You've seen these arenas before, Marked One," Olaera said in passing, but there was a pleased edge to her voice. "It's mostly for labor slaves and disciplinary action. I pride myself on all of my livestock being properly trained

prior to sale. It's important to the empire's clientele that their purchases listen well."

Eric merely nodded, his gaze sliding over all the broken people staring back at him. Some of them glared, a defiant burning to their eyes. Good. It gave him hope to know that there were people in there still fighting. It was all the eyes that stared back at him, the light gone out, that worried him. Was he too late to save them? Had they given up on living? The answer to that question plagued him.

Still, he had to keep walking, keep acting as if it didn't bother him. If he did anything in front of Saelihn or the baroness they would know he had ulterior motives. No doubt Saelihn was going to be reporting every single word Eric uttered, every action he took. Though he doubted his little lie about the empress earlier would bother Nithroel. She knew the baroness had a greedy disposition and would probably find her forced humility humorous.

"As you mentioned earlier, Marked One," Olaera continued, her sharp tone lingering in the air. "I'd like to show you the facilities you weren't privy to previously, as per your request."

There was a lightness in her step that had Eric's skin prickling. Wherever they were going, he wasn't going to like it. As they left behind the caged arenas and rounded a corner, the sun was blotted out by the twisting spires of Olaera's mansion.

Her estate was almost triple the size of the Adlar estate, with multiple levels to her mansion alone and several other annexes scattered across her property. Where Aimar's estate gave the false impression of tranquility with its beauty and flourishing gardens, Olaera's estate was gothic and industrial. Apart from the trees and ivy and that grew in and around her buildings, everything was trim and neat, built for efficiency. She used her own estate as a means to train her slaves no doubt to achieve the look of perfection. There wasn't a blade of grass or leaf out of place as they walked. Even the packed earth pathways they made their way down were freshly groomed.

Eric felt sick to his stomach, knowing every step he took was likely over a place that some innocent person was whipped and bled. Still, he followed the baroness and Saelihn into the rear-attached annex of her mansion.

The first thing he noticed with a sinking pit in his stomach was the deep rouge curtains that covered every single window, blocking any light from entering. He kept his breathing steady, even though his pulse hammered at his throat. He had a feeling he knew what he was about to see.

“This is where the empire and my business makes most of its income, so I ensure my livestock is in pristine condition and of the highest calibre in skill.” Olaera’s hawk eyes trained on Eric as she stepped to the side, gesturing wide to the massive space.

“How much more lucrative is this type of slave compared to the others?” he asked.

Eric knew where they were going, but it still sent a jolt of pain through him, as if he was struck by lightning, at what lay before him.

“At least double. See for yourself, Marked One.”

The entire annex was one gigantic room in the middle of an orgy. Moans and cries of pleasure filled the air and the scent of liquor and sweat assaulted him. Glistening bodies writhed around each other while Fae oversaw to instruct and make clear demands of expectations. In one corner, he saw a curvaceous woman with a collar around her neck, crawling on her knees like a hungry animal, begging her “master” to let her please him. Another area was simply a mass of tits, cocks, and writhing limbs as the humans pleased themselves and their Fae counterparts.

This was the training facility for pleasure slaves.

“As you can see,” Olaera said, full of pride, “I take great care of my livestock. If they’re malnourished or abused, they won’t fetch anywhere near as high a price.”

Eric bit down on the side of his cheek, tasting blood as he looked on, forced to endure the scene. Quashing down the

horrific memories that threatened to take hold, Eric focused on how many guards oversaw this sex den. There were also a lot of windows and not a lot of slaves that were caged or chained. Well, some of them were, but it looked to be more part of their training.

Bile rose in Eric's throat and he forced it back down. How many people were like him in this room right now? Forced to live a life they never imagined, even in their nightmares. With a twisted sense of bitterness, he told himself at least they were prepared for it. Eric wasn't given that luxury. He'd been purchased as a labor slave and then the white-eyed monster decided he liked Eric better for other things.

"Feeling alright, Marked One?" The baroness asked, an innocent look on her face. Eric saw the malicious glint in her eyes, though.

"Yes, my lady." Eric cleared his throat. "My eyes are still adjusting going from the sun to such a dark room."

"Ah. Yes, well, this facility is dimly lit to simulate where the stock will be doing most of their work."

Every single time she uttered the word "stock," Eric's temper sparked. It was getting harder and harder to stay collected. He eyed Saelihn, but what he could make out of the Fae knight's shadows seemed innocuous. He wondered what exactly Saelihn would report back to Nithroel if he suspected anything amiss with the baroness.

"How often do you give them breaks?" Eric asked, hoping to irk Olaera's patience again.

It didn't matter what kind of answer she gave; he'd get information about shift changes and just how much Saelihn was paying attention.

"Their sessions can go for hours." Olaera side-eyed Eric, her voice guarded. "They'll need to be able to keep up with the stamina of the Fae. Their bodies need to become more pliable as soon as possible."

“I understand the need for quality, my lady,” Eric sighed. “But surely after running this business for so long you’re aware of human bodies’ limitations. If you push them too hard, they’ll be ruined.”

Olaera’s feather mantle ruffled as she straightened, her mouth a hard line. “They either succeed and prove their abilities, or they find themselves transferred to laborer or cleaner facilities. Nothing is wasted.”

Eric smirked and the baroness glared daggers at him. “I beg to differ, my lady.”

He glanced at Sir Saelihn and saw the Fae knight hovered behind him; his head ever so slightly angled toward the sex den. That was interesting. Time to do a little prodding.

“Sir Saelihn,” Eric said, forcing the hooded knight into the conversation. “If a pleasure slave is worth “at least double,” as the baroness claims, and they are then pushed too hard and downgraded to laborer or cleaner, I think that’s a considerable amount of income wasted. Especially when the Fae have considerably longer life spans than humans, what’s a few more days of training? Wouldn’t you agree?”

The baroness was outright scowling at Eric, but she kept her mouth shut. Her gaze focused on Saelihn, waiting for his answer. The empress’s personal guard stood there, either lost in thought or deciding how to respond, when finally he uttered three words.

“I would agree.”

Olaera’s nostrils flared and her eyes bulged, her fury claiming her. She was a greedy and prideful Fae. Eric could only imagine how much Sir Saelihn’s response would eat away at her. He hoped Saelihn’s words devoured her.

“I’m glad I decided to look into your business, my lady, and not Lord Aimar’s. It seems evident to me you can benefit a great deal from my insights. If we could continue the tour to the other facilities?”

Eric inclined his head, keeping his eyes trained on the baroness. He hated every second he spent in this room but he

wouldn't let her know that. Not when he could see how close to snapping Olaera was, having to listen to what Eric said.

"I'll show you to the cleaner facility next," the baroness ground out, pleasantries gone.

As she strode off ahead of them, her heeled boots clacking against the floor harder than usual, Eric snuck a look back at Saelihn. Instead of the sex den, the Fae's focus was on Eric. He couldn't make out those blood-red eyes under his hood, but Eric knew he was being scrutinized. The empress would hear about this, there was no doubt about that. But he was curious to see if she would summon him to discuss his visit privately or not.

The rest of the tour was much briefer, with Olaera being noticeably less accommodating. She didn't pretend to be polite and did her best not to look at Eric as she showed him the remaining facilities.

The cleaner facility was depressing, to put it gently. The space smelled like too many failed apothecary experiments, with all kinds of different cleaning vials lining the walls along thick wooden shelves. They spent all of their training cleaning up the other facilities, effectively giving the baroness even more free labor while also maintaining a profit.

It made Eric's teeth grind together until his jaw hurt. The baroness was incredibly resourceful and he knew the Fae didn't actually care about the well-being of humans. It all came down to the wealth of the empire. He hated it, but it comforted him knowing he was going to destroy the baroness and her wealth.

The holding cells was the last stop of the facilities tour, and it was like an ice dagger lanced into his heart. It looked the same as the first time he was brought into this awful world. Memories threatened to shatter him as soon as he walked down the dank hallway and saw the filthy black metal bars. Evidently, the cleaners were told never to bother cleaning the holding cells unless they needed to clean up a body. Eric remembered that much against his will.

“Those are the facilities,” the baroness said, once they were back outdoors at the front of her estate. “Which I think is plenty for your first day. If you’ll excuse me.”

Eric’s head was beginning to swim, but he needed one more thing from the baroness. He gritted his teeth and fought through it. “That wasn’t *all* of the facilities, though, Baroness Olaera.”

She whirled and a stray feather fluttered to the ground from her inky black mantle. “I assure you, it is, Marked One.”

“It was everything pertaining to the humans, my lady,” Eric replied.

“Are you under the impression that my private residence is yours for the taking as well, Marked One?” Olaera reared her head back, looking ready to strike.

“You misunderstand.” Eric held up a palm, mastering a bored expression just like Cithrel’s, which earned him a scowl from Olaera. “I merely wish to see all of the records you keep pertaining to the slave trade. Expenses, sales, all the papers you have to keep track of your business. No matter how temporary my involvement may be, it’s my responsibility to be thorough.”

The bird-like Fae’s eyes twitched, her talons flicking at each other, showing just how agitated she was. “Follow me.”

She didn’t wait for Eric. In a flash, she used her Fae speed to dart into her estate. Eric could have used his own aether to follow, but he already had a gnawing headache from this day and he wanted to take his time to look for any potential escape routes.

As he walked through her estate, he was unsurprised to see the entire mansion was made of the finest stone, second only to the stone used in the palace, which ran floor to ceiling everywhere the trees and their roots didn’t grow. Her windows were glass with stained artwork on several of them. Each window depicted a different image of what Eric guessed was her family and a show of their wealth. He took note that there wasn’t a single servant or guard in sight inside her mansion. In



fact, the entire place would look abandoned if it didn't look so pristine and polished.

He caught sight of the baroness striding out of a room, which he made a mental note was her office, with a bundle of paperwork in her arms. Where were all her staff? It seemed suspicious and out of place for her to hand-deliver records to Eric.

"Here." Olaera practically dropped them into Eric's hands and he had to fumble not to let them spill everywhere.

He looked up to see her sneering back at him, pleased with watching him struggle. "Thank you for these," Eric said, forcing himself to remain cordial. "And thank you for taking the time to give me a tour of everything. I'm eager to go through everything and get started on what I have planned. You can look forward to it."

The Fae noble nodded but didn't voice any agreement, which spoke volumes. "Is there anything else you require of me? I am very busy and it pains me to be so idle when I have work to be done."

She couldn't get rid of him fast enough, clearly. Eric was successfully under her skin and lodged inside her head.

*Good.*

Eric smiled. "I won't keep you any longer. Have a good day, my lady."

Olaera simply lifted her brows by way of reply, waiting for him to be outside her mansion before the door magically slammed shut and sealed itself behind him.

Saelihn didn't make a move to take the documents from Eric or bother with conversation. Which was fair—Eric didn't think he'd heard more than a handful of sentences from the empress's personal guard since he'd known him. It wasn't long before they were back at the palace, surrounded by other knights.

Eric stopped as Saelihn dipped his head. "I'm sure you'll send me a missive if Her Imperial Majesty wishes to speak with me?"

“Yes.” Saelihn didn’t look at Eric and as soon as the word left the Fae’s mouth, he vanished from sight, leaving Eric alone at the palace gates.

As Eric made his way through the palace, he realized this was the first time he was completely on his own since coming back to the Fae world. Now would be the perfect time for someone to attack him, he thought, with a sudden morbidity. He was alone and his arms weren’t free to react quickly. Realistically, though, he was sure one of the princes had him secretly followed. The Imperial Family was far too protective of their living weapon to leave him exposed like this.

Eric wondered how much time he would have before the Fae King made his next move. He clutched the baroness’s records tighter. There would be something in them that Eric could use against her, he was sure of it. He went over everything he saw today—how many guards were on patrol in each facility, the number of exits at every location, the condition all the people were in, physically and mentally.

A lance of guilt tore into his chest. There were hundreds of humans captured on the baroness’s estate alone. It was impossible to save them all. Some of their eyes were completely vacant. They were nothing more than husks. That knowledge was a dagger to his heart.

Eric’s jaw set and his lip curled back without realizing it as he walked. It was the baroness’s fault. Hers and Aimar’s. They treated humans like animals and profited off it. He couldn’t stop it all, but he could stop the two of them permanently.

Eric was so lost inside his own torturous thoughts he didn’t notice how fast he reached his living quarters. The door swung open as soon as he got within a certain proximity, with Hinni holding it open for him.

“Welcome back, Eric,” Hinni greeted.

“Hi, Hinni.”

Hinni followed Eric in, her steps little more than a whisper behind him. Solonar was waiting for him in the sitting area, leaning forward in his plush chair. The crown prince was dressed in a loose black velvet wardrobe that looked a lot like loungers, the shirt completely open, revealing his oath scrawling across his skin. His ears only had two simple gold studs in them and he swirled a glass of dark red wine in one hand while holding a book in the other. Though, if Eric had to guess, the prince looked more agitated than anything else.

At the sight of Solonar there was an uptick in Eric's pulse. He forced a neutral expression. He'd had no idea he was here, and no idea why Cithrel was still nowhere to be seen.

"Good day with the baroness?" Solonar arched a brow, his voice low.

Eric sighed as he set down the documents on the table. "She only looked like she wanted to kill me, so I'll consider it a success." Successful in more ways than one.

"Sounds about right for almost any of the nobles in this city." He shot Eric a curious glance then. "How was having mother's spy watching your every move?"

Eric eyed his coat, his fingers brushing over a piece of embroidery as he thought it over. He met those steady feline eyes, knowing he needed to be careful what he told the crown prince. Things were going to get complicated fast managing his lies.

"He didn't talk much," Eric started. "And I'm sure he's going to report everything I said to the baroness. I might have told a few white lies to try and bait Olaera, but I doubt the empress will mind when she hears what I said."

"Now I'm sad I didn't get to be there and watch her feathers ruffle," Solonar mused, swirling his wine.

Eric's eyes strayed from Solonar's amber gaze to his exposed chest and then to his hands, to the way the tendons flexed around the glass. He looked away quickly, before the raven-haired prince could notice.

“If that’s all you came here for then, you can leave now.” Eric turned to Hinni. “I’m going to get washed up, Hinni. I’ll eat after.” Eric needed it after everything he had to see today. It made him feel dirtier than usual.

“Of course, Eric. Take your time.” There was an obvious sympathy to her all-black stare and Eric knew she was feeling his heavy mood.

As he made his way to the bathroom, he felt Solonar’s feline eyes focused on him, studying him. He worked to not be unsettled by the hyper focus of the prince and was relieved when the door shut behind him with a heavy wooden thud.

It wasn’t until steam billowed out of the bathroom after a long, hot bath and he’d left to get dressed that he noticed Solonar was still lounging around. Was he waiting for Eric, and if he was, then why? He went to go throw on something to sleep in when he spotted the crown prince leaning against the doorway, a look of mild irritation on his face.

“All done pampering yourself?”

“I didn’t realize I was on a time limit,” Eric said, cautious. “Why are you still here?”

Solonar scoffed. “Have you forgotten our little arrangement already? How sad.”

“What are you—” Eric began and then in one fluid flurry of motion, Solonar stepped forward and pressed his smooth palm against Eric’s throat.

The raven-haired prince’s aether ignited like an explosion, filling the room with the smell of ashes and brimstone. The heat overwhelmed Eric and he stood halted in place as Solonar’s power coursed through his body, burning away the exhaustion and fatigue of using his own aether. The fire within Eric felt alien, like it didn’t belong, as it scorched through his veins. He felt the growing lances of pain alleviate in his skull.

Feline eyes raked over him, sizing him up. “Try to take better care of yourself.” Solonar’s gaze heated, searching

Eric's expression for something, but eventually he gave up. Then he was gone.

Eric's shoulders slumped as he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Was that really all the crown prince was there for, to heal Eric? He didn't get to think on it for very long because a moment later, Cithrel appeared.

Without thinking, Eric crooked a grin and his chest squeezed. His good mood didn't last long, though, when he took in Cithrel's expression. Barely contained wrath crackled like lightning in his glare. His next words were as harsh as a thunderclap.

"What were you doing with Solonar just now?"

## Chapter Twelve

“What?” Eric grimaced, annoyance trickling into his tone. “He came to give me some of his aether, that’s it. Besides, how is it any of your business?”

“I warned you about him, Eric.”

Eric shook his head, incredulous. What the hell? “I’m not a fucking idiot, Cithrel. I know enough not to trust him. But in case you forgot, my Marking is eating away at me. Solonar’s oath-bound to me. He doesn’t have a choice and the sooner I let him give me aether, the sooner we don’t have to be near each other.”

That was clearly not the answer Cithrel wanted because his glower deepened and his chest heaved. “He’s clearly up to something, Eric. He wouldn’t come here without an underhanded plan. The crown prince had no business being here or being alone with you.”

Eric stomped forward, getting in Cithrel’s face. He was pissed off now. “Why don’t you just say what you really want to? Instead of repeating the same thing over and over. As far as I’m concerned, you’re no better than Solonar right now, talking in circles.”

“Don’t compare me to him.” Cithrel bared his teeth. “I’m nothing like him.”

Eric just shook his head before looking away. How did they manage to start arguing within seconds? They never seemed to be able to talk properly to each other. He didn’t know what he was thinking when he thought they could be something different this time.

“You want me to be honest?” Cithrel’s voice was rough.

Eric glanced at him, huffing a breath. “It would be nice if you tried.”

“I don’t have the luxury as a prince to be honest, Eric. Not the way you want me to be.” When he scowled, Cithrel

barreled on. "What I mean is, you're incredibly valuable to Alonetha and visibly tied to the heir of the empire. Everyone in the palace can see that."

"Stating facts isn't exactly what I'd call honesty," Eric muttered.

Cithrel's mouth contorted, clearly struggling with something. "All eyes are on you, Eric. I can't just tell you that you're *mine*. Not unless I wanted to put an even bigger target on your back. There's a traitor in the palace, probably more than one spy, watching every Imperial Family member's moves. What do you think they'd do if they knew that I'm desperate to be close to you every minute of every day?"

Eric's breath caught in his throat. "How do I know this isn't just another way to placate me? For all I know, you'll just say you're doing your duty again. I'm not just your plaything."

"I know you're not my toy. You mean a great deal more to me." Cithrel leaned forward so that his arms pressed against the wall on either side of Eric.

Pools of blue reflected what Eric felt right now, but he didn't want to open up to Cithrel again. He didn't want to feel like this was anything other than lust. That didn't stop his body from reacting to having Cithrel this close to him and from seeing just how lush his mouth was. Christ, the things he wanted to do with that mouth. Thoughts of running his hands into the angel-faced prince's hair filled his mind's eye.

Shit, he was in trouble.

"I hate that my brother is the one close to you and not me," Cithrel breathed, his voice husky. "I hate the thought that you share anything with him and not me. I feel pathetic with how eager I am to be around you. I hate that I'm so depraved as to ignore my soldiers so I can spar with you, just so I can see you and not let anyone else touch you. Even now, I'm disgusted to debase myself so much for a human, but here I am, spilling my secrets to you."

"You said so yourself. I wasn't ready to fight the other Fae," Eric argued, even though he knew he was hoping to be

proved wrong.

“Do you really think you need the prince commander to teach you how to fight? Even if you did, my brother is perfectly capable of handling you like he did before. But whenever he’s near you, I want to tear his head from his body. I don’t want to share what’s mine.”

Eric swallowed and panted a breath, his gaze falling from Cithrel’s eyes to his lips again. “You don’t get to claim me as yours. I don’t belong to anyone.” His mind was a mess of thoughts. “If anything, I hope I ruin you and haunt you.”

“I hate you. I hate what you do to me.” Cithrel inched closer, his warm breath on Eric’s cheeks. “I wish I never laid eyes on you.”

“The feeling’s mutual.” Eric ran his tongue over his lower lip. “Bastard—”

Cithrel crushed his lips to Eric’s, devouring the little space left between them, claiming him. He wasn’t gentle, he didn’t take care to not hurt him, but that was fine with Eric. He didn’t want Cithrel to be soft and delicate. He was tired of being treated like he couldn’t handle anything.

Cithrel’s tongue explored Eric’s mouth, demanding to taste him. Eric’s nails dug into Cithrel’s forearms, hard enough to draw blood on anyone other than Cithrel. There was no love between them, no affection, but neither of them wanted that.

Yet, there was something freeing about this moment. The truth was finally laid bare, and Eric knew what he was to Cithrel, what they meant to each other. They were a means to an end, drawn to each other to fulfil a loathing sensation they seemed unable to ignore.

A calloused palm slipped underneath Eric’s shirt and ran up Eric’s scarred chest, feeling every inch of him. Eric felt the prince thumb one of his nipples, making it harden further and a small groan slipped out. His back arched into the prince as Eric bit down on Cithrel’s lip hard.

Cithrel sucked in a sharp breath and pinched Eric’s nipple harder, edging more towards pain than pleasure, but



that line had been blurred for Eric for a long time.

Eric refused to be dominated by Cithrel in this moment, willing them to be equals now that there were no secrets between them, at least in their feelings. Aether pulsed in his blood and bones and fortified his body. If Cithrel could make a show of his strength, then so could he.

Eric gripped Cithrel's biceps and forced him down onto his back with superhuman speed so that he straddled him, grinding his cock that strained in his pants against him. Christ, he forgot how big Cithrel was and relished the thought of riding him again; of the prince's rough hands trying to pin him down.

"Careful, Eric," Cithrel warned. "I won't hold back if you keep this up."

Eric stuck two of his fingers in his own mouth and sucked on them until they dripped with saliva before pulling them out. "I'm done being careful."

Hunger flashed in Cithrel's eyes at whatever he saw in Eric, and Eric drank in the utter starvation that danced in the prince's eyes. He scooped Eric up in his arms and carried him to his own bedroom, where the bigger bed was, and dropped him without ceremony on the bed. An instant later, Eric was glad to have aether flowing in his veins because Cithrel moved with blinding Fae speed and strength and slammed Eric's back into the headboard, pinning Eric between his thighs.

Eric's cock twitched and he grunted from the ache that spiderwebbed across his entire back. Then his lips were on Cithrel again, nipping at the prince's neck, his throat, and the bottom of his ear. His breath was heavy, breathing into him as he trailed bites up and along the prince's skin until Cithrel grabbed Eric's chin in his grip and forced Eric to look at him again.

"I think I let you have your way long enough." Cithrel's deep voice dizzied Eric. "Now you'll do what I want."

“We’ll see if you can make me,” Eric challenged, excitement coursing through him and heightening his pleasure.

“I hoped you would say that.” An awful and delicious grin split Cithrel’s face.

Eric was all too eager to oblige the beautiful bastard. Neither one of them was going to back down and by now he was throbbing to be touched by Cithrel, to be dominated by him, but he’d be damned if he’d make it easy. He loved to be difficult.

Before Eric could break free of Cithrel’s grip, the prince ripped the shirt off of Eric’s back, exposing his entire upper half. Then he grabbed a handful of Eric’s curls and jerked his head back, exposing his throat. With his other hand he slipped under Eric’s pants and began to palm his erection.

Eric moaned, a heady high filling him, blinding his thoughts.

Cithrel stroked him as he kissed Eric’s throat before he found Eric’s mouth again. The Fae prince kissed hard enough to bruise but Eric savored the feeling. It electrified him. His breathing came in panting breaths as Cithrel pumped faster, his grip on Eric’s cock tightening.

Eric grunted, knowing he was getting close to coming, but he’d barely had his fun with Cithrel. Aether heated his muscles and Eric surged forward, throwing Cithrel onto his back again.

Eric grabbed the Fae prince by the wrists and thorns spilled from his palms, restraining the prince’s arms, leaving him tethered to the bed post and at Eric’s mercy. Wide blue eyes stared up at Eric before they darkened to storm clouds. Eric just smiled.

“This is a much better view.”

Eric felt the prince’s erection twitch underneath him as he straddled Cithrel. *Good.*

Cithrel smirked at Eric. “The harder you fight me, the less gentle I’m going to be with you.”

Holy shit. Eric didn't think he could get more aroused as a trickle of fear mixed with anticipation. "I'd like to see you try while I've got you pinned, Your Highness."

"I look forward to hearing you beg me to stop."

Citrus flitted through the air and then two needle-thin knives materialized into Cithrel's palms. With a twist of his wrists, the fourth prince cut through Eric's blackened restraints and in a flash had his blades pressed to Eric's throat, forcing him down onto the bed.

"I have no problem begging." Eric flashed a sardonic smile. "But it won't be for you to stop."

Cithrel exhaled, his eyes trailing down Eric's body and back up, appreciating every lick of his flesh. Finally, the prince's knives vanished and he slid off the bed and stood over Eric. Cithrel's dick throbbed at the sight of Eric splayed naked on the bed.

"Get on your knees."

"Fuck," Eric breathed, the command sending a shiver of heat through his body. But he wasn't about to do as he was told. "Make me."

The prince's nostrils flared, his broad chest heaving at the disobedience. Eric's aether flowed through his nervous system freely, readying him for a fight, which only made him harder. The scent of their magic filled the air, citrus and morning air clashing with rotted earth.

Cithrel's shape flickered out of existence, moving faster than even Eric's aether-fueled gaze could track, and appeared behind him. A hard calloused hand gripped the back of Eric's neck, squeezing tight.

Eric's thorns erupted from his flesh like spikes and impaled Cithrel's hand, eliciting a hiss of shock and anger from the Fae prince. Gold droplets of blood welled along the back of Cithrel's hand before the wounds closed a moment later. Eric smirked and whirled on Cithrel, throwing his weight into the prince. Except he slammed into a wall of unmovable flesh that sent him stumbling backwards.

Cithrel glowered at Eric, a confident sneer on his face. “Do as you’re told.”

Eric’s heart hammered in his chest with anticipation. Christ, it felt good to fight back even when he knew he wouldn’t win. Really, he didn’t want to win. He wanted it to hurt because he knew how fucking good it would feel.

“I don’t think I will.”

Cithrel rolled his shoulders, his fingers flexing. “Fine by me. My hand still stings, so I don’t think I’ll be gentle at all.”

Eric’s eyes fell to Cithrel’s throbbing cock. His mind filled with thoughts of the prince riding him hard without mercy, making him scream.

A flash later and the world tilted all of a sudden, taking Eric off-guard and landing him ass first on the edge of the bed. Cithrel had a fist of Eric’s curls, ripping at them so hard his eyes watered. The prince’s dick dripped with pre-cum and there was a starving sheen to those arctic blue eyes.

“Suck it,” he ordered.

Eric didn’t move until Cithrel pulled harder on his hair and his mouth opened from the pain. Then Cithrel’s cock was in his mouth and Eric’s lips tightened around the prince’s length, taking him all the way in.

Then the angel-faced prince moved his hips and thrust into Eric’s mouth, the tip of his dick slamming into the back of Eric’s throat.

Eric choked in surprise, his throat constricting around the prince. His body was on fire as he sucked the prince while he thrust into Eric’s mouth again and again.

Cithrel groaned, keeping his eyes trained on Eric’s mouth as saliva dripped from the corner of his lips around the prince’s dick. Eric knew the Fae was enjoying the view and he sucked harder, his tongue flicking the slit of Cithrel’s tip.

Eric let the prince grip the back of his head as he started thrusting into him faster and faster, the Fae’s breathing

coming harder and harder. Eric gagged on Cithrel's cock just as the prince fell apart in his mouth, coming in his final thrusts.

Eric swallowed down the come, sucking the prince slowly before Cithrel jerked Eric's head away, hard, making him wince from his hair being more than likely ripped out. He looked up at the blond-haired bastard, a defiant grin on his face as he gasped for air.

Cithrel swallowed a dark look in his eye. "You're *mine*, Eric. I'll make sure you know it when I'm done with you."

"You're a bastard," Eric taunted, his want burning in his hazel gaze with a wry smile. "I'm not yours."

"We'll see about that."

Cithrel palmed Eric's rock-hard cock so fast he jumped with a yelp of surprise, his dick pulsing even more. Cithrel stood over Eric, staring down at him. He hooked his fingers under the waist of Eric's pants and tore, shredding the fabric with his bare hands.

Eric swore under his breath, his hand going to stroke himself when Cithrel caught his wrist before he could do anything.

"I didn't say you could touch yourself."

"I hate you," Eric said, cursing again. Fuck, he could only get so hard. He couldn't take it anymore.

Eric lunged forward, going for Cithrel's ass to spin him onto the bed. Instead, Cithrel twisted his wrist and thrust him onto his back on the bed. Before Eric could move, Cithrel had his hand around Eric's throat, pinning him.

Eric gasped, struggling for breath and arching his back, his erection throbbing for the prince. The heat and hunger was dizzying. "Please," he panted. "Please. I can't take it anymore."

"Please, what?" Cithrel leaned forward, whispering into Eric's ear.

“Please touch me. Please fuck me, Your Highness.”

Cithrel pulled back with a wolfish smirk. “You still have to be punished.”

His calloused grip tightened a little more before he slapped Eric’s bare ass.

Eric’s eyes went wide at the sting across his skin, his body writhing on the bed. He spread his legs wide, eager for Cithrel. “Please, Your Highness,” he rasped.

Cithrel slapped his ass again. “Are you mine?”

Eric fisted the bedding, gritting his teeth. He wanted Cithrel so bad, he couldn’t think straight. “I’m yours.”

“Good.” Cithrel kept his hold on Eric’s throat. “Open your mouth.”

Eric did as he was told and then two of Cithrel’s fingers pressed into Eric’s mouth. Eric sucked the prince’s fingers in earnest, wetting them thoroughly. When the blonde-haired prince pulled his fingers out he palmed Eric’s ass before he began fingering him, stretching him.

Eric moaned, his dick throbbing.

Finally, Cithrel gripped his own hard dick and with a shift of his hips he thrust into Eric, filling him. Eric cried out in pleasure, ecstasy driving him mad. Then he pulled out slowly and slammed into him again, making Eric take all of him.

Eric drowned in the heady pain and pleasure of being fucked. Cithrel maintained a punishing rhythm, thrusting into Eric without relent. His entire body ached and it was all he could do to grip the bed with one hand and jerk himself off with the other.

He could barely breathe with the prince choking him in one hand and gripping his hip with the other while he speared Eric.

“Harder,” Eric begged.

Cithrel cursed and picked up his pace even more, grunting. Eric felt his muscles tightening as everything became too much and he came all over his stomach with a cry. Eric's ass clenching around Cithrel's cock was the prince's undoing and a moment later, he exploded inside him, his come filling him. The prince pulled out and slumped over Eric, his hand falling away from his throat.

Eric coughed, gulping down air. For a while, the sounds of their breathing filled the room as they both panted in the wake of their loathing and lust for each other. Their attraction was undeniable, but they both knew nothing good would come of it.

But that was enough. At least they both knew where they stood. Plus, that had been the best sex of Eric's entire damn life.

When Cithrel pulled himself away and stretched, Eric allowed himself to appreciate every inch of the beautiful bastard while his back was turned. He bit his lip, knowing he still wanted more, a lot more, of the fourth prince. His mind's eye already fantasized about the next time he could be at the angel-faced prince's mercy.

"I should go back to my room and get some sleep." Eric sat up, slower than he wanted.

His back screamed in protest despite him using his aether to strengthen his body.

Neither one of them spoke to each other, and the heat in the room turned to a frigid wasteland as clear hurt rose in Cithrel's eyes through loose blond strands. Cithrel watched Eric as he stumbled to his feet but said nothing. Eric didn't turn to say goodbye and Cithrel didn't make any move to linger.

Eric's chest constricted as his bedroom and the entire living quarters that they shared fell into a ringing silence, but shook his head once. He felt like he should've stayed. It was clear Cithrel wanted him to, but there was a stronger sense of guilt buzzing around in his head now.

It was the first time Eric felt guilty for lying to Cithrel. Cithrel was trying and Eric was the one going around behind his back, planning to destroy his own people. Eric shouldn't have slept with him, shouldn't have kept this from him. But there was no way he could tell Cithrel the truth, not about everything. The prince would want Eric locked away in the Black Thorn when he found out what Eric had planned. Even if Cithrel didn't, the empress would, and that was the same thing.

Eric swallowed the lump in his throat and crawled into bed, burying himself under the bedding. Despite feeling good about finally getting the truth out of Cithrel, he was the one with secrets now.

When he closed his eyes, he told himself over and over that none of it mattered. He just needed to focus on dealing with Olaera and Aimar.

Eric dreamed of running. Running non-stop as his lungs burned and his muscles screamed. Bodies littered the ground around him: humans, nymphs, even Fae. He kept going, his vision blurred as he whipped past trees at a brutal pace. His heart thundered but he didn't stop. He needed to get away.

Black swirls snaked through his sight, blinding him and forcing him to trip. He clawed at the ground, frantic to get back on his feet but found himself unable to. Dirt and blood caked onto his skin and he looked down in horror to see the black Markings had in fact chained him to the earth. He couldn't move no matter how hard he tried.

Tears streamed down Eric's face at the sound of footsteps approaching. His body panicked, as if it knew what was coming before his mind did.

Krysos came into view, an awful grin spread wide on his rich bronze skin. He stood over Eric the way a vengeful god would, about to get what he wanted.

The Fae king leaned down so he was close to Eric, his face splattered in several shades of blood. Some black, some



red, even gold blood. Eric swallowed and opened his mouth to speak, but he was mute.

Suddenly, Eric noticed the bodies that sprawled out before him. Twin blades were tossed on the ground, just out of reach from familiar rough calloused hands. A hand went to Eric's mouth, his eyes wide in disbelief as he looked to see familiar blond war braids. Gold blood covered silver armor and the emerald cape was torn to shreds. Next to him were others he knew too well. Luthais, Elasuin, Lyari, Rhistel, and even Solonar, all torn to pieces and strewn across the ground around him, covered in their own blood.

*No.*

Eric screamed but no sound came. He looked down at his shaking hands and they were coated, dripping with golden blood. It wasn't possible. He couldn't have done this, could he? It had to be a trick.

Then he saw his own shadow. Vines and thorns moved like tentacles, writhing around him and forming a gruesome mantle. Worst of all, though, was the shadow of a baleful crown that hung over Eric's head, fit for a king.

*What have I done?*

"You didn't think you could hide from me forever, did you?" the Fae king leered. "I promised you I would kill everyone and then you. So really, this is your fault."

Eric's eyes squeezed shut as Krysos stood straight and lifted a massive blade over his head. Just as the sound of the blade falling cut through the air, Eric's eyes snapped open.

He bit down on his fist to choke back a sob and curled into a tight ball, as if he could somehow hold himself together. Agony ripped through his heart as the images painted themselves into his memory so that they could stay there forever. His breath hitched in his throat as tears stung his eyes.

If Cithrel heard him muffling his tears from his own room, he made no indication, not that he would've cared. He had to be hurt by what Eric did, rebuffing him like that afterwards.

Eric looked out at the window with bleary, half-blind eyes. There was no moon, no gorgeous night view for him to look at. Just a looming clouded darkness stared back. It seemed appropriate.

It wasn't real, he knew it wasn't, but all he could see was the blood of the Imperial Family literally on his hands. That was the cost of what he was doing. When he destroyed the slave trade, it would cost the empire immensely. Not only would they lose a huge source of income and trade opportunities, but it would show the rest of their world that the empire was weak, that they could be conquered. He was going to be the reason the Fae who protected him were destroyed, and now his mind was torturing him for it.

There was no way around it. This was the price of his revenge—his humanity.

## Chapter Thirteen

Eric's body slammed to the ground, and the air knocked out of his lungs. He wheezed, rolling over onto his side as a shadow loomed over him and blotted out the sunlight. A calloused hand reached down towards him, and with a groan he took it. He was wrenched back to his feet and looked right into the sharp blue eyes of Cithrel. There was the slightest quirk to his lips, so subtle that no one else but Eric could see it.

Things were... complicated... between them. It had been weeks since the two of them started sleeping together regularly and Cithrel was different around Eric. Even more than he was before, there were hidden smiles and the lightest of touches whenever he passed him by. It made Eric's heart twist, the guilt strangling him. He felt like an asshole, lying to the prince like this. Every now and then when he and Sir Saelihn went to the baroness's estate and his plans solidified more and more, the guilt of keeping things from Cithrel ate away at him. All the anger he had towards Cithrel about keeping secrets and here he was doing the same. He was a hypocrite.

Eric's heart stuttered at the ghost of affection, and he shoved away from Cithrel, brushing the dirt off his clothes.

"You're going to regret doing that." Eric backstepped, leveling his focus on Cithrel.

"From what I've seen you do today, I doubt that."

Cithrel mirrored Eric's footsteps. The two of them paced in front of each other the way a wild animal would for a meal. Eric felt his limbs charge with aether, let it seep into every fiber of his muscles. His best chance at getting ahead of the prince would be to make the first move. He had learned the hard way that it was next to impossible to react to Cithrel's speed. If he kept Cithrel on the defensive, then he at least had a fraction of a fraction of a chance.

Eric darted forward, letting his power flow through him. Color drained away from his eyesight, washing out the blond from Cithrel's hair and the bright blue of his alert gaze. At the last moment, Eric darted to the left and shot out his blackened vines to the right. The prince didn't see it coming and Eric fought back a grin.

Cithrel dodged Eric's attack and it looked as if he was headed straight for the vines, which were ready to ensnare him. But before they could wrap around his limbs, several swords manifested from nothing and sheared the inky thorns. They fell limp and lifeless at Cithrel's feet as he planted his back foot.

Then he vanished in front of Eric.

*Damn it.*

Eric summoned his putrid thorns to form a cage around himself but he wasn't fast enough\_Cithrel was already behind him. Before Eric knew it, his arm was twisted behind his back and he was shoved forward, forced to his knees.

"Am I going to regret doing this as well?" Cithrel asked, his question toneless.

A breath later, Eric's arm was released and he slumped forward. With a huff, Eric got back to his feet. He scowled at Cithrel, who stared back, his expression blank, which only annoyed him even more.

Eric was exhausted. He barely slept between his work at the slave trade and his training sessions with Cithrel and the soldiers. He didn't have the same kind of stamina that the rest of the Fae had, even with his own aether. Solonar at least healed Eric's fatigue from his aether destroying him from the inside out, but it only did so much. Mentally, Eric felt constantly drained.

"Are you at your limit?" Cithrel asked, walking towards Eric.

"Not yet."

"Good." Cithrel swept his arm out towards the other Fae elite soldiers who trained alongside them. "It's about time

we test your progress.”

Eric frowned, his brows pinching together. “How so?”

“You’re going to take part in today’s challenge.”

Eric swallowed. He watched what the two prince commanders called their “challenges,” and it was less of a challenge and more of a bloodbath. It was always some kind of test and it was always brutal, pitting one Fae against another. Except, most of the Fae could heal their own injuries and Eric obviously could not.

“Great,” Eric said.

Rhistel bounded over to them, beaming. “You’re playing today, Eric Becker?”

“Looks that way,” Eric answered, biting back a sigh.

Christ, he did not want to go up against Rhistel. The youngest sibling of the Imperial Family was an absolute monster. He seemed to have an innate ability for violence—he never tired, he was almost as fast as Cithrel, and he was undefeated in every single challenge he fought in. And Eric was yet to see the youngest prince’s aether blessing.

“You won’t be participating,” Cithrel said.

“What? Why?” Rhistel whined, his expression instantly crestfallen. “I want to practice with Eric Becker.”

The fourth prince stared back, unmoved. “I want to judge his progress, not set him back weeks or more after you get through with him.”

Eric paled a little at that comment. Rhistel’s bottom lip jutted out. As he stood there pouting, he looked like a kid in timeout and not like a supernatural being who was deadlier than half the people around him combined.

“Then if Eric wins, can he practice with me?”

Cithrel’s arctic gaze flashed briefly, then he nodded. “*If* he wins.”

Eric glanced around the training grounds as more and more Fae gathered around them, well around their princes.

They probably heard Cithrel and Elasuin arguing over Eric, because a few of them eyed him with apprehension. Some even looked pleased.

*Great.*

Eric clenched and unclenched his hands that now grew clammy. He didn't even want to win anymore, because if he did, then that meant he'd be sparring with Rhistel in the future. This whole thing felt like a punishment. Eric chanced a look at Cithrel, but his mask of indifference was firmly in place, giving away no sign of emotion. He'd have to ask the fourth prince later.

Once all the Fae had circled around them, Elasuin stepped forward. Everyone went utterly silent, all but turning into statues, which made Eric's breathing sound twice as loud in the stillness.

"The challenge today will be slightly different," Elasuin said through a sneer as he eyed each of his soldiers. "Today the Marked One will be joining you all. Your prince commanders take his training very seriously, so I demand you all do the same. Give him no leniency. The challenge will be a simple one: the Circle."

A stream of murmurs and surprised looks rippled through the soldiers. Elasuin didn't bother to hide his haughty grin. Then he held up his hand and the training grounds once again fell into deafening quiet.

"Prince Rhistel." Elasuin crossed his hands behind his back as he looked at the Fae soldiers before him. "Explain to me what the Circle is."

Rhistel glanced at Eric, his face a cross between pity and melancholy before he spoke up with his boyish voice. "Two Fae enter the circle and clasp their left arms together. The first Fae to leave the circle loses."

The grin on the Prince of Nightmares' face widened. "Thank you, Prince Rhistel. Your competitors will be chosen by whoever the aether calls to. We'll go until there is only one soldier left."

Eric's heart quickened, his gaze darting around the training grounds. He felt the aether in his blood begin to stir of its own volition, as if it obeyed Elasuin's words.

He needed to calm down. It was just training. That fact didn't stop his pulse from racing, though, when his attention and aether fell upon his opponent for the challenge.

A hulking brute of a Fae made his way over to Eric. He had three dull-looking gray eyes and a high, strong nose. Even his cheekbones and jaw looked severe, which matched the hard line his mouth formed. Instead of hair the Fae that stood before Eric had little shocks of yellow feathers that resembled dragon scales.

"Greetings, Marked One." The Fae's words grated like gravel. "It will be my honor to fight you. My name is Sir Galan."

"Wonderful to meet you, Sir Galan. You honor me. Good luck in the challenge."

Galan gave a single curt nod, his jaw clenched.

Over the next several minutes, Eric's hopes of winning this challenge plummeted. He watched the soldiers competing one after another as he waited his turn. Each round was violent and wild. Black blood sprayed freely and the sound of bones shattering filled the air along with the cries of victors and the defeated. It sounded like war, not like a sparring session.

Eric cleared his throat and kept his shoulders straight through sheer force of will. Inside, his guts felt like liquid. It wasn't until Elasuin barked his and Galan's names that his body seemed to come alight with electricity.

*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.*

Galan and Eric turned to face each other once they stepped inside the enchanted circle. It looked like someone dragged a stick through the dirt, but as soon as Eric crossed the border of the circle, magic pressed down on him with the force of a hurricane. There was no leaving the circle unless you won, or you were forced out.

Eric drew in a shaky breath. He needed to calm down. With a quick glance Eric found Cithrel's face in the crowd out of habit. Relief swelled in him to see a crack in the fourth prince's mask, just for him.

Cithrel gave him a look of encouragement, a ghost of a smirk on that hardened face. The pit in Eric's stomach dissolved seeing Cithrel support him. He could do this. One round at a time.

Eric turned his attention back to Galan and eyed the Fae soldier's outstretched hand. He took the hand and felt another snap of aether jolt through him as they made contact. This time the power that swarmed in the air felt like metal clamping down on their hands, chaining them together in this hell pit.

At the sound of Elasuin's laughter, Eric snapped his head to look at him. He knew this was never a simple challenge, but that bastard's laughter sunk right through Eric's skin and soaked into his marrow.

"Let's see what you can do, Marked One." Elasuin had a malicious look in his green eyes. Before Eric could say anything back, Elasuin's arm raised and he barked out a single word. "Begin."

The world tilted on its axis immediately as Galan threw Eric off his feet in an attempt to rip Eric out of the ring. His stomach flipped as nausea rolled over him. In his sudden panic, Eric let his aether free all at once, giving it free reign to wreak havoc.

A channel of swarming thorns burst from Eric's free hand and formed a massive wall of rotten vegetation, catching his body before he could be flung from the circle. Sharp inky thorns from his vines sunk through his jacket and pants, drinking his blood. The vines pulsed around Eric, like a living thing, and made his stomach swim. He slumped forward, his hand still attached to Galan, just as he felt the air stir around him.

Galan grunted and then Eric felt the Fae's fist connect with his jaw. Eric's head snapped back from the blow, sending



a blast of pain reverberating through his skull. He let out a choked groan through gritted teeth.

Somehow, he managed to focus his power enough to soften the blow. There were enough memories of his jaw being broken and the unending agony of the pain and the struggle to heal it on his own. Thankfully, dodging the worst from these kinds of blows was one of the first things Cithrel helped to teach Eric.

Galan threw another fist, but this time Eric was ready, throwing up a wall of vines in front of him. Skin split open and black blood splashed against Eric's putrid thorns. They absorbed the blood and pulsed once more before growing in size. They were feasting.

Galan grunted, his face pinched together, and he jerked his hand away from the obsidian vines that slithered around them. At least Eric had a chance to catch his breath. His entire arm ached from the feeling of having it almost ripped from its socket.

The Fae around them shouted and roared at the two of them in the circle like wild animals. Eric didn't dare take his eyes off his opponent, but he was sure Elasuin and Cithrel were dead silent, watching Eric intently to see how he would do in this fight.

Then things happened much faster. Galan, specifically. The Fae dragged Eric around the circle, trying to overpower him through strength and speed. Eric managed to keep up but his body was suffering for it. Every time he was thrown like a ragdoll and his back slammed against his wall of thorns it was raked and sliced by his own power. The sting of pain grew and grew with each impact. He couldn't keep this up. He needed to do something.

"Forgive me, Marked One," Galan exhaled.

Eric's eyes widened as a blast of what felt like a thousand tiny needles stabbed his body. The pain was immobilizing. Galan had his palm facing Eric, as if gesturing to stop something, and when he pushed his palm closer, the force of the needles doubled in intensity.

The veins in Eric's neck bulged as his mouth fell open in a silent scream. Drool fell from his slackened jaw. He was paralyzed on the spot by the blinding pain and the world somehow still found a way to spin with a sickening velocity.

Galan's grip on Eric's arm tightened and he stepped closer until his palm pressed flat on Eric's chest. "You fought well, Marked One. I will not make you suffer further in this circle."

Eric wheezed before he lifted his chin to look at Galan. "You shouldn't have gotten so close to me."

To the Fae's credit, he was already in motion as the words left Eric's lips instead of standing stunned. Still, it wasn't enough. For all the focus that Galan dedicated to immobilizing Eric, he forgot to stay aware of his surroundings.

Galan wrenched on Eric's arm but Eric anchored himself to his wall of thorns, commanding them to hold him in place. On every side of Galan were walls of Eric's blackened and festering thorns. No matter how fast and hard the Fae tried to pull Eric from his spot and escape, he couldn't move.

With the flick of Eric's wrist, the living wall of vines closed in on Galan and swallowed him whole until he became part of the wall. Eric let out a long and heavy exhale, and as he did, the black thorns severed the magic keeping the two of them chained together. Sir Galan was cast with violent force from the circle.

As soon as Galan's body crossed the line, the pressure in the air dissipated and Eric felt a weight on his shoulders lift.

Galan hit the ground hard, kicking up dust as his body tumbled further from the circle. Eric's chest was heaving, his clothes in tatters and his back dripping blood, but he was still standing. He was the only one left in the circle.

"Well done, Eric Becker!" Rhistel shouted, clapping his hands together.

Eric gave Rhistel a pathetic smile before he noticed Elasuin looked positively homicidal. Then Eric found Cithrel in the crowd of Fae.

He was smiling. A full, genuine, toothy smile.

Holy. Shit.

He managed to survive the first round of the challenge and Cithrel was smiling at him. Eric's chest swelled and a renewed sense of determination overtook him. It was getting easier to use his power. All those days getting thrown into the dirt by Cithrel and sleepless nights in his own bedroom trying to manipulate his aether better were finally starting to show some results.

Eric walked out of the circle and glanced down at his Marking. The familiar black prongs of his tattoo glared back at him like rotten angry scars. Except now, Eric felt like he had control over the Marking.

His hand clenched into a fist and he made his way to stand next to Cithrel as they watched the rest of the first round of the challenge.

"You did well," Cithrel said, though he stared on at the two Fae who now fought and didn't spare Eric a look.

"Thanks," Eric answered, fighting back his own pleased expression. "It feels good to finally make some progress."

"Your control over your aether has improved quickly. Have you been practicing outside of the training grounds?"

Eric stiffened. Of course Cithrel would have noticed that. "At nights, after I'm done with the baroness during the day."

Cithrel's tone shifted slightly and Eric was glad they weren't looking at each other. "You learned that much on your own?"

"Did you see the look on Elasuin's face when I won? I swear, for someone who wants me to be strong enough to go to war, he could look a little less mad when I do something good."

Eric wanted to change the topic. He didn't want to talk about what he was doing in secret. Cithrel would know

something was off, but it was easier to withhold the truth. He realized he didn't want to lie to Cithrel, not like that. Something was changing between them and Eric didn't know what, but he knew he didn't want it to stop.

Cithrel stayed quiet for a beat longer and then he chuckled at Eric's side. "I did. Elasuin is a temperamental thing. But it was satisfying to see his little plan fail."

The Fae in the ring with a body like a bear and teeth to match flung the tiny blue Fae with limbs like snakes into the air with a roar. The snakelike Fae looked like he was about to lose, but at the last minute coiled his arms around the bear Fae. Eric hadn't noticed it much before but now that he'd been training with the soldiers regularly, they looked so much different than the nobles. They still had the same kind of inexplicable beauty but these Fae soldiers seemed to have been chosen for the army for the unique way the aether seemed to shape them.

Eric frowned. "What plan?"

Cithrel watched as the smaller Fae kept wrapping himself around the other soldier until the bear Fae fell to his knees, unconscious. Then the snakelike Fae tossed his body outside the circle. The crowd erupted into jeers and whoops.

"He wanted to teach you a lesson about the true strength of the Fae and show you exactly how much harder you have to work to master your aether to be on even ground with our kind. That, and he wouldn't pass up any opportunity to criticize me for my shortcomings as prince commander. But that's not what happened in the circle."

"I won," Eric supplied.

"Exactly. I'm sure Elasuin is seething like a spoiled child that he didn't get to see you hit the dirt once again. And now he can't utter a whisper about my strength as a commander."

Eric snorted. The third prince had one of the worst tempers. But what Cithrel said just then had him thinking. He

wondered if Cithrel would even answer him, but if their relationship was changing then it was worth a shot.

“Why does he still confront you so much?” Eric asked, his voice low. “What happened was centuries ago.”

Two more Fae entered the circle and began grappling and shouting. All the while Cithrel remained silent. They stood there without talking for so long Eric was sure he’d made a huge mistake by crossing that boundary.

“We’ve always been like that,” Cithrel finally answered, his voice so low Eric struggled to hear. “He can still see the difference in our power, even if I know my place.”

An uncomfortable chill prickled at the back of Eric’s neck. Images of a dark and brutal childhood surfaced in his mind.

Eric had never really had parents. His father was long gone while his mother had still been pregnant with Eric and she’d abandoned her sons before Eric knew the alphabet. He didn’t know what his father looked like, and memories of his mother grew hazier by the day. Still, he supposed no parents were better than the kind Cithrel had. Eric couldn’t imagine not having Bryce, even if things between them were so often strained.

“You don’t have any good memories with your family at all, do you?”

Cithrel’s gauntlets groaned as he crossed his arms across his chest tighter. Eric didn’t dare peek at the prince’s face. He was afraid of what expression he’d see staring back at him.

“The Fae world is a much different place than the severed world with your kind. I’m a member of the Imperial Family. There are standards and expectations that we must all meet and exceed. There is no room for love, no room for weakness.”

That admission had Eric’s gut churning with pity. He mourned the childhood Cithrel was robbed of. They were both

damaged goods, it seemed. Neither one given a chance at happiness as kids.

The Fae prince dipped his head before he cleared his throat. Eric had never seen this kind of vulnerability from Cithrel, not even close.

Eric nodded, unsure of what else to do. They were still surrounded by other Fae soldiers, with Elasuin and Rhistel on the other side of the circle. He wanted to reach out and touch Cithrel, to squeeze his hand, to hold him, anything, but he knew that wasn't possible. Not now. "I'm sorry."

"It's my duty."

Those three words hurt more than anything else. Everything Cithrel was subjected to in his life was his duty. If that was Cithrel's upbringing, his entire past, then what did that make Eric, since he was the one with Cithrel's malevolent father's aether flowing in his veins?

"There is more to life than duty, Cithrel." Eric turned to look at Cithrel and his lips parted in surprise to see Cithrel staring back at him.

He regarded Eric with an indescribable heaviness. "Perhaps."

"Round two!" Elasuin barked, ripping Eric and Cithrel from their private little world.

A scowl formed on Eric's mouth as he watched the Prince of Nightmares stride around the circle with his chest puffed. Part of him wanted to get into the circle with Elasuin next, even if the rest of him screamed that would be a death wish. He couldn't understand what kind of brother could do what he did to his sibling. The thought of Bryce being anything else made Eric's stomach twist. For all the messed-up things they lived through together, and the complicated relationship they had now, Bryce was still a constant for Eric. He was one of the reasons Eric made sure he would save the other humans here and leave this world behind for good.

"Marked One!" Elasuin shouted with a sneer. "Since you did so well in the first round I'm eager to see more. Who

does your aether call to?”

Eric reluctantly drifted from Cithrel’s side and back into the circle, with all the Fae soldiers’ eyes on him. Even though he’d been healed after his previous round, his muscles were still aching. His resolve tripled as he stood before Elasuin, letting his aether thrum in his blood and pull him towards his next opponent.

Elasuin grunted, a knowing look on his face. No matter what, Eric would make sure he won this entire challenge just so he could prove to Elasuin that he was strong enough.

That was what Eric thought when his footsteps carried him across the training ground and brought him face to face with his next opponent. The small and lean Fae with limbs like a snake looked back at Eric like he was his next meal and not his next opponent.

*Damn it.*

“It’s my honor to challenge you, Marked One.” The snake Fae dipped his chin. “I’m Sir Drynel.”

Eric eyed the Fae who stood before him. Up close he was even more intimidating. Despite his small size, the Fae soldier had the fluidity of water and the bite of a whip. It would be hard to hold onto him and not be crushed or launched from the circle.

Sneaking a glance, Eric found Cithrel’s arctic gaze and blinked when he saw Cithrel now stood just outside the circle, his arms crossed and his expression blank. Still, when their eyes met, he nodded to Eric once.

Eric turned his attention back to the Fae in the circle with him and straightened. “You honor me, Drynel.”

He reached out his hand for Drynel to take, focusing his breath. When Drynel clasped his forearm, his fingers digging into his skin with a hard grip, the magic just like last time clapped into place, tethering them together in the small arena.

Eric drowned out the cheers and bets the other soldiers placed and let his attention fall on Drynel. The snake Fae

gazed back, his big shiny eyes unblinking. The same tactic wouldn't work against Drynel from before. Eric just wasn't fast enough, and he knew he'd be on the defensive immediately. The cage Eric had been practicing since the incident in the Imperial Library was certainly stronger, but today would be the day he found out just how much it could withstand.

"Begin." Elasuin's voice resounded throughout the training grounds.

Eric dug his heels into the sand and cast his grotesque thorns around his feet and legs, anchoring him to the earth. Not a breath later, Eric felt his entire torso wrench forward as Drynel's arms wrapped around Eric's arms and pulled. The sensation of being pulled apart rocked Eric to his core and he swore his skin was seconds away from tearing apart.

With a huff, Eric let the aether in his blood surge and vines erupted from his free palm, aimed directly at Drynel. They managed to slither into the Fae's arms before he ripped himself free and darted to the side, their hands still firmly stuck together.

The next few moments were a flurry of a tense dance. Drynel twisted and ripped at Eric's body as his thorns chased and slashed at the Fae. It wasn't long after, though, that Eric realized he wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer, and Drynel didn't look close to tiring.

Eric glanced at Elasuin and saw his upper lip curl back in a hideous smile. The third prince was about to have a rude awakening.

"Sorry, Drynel," Eric panted, "but I have something to prove."

Drynel's face twisted with suspicion, but Eric doubted the Fae was about to see this coming.

Thorns tore from Eric's hand, the one that gripped Drynel's, and latched onto the Fae. Its sharp spikes sliced skin and drew blackened Fae blood. The Fae soldier hissed and began to move faster and faster, making Eric's head swim



from dizziness. Eric closed his eyes and with a sharp inhale he set his aether free.

Putrid vines burst through the entire ground of the circle. Drynel was agile but there was nowhere for him to go except outside the circle. Seeing his defeat, Drynel stopped running and let Eric's rotting vines twine around him.

"I submit to you, Marked One."

The air rushed from Eric's lungs and with it his thorns dissipated before vanishing into nothingness. He was out of breath, and his entire torso felt like it was covered in bruises, but he'd won.

Elasuin's air of superiority was replaced with a burning rage. His green eyes blazed, which stood out even more against the tattoos inked all over his shaved head and neck. The third prince glared straight ahead and ignored Eric. He snapped for the next two Fae to enter the circle to compete.

Eric made his way to the sidelines next to Cithrel again and felt a lightness in his chest at another victory. That and it felt good to stand next to Cithrel when he looked at Eric with something other than annoyance or cold indifference. What was wrong with him that he craved being near someone like this?

"That was clever of you," Cithrel said, looking directly at Eric this time.

Eric's heart thumped harder like an idiot having the prince's undivided attention. "Thanks. Sir Drynel moves a lot like Krysos. I knew I couldn't keep up with that kind of speed so I gambled on my control over my aether."

Once the words left his mouth a lance of pain shot through Eric's temples. He winced and stifled a whimper, but Cithrel noticed. His expression darkened and Eric thought it was from the mention of Krysos.

"Next time you won't have to fight Krysos, because I'll kill him with my blades." Cithrel's icy gaze melted and burned.

His breath left Eric in a rush as he took in the prince's declaration. It was obvious from the look in his eyes that he meant every word he said. It sent a delicious chill down his spine when it should have terrified him.

The warmth in Eric's chest froze into a block of ice when the reality of his own making came rushing back. Even if the Alonethan Empire won this war, their capital city would be in tatters after Eric was done destroying their primary source of wealth—the slave trade.

His moral compass went to war with his new rising tide of guilt. Emotion pricked at his eyes. "Right."

Cithrel studied Eric's expression and thankfully didn't question it. At least for now.

The weight on Eric's shoulders lingered for the rest of the competition and even when Eric won the final challenge with ease, the victory still felt hollow. He barely cracked a grin when Elasuin stormed out of the training grounds and Rhistel knocked the breath out of him with a giant hug.

"Congratulations, Eric Becker! Now we can spar together." The glimmer in the youngest prince's eyes made Eric's nerves tick.

Eric's head whipped around to look at Cithrel. He'd forgotten about the deal Cithrel made until now. Horror filled Eric's features at the casual shrug Cithrel gave them both.

"I gave him my word, Eric."

Eric deflated. Sparring with Rhistel was going to be awful. "Looking forward to it, Your Highness," he said to the youngest prince.

Rhistel flashed a beaming smile before clapping a hand on Eric's back hard enough to leave a mark. "I should go before Elasuin comes looking for me. He's never fun to train with when he's in a bad mood."

"Isn't that all the time?" Eric muttered, unable to stop himself.

Cithrel snorted and Rhistel's eyes widened with glee before he burst into laughter. "That's a great point, Eric Becker."

Then Rhistel waved over his shoulder as he dashed off in Elasuin's direction, leaving Cithrel and Eric by themselves. All the other Fae soldiers were disbanding or making themselves otherwise scarce.

"I should go," Eric said before things got awkward. "I'll need to take some medicine from Hinni."

He didn't want to admit it to Cithrel, but his body was peppered with bruises and aching with every slight movement. More than a vial of Hinni's potions, he needed some of Solonar's healing magic. But Eric knew better than to mention the crown prince around Cithrel. Maybe he'd go looking for Solonar afterwards.

Cithrel's jaw ticked. "I'll walk you back."

Eric swore to himself. He didn't even have to mention Solonar to ruin Cithrel's mood. The reminder that Eric needed the crown prince to keep on living was a bitter thought.

"Welcome back, Eric," Hinni said and smiled once they'd returned to his room. She beckoned him inside. At the sight of Cithrel she bowed her head low. "Greetings, Your Highness. How may I serve you?"

"Tend to Eric," Cithrel said to Hinni. Then he turned, his gaze falling on his brother who lounged in a divan waiting for them, no doubt looking to pick a fight with his brother. "Do what you must and then leave."

"Is that how you should talk to your darling brother?" Solonar floated into the room Eric and Cithrel were in, his onyx and crimson coat fluttered behind him.

Eric followed Hinni to the table before she flitted off to retrieve her satchel that contained all her special concoctions just for him. His head ached and he felt like every thump of his pulse was a hammer to his skull. His emotions got the better of him in training today and he pushed himself too hard.

If he couldn't take care of this, there was no way he could manage his plans.

"I want to make sure you actually do your job," Cithrel said. "Otherwise, there's no reason for you to be near Eric."

Solonar picked at his fingernails, like they were more interesting than Cithrel. "Rest assured, brother. I'll take *very* good care of dear little Eric."

Cithrel's nostrils flared.

Eric stepped between the two before things could escalate. "I'll be fine, Cithrel, really."

The fourth prince studied Eric. A flicker of hurt flashed through his eyes, but it was gone so quick Eric must have imagined it. Cithrel gave Solonar a final look filled with loathing before he stormed out. At least he knew enough not to try and stay in the same room with Solonar as far as Eric was concerned. They'd just fight again.

"Why do you have to be like that?" Eric muttered as he sunk into a chair. The day's injuries were taking their toll on him now. The pounding in his skull worsened and he grimaced with the effort of staving off the ache.

"Why do I have to be anything else? I'm the heir to the throne. Every time he oversteps it's my job to put him back in his rightful place."

Solonar's words didn't have any malice behind them, and that's what made them even worse. That was how things were between them and their whole family. Eric shook his head in disbelief.

"That's pitiful."

Solonar moved to stand before Eric, seated in his chair, and he bent down until he was on his knees and his gaze met Eric's. "Pity is an emotion reserved for children and the weak. Now are you going to sit there slumped over like a whipped animal all night or can I repair some of the damage done to your fragile human body?"

Eric swore. “Don’t let me stop you.” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

The invasive heat soon filled his veins and Eric closed his eyes, determined not to flinch this time as Solonar’s aether worked its way deep into Eric’s blood. When Solonar was done, Eric was out of the chair and down the hallway before the crown prince could utter another word. He guessed that seeing Eric in such rough shape meant he knew not to bother Eric with practicing with Fae Paths or any other work with his aether.

It still unsettled Eric to see Solonar continue to treat his family with so much disdain, but then treat Eric completely different. The oath he was forced into obviously played a part in his change in behavior, but Eric couldn’t shake the feeling there was some ulterior motive at work. It would be foolish to think Solonar was growing fond of him when a year ago he wanted Eric dead. No, living beings didn’t change that fast. Certainly not beings who lived for hundreds or thousands of years.

The crown prince was up to something. Eric was sure of it.

## Chapter Fourteen

When Eric woke up, he felt as though he'd been trampled. More than that—as soon as his eyes cracked open, something felt off. He slept without the dirge of nightmares but didn't feel anywhere near close to rested.

The uneasy churn in his stomach worsened when Hinni was quiet that morning, her usual conversation cut short to simple replies. Even when Eric asked where Cithrel was, she stated that he received a missive before the sun rose and bid her to say nothing more on the matter.

“Did he say anything about my training this morning?” Eric rubbed the back of his neck.

“No, apologies, Eric.” Hinni dipped her head. “If you'll excuse me, the prince commander requires me to handle some affairs on his behalf.”

Things got even more strange when Eric made his way through the palace and it was quieter than usual. There were still several servants and attendants circulating throughout the palace halls, their footsteps like whispers, but any signs of nobles or aristocrats were non-existent.

Eric chewed on the inside of his cheek, tension growing in his limbs. He wondered what Cithrel read in that letter that he'd leave Eric on his own with no warning or protective measures. It was too much of a coincidence that Cithrel's absence and that of the other nobles overlapped. There must have been an incident that only the high-ranking Fae were privy to that didn't include Eric.

With a shake of his head, he cleared his thoughts. Paranoia was something he couldn't afford to linger on. It would be perfect to get a workout in while he was alone. He might even be able to practice for his plan with the space of the sparring arena. The sky was an ominous gray, the clouds swollen and angry looking. Eric pursed his lips, wishing he chose something different to wear if it was going to rain.

The training grounds came into view and Eric's heart juddered when he saw that Elasuin alone stood in the middle of the arena with his hands held behind his back. His vicious emerald eyes never strayed from Eric's face as he made his way to join the prince.

"Good morning, Marked One," Elasuin greeted. His voice was calm, which was even more disturbing compared to his usual constant state of aggravation. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Good morning, Your Highness." Eric shifted on his feet, feeling the weight of the situation press into him. "I didn't think you'd be here this morning. If you have business in the training grounds, then I won't stand in your way. I'll return to train later."

The bad feeling festered, spreading like a disease. Eric needed to get out of there—now.

"I do have business here. With you. Now take your stance."

Eric took a step back and his hazel eyes narrowed. "I don't know what you mean, Your Highness, but I have no intention of fighting you. I'm going to take my leave."

His face was the picture of calm, but his mind raced, frantic to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Was it really possible that Elasuin was laying in wait for him because he won the challenge? Of course it was. Eric swore inwardly. Elasuin could very well be the reason why Cithrel was gone this morning. Solonar had used the same trick in the past, so it wasn't hard to believe the third prince was capable of something similar.

"Take your stance. That is your only warning." Elasuin took up an aggressive position, readying himself to strike.

Eric put up his hands, but before he could ask again the force of Elasuin's power slammed into him. Voices assaulted his mind and illusions of his worst fears blinded him.

*I missed you, pet.*

*I don't love you. No one does.*

*You're weak. You'll die in this place.*

Eric threw his hands out and fetid thorns hissed into existence, swallowing the visions whole. Elasuin was there, waiting, within striking distance. A millisecond later the Fae's fist slammed into Eric's face and sent him sprawling into the dirt.

The air rushed from Eric's chest and his face was swarmed with pain. Eric's cheek split open from the blow, leaving a sharp sting as warmth trickled down his chin. Confirmation dawned on Eric as he got to his feet. His breath hitched. This wasn't a training session at all. This was Elasuin taking out his anger on Eric. Punishing him.

"You really couldn't stand me winning your challenge yesterday, could you?"

Elasuin rushed Eric again and darkness swallowed Eric's senses, leaving him standing in a void. Then his feet were kicked out from under him. Everything came rushing back to him just as the back of his head hit the ground first. Eric gasped as his ears rang. He fought to suck in air, but nothing came since the wind was knocked out of him.

Rolling onto his side, Eric's fingers dug into the dirt of the arena, struggling to pull himself to his feet. He gritted his teeth with the effort, knowing this wasn't going to be over until Elasuin was satisfied with the beating he doled out.

"Your victories yesterday have given you false confidence in your abilities." Elasuin walked around Eric with ease, knowing Eric didn't have a chance. "If we were on a battlefield right now you would have been dead twice over. You won't have that dog to protect you and whisper sweetness into your ear when we're at war."

"Dog?" Eric coughed. "Don't you mean your brother?"

Elasuin sneered. "A male that faithfully follows every command like a trained beast is no brother of mine."

"Was Cithrel like that before or after you beat him throughout your childhood?"



The Prince of Nightmares rushed Eric and the next thing he knew Elasuin had his hand wrapped around Eric's throat. He squeezed and Eric's mouth fell open, choking for oxygen.

"That whipped beast cut his heart out for you, did he?" Elasuin said through bared teeth, spit hitting Eric's face. "That's hardly surprising, considering you're both so repulsively weak. It's disgusting to see you two together. An aether-cursed shame that my father chose you. If that dog insists on fucking you and not preparing you for war, then it's my job to make sure you don't waste my father's gift and get yourself killed until you've served your purpose."

With that Elasuin threw Eric away from him, turning his back to Eric in disgust. Rage heated Eric's cheeks and it was then he remembered his face was still cut and bleeding. But Eric didn't feel the sting of his wound or the burn in his lungs as he sucked in deep breaths. The only thing he felt was hatred. But he couldn't bring himself to attack Elasuin because a small ugly part of him knew the third prince was right. About Eric, at least.

He was still too weak. A small victory meant nothing if his life was on the line. Regardless of the war with the Fae king, Eric had to be able to protect himself in the aftermath of his plan coming to fruition. Even more so if he failed in ruining Lord Aimar and the baroness.

Eric got to his feet again. "Fine. I'll fight with you. But you beating the shit out of me doesn't prove you're strong. It just makes you a coward."

Elasuin stilled. He looked at Eric like he was ready to snap his neck. "What did you just say to me, you fucking human?"

The sky finally broke and Eric felt a few stray drops of rain hit his face. Eric's vision drained to black and white as he let his simmering rage boil over and consume him. Except now he could channel the overflowing aether. A second skin of aether ran over his flesh as he stared back at Elasuin. He lifted his chin and spat his next words. "You're a bully and a

coward. You beat your own brother because you were afraid of how much stronger he is than you. You're the one who's repulsively weak."

Then, Eric turned his back on Elasuin and walked away. It was the biggest "fuck you" move he could think of to the Fae. The total lack of respect would no doubt send Elasuin into a rage, and that's exactly what Eric was counting on.

"How dare you!" Elasuin roared.

Eric felt the weight of Elasuin's full power smash into his back and his entire body vibrated from the impact despite the shield of aether he put over himself. He stumbled forward but kept his footing, and that was all the time he needed to ensure he snared Elasuin.

Eric spun on his heel to face the furious Fae and found his body strung up by the rotting and foul-smelling black thorns he had summoned from underground. Elasuin cursed and shouted at Eric, but Eric laughed in his face.

*Good.*

"I think I like you better like this. It's where cowards belong." Eric tilted his head to get a better look at Elasuin, to see the sharp thorns bite into the Fae's skin as they fed on his pure golden blood.

"Fuck you," Elasuin spat.

In a flash of magic, Eric's senses were ripped away from him, leaving him in oblivion, and then in a rush they came flooding back, overloading him. Eric was stuck in a horrific rhythm of desolation and an onslaught of awareness. It was too much for him to move or breathe or do anything as simple as blink. The only thing he could do was outlast Elasuin. Eric endured the prince's assault, while he kept a death grip on his own aether, letting his putrid vines continue to feed on pure Fae blood. The more they fed, the weaker Elasuin would get until he wouldn't be able to hold Eric in this waking purgatory.

Finally, the nightmare broke and Eric was brought back to reality. Eric fell to his hands and knees and vomited, dirt

and his stomach's contents splashing onto his bare skin. Gasping and gagging, Eric was slow to get back to his feet, but he kept his snare tight around Elasuin. There was no way he was going to let that prick beat him.

The third prince was fuming, nostrils flaring with a vicious scowl on his brutal face. Eric was sure that if even one of his vines broke, he would be seconds away from death. But he made damn sure they would hold.

“No, fuck you, *Your Highness*. You may be the third-born son of the Imperial Family, but what does it say about your strength if you're beaten by your younger brother *and* a human? The Fae only seem to understand one thing and that's power. I've proven I have more of it than you. If you ever touch me or Cithrel again, I'll destroy your reputation for the rest of your long, long life.”

Elasuin's face had turned bright red, and the veins in his neck bulged, but he didn't say anything back. He couldn't, not when everything Eric said was the truth.

Eric left the third prince in the arena and didn't look back. Elasuin was beneath him now.

Damn it, his face stung from where Elasuin split the skin. The cost of using his aether began to set in, and the gnawing and splintering in his skull screamed. His ears rang to a painful melody with every step he took. Fatigue plagued him. Between that and his still-simmering temper, he couldn't focus enough to try and heal his wounds himself.

The halls of the palace seemed to slowly fill again with other Fae nobles and servants as he made his way back towards Cithrel's wing of the palace. Whatever meeting they attended was over now, and several Fae lowered their heads as Eric thundered past them, not bothering to nod back at them. He felt a little shitty for not acknowledging them, but his thoughts were consumed with what Elasuin did to Cithrel throughout their entire childhood. He was nothing but a goddamned bully. Their father wasn't any better, either, pitting his children against each other to batter them into coming out

stronger, regardless of how much it fractured their hearts and minds.

Eric swore. It always came back to that in the Fae world. Strength above all else. They didn't care who they crushed or destroyed on their path to power. Fine, then. If that was how they wanted to live, then Eric would use it against them. He would become strong, stronger than them all and use their power to ruin them until their legacy was nothing but a pile of rubble and shattered egos.

"Eric, where were you?"

Cithrel's question cut through Eric's thoughts and dragged him up from the abyss of his mind. He flushed; shame colored his cheeks as he still clutched the bloody wound on his face. He didn't want Cithrel to see him looking like this. Soaked curls hung limp and fell in his face. And he was covered in his own crimson blood and rain, staining his clothes so that he resembled a water-logged corpse. He had promised Cithrel he was going to be stronger, strong enough to protect himself. Right now, he looked nothing like someone capable of doing that.

When Eric didn't answer, Cithrel continued. "Hinni said that you were gone when she returned. It's not safe for you to be out in the palace on your own, not with the Fae king's assassins hunting you."

Water dripped from Eric, the droplets splashing onto the spotless stone floors of the palace hallway they both stood in. Eric couldn't have felt more out of place than right now.

"I was at the training grounds." Eric averted his gaze, shielding the busted side of his face. "But it started pouring out there so I'm heading back to get cleaned up."

He moved to slip past Cithrel but the Fae bastard was faster, grabbing Eric's arm and halting him. His voice went heartbreakingly soft then. "Look at me, Eric. What's wrong?"

His tone caught Eric off-guard and his masochistic craving for Cithrel's attention won out over his anger at Elasuin. He did as Cithrel asked and met his searching gaze,

drinking in his appearance and letting Cithrel drown his flaring emotions.

Cithrel's eyes had gone pitch-black and his voice went low.

"Who did this to you?"

Eric swallowed but he didn't look away from the prince. "It's nothing. It was an accident. I know there's a banquet tonight so I'll see Hinni and it'll be fine. I doubt it will even scar."

That was clearly the wrong thing to say because Cithrel just gripped Eric's wrist even tighter and forced Eric to look at him. He noted that even with his grip of iron, his touch wasn't painful. The fourth prince took care to be gentle with him.

"Who."

The prince's tone was enough to surprise Eric and his lips parted. "Elasuin."

"What?" Cithrel's voice thundered, his rage filling the space, swallowing the quiet whole.

Eric recoiled from Cithrel out of instinct, his body telling him this was a predator and he needed to get away. Except this was one predator he'd let snare him time and time again.

"It was an accident," Eric said again, though his voice lacked conviction this time. "I asked for him not to go easy on me during training. It's my fault."

Cithrel towered over Eric and pulled him in close. "Look at me, Eric. This is not your fault. It's that short-sighted and erratic undesirable's fault and I'm going to make him regret ever touching you."

Eric's lips parted in surprise. He'd almost never seen Cithrel like this and he'd never heard him talk about Eric specifically like this. It was so, well, protective. That couldn't be right, but the fact that his chest beat harder disagreed.

"We were sparring, Cithrel." Eric cleared his throat, the air feeling thick as his body craved this closeness with Cithrel.

“It happens.”

At that Cithrel’s rage tempered and his tempestuous expression softened. He stared down at him and let out a deep exhale as his forehead pressed to Eric’s.

Eric was too stunned by the gesture to move. Slowly, Cithrel’s rough hand came up to cup his cheek and tilted his chin so that he looked up at him. “This is something that shouldn’t happen to you, Eric.”

Eric’s entire body was alight with a sudden and razor-sharp need for Cithrel. His hands ran down Cithrel’s chest, not daring to look away from those soul-devouring eyes. He feared that if he looked away, he might never see Cithrel look at him that way ever again, and he wanted to soak in every second of it. Just a little bit longer, and he would commit that face to memory—being looked at like he was the center of the universe.

Then Cithrel let his hand fall away from Eric’s face and those soft blue eyes froze over to arctic. “I have something to take care of. Let Hinni tend to you.”

“Cithrel, wait—”

“There’s someone I must speak with before I deal with my brother.” Cithrel cut Eric off, his words as sharp as razors. “I’ll see you at the banquet, Eric.”

Eric reached out to stop him but Cithrel was already gone, flashing out of existence, on his way to probably beat his older brother half to death. A pang of fear trickled in with the excitement. If that was how Cithrel reacted to his brother angering him, how would he react if he found out what Eric was doing?

Cithrel would chain him to the darkest and deepest corner of the Black Thorn and leave him there to rot, he was sure of it. No depth of passionate looks could spare Eric from that fate.

Eric’s entire body was racked with an anxious shiver at the thought. A trickle of remorse chilled his veins, but it was too late to decide to have a conscience now.

As Eric cupped his cheek to staunch the bleeding, he swallowed down the lump of his hesitation. He had a banquet to get ready for.

## Chapter Fifteen

Eric missed having a watch. He pivoted and paced back the way he'd just come from. He'd walked every inch of Cithrel's living quarters. It was near unbearable having to wait with no real way to tell time in the Fae world. For all he knew, it could have been thirty minutes or six hours since he last saw Cithrel. Hinni, ever patient, waited with the preternatural stillness of the Fae for the prince to return. She only moved to adjust Eric's attire for the banquet or to make conversation so that Eric might be distracted and settle his nerves. She no doubt felt his emotional state with her aether.

"Where is he?" Eric mumbled, biting one his nails.

Cithrel said he had to talk to someone before he dealt with Elasuin and Eric's stomach was in constricting knots about who Cithrel met with. If it was the empress, what would she do? Worse than that, what if she reached her own conclusions about Eric after hearing about what happened?

"The prince commander said he would meet you at the banquet, did he not?" Hinni's soft lilting voice pulled Eric's attention.

Eric blinked. "Sorry, Hinni, what?"

"It's alright, you have much on your mind." Hinni touched Eric's arm. "His Highness, the Prince Commander, is unlikely to appear before the banquet, Eric. I think it's best that you arrive by yourself."

That was exactly what Eric didn't want to do. "I know."

He swivelled and caught sight of himself in the mirror, giving himself a final once-over. Hinni had done exceptional work with Eric's outfit tonight. Between her and Luthais's tailor, Eric knew he looked gorgeous. The black coat and pants hugged his lean frame in all the right places, showing off the muscles he'd developed over the last year of training with his brother and the Fae. Emerald threads that glistened like jewels in the fabric detailed his coat and formed around the Aloneth



family crest. Embroidered within the emerald on Eric's left was a black doe. Eric ran a hand through his curls, sweeping them back from his face, and eyed his boots. The black leather gleamed as the studded and leather-strapped ankle-high boots finished his outfit.

"You look like perfection, Eric," Hinni said, rounding him. "And you certainly look the part of the Marked One."

Eric's gaze fell to the floor and a sad smile spread on his lips when he looked back up. "I used to look like perfection, Hinni." He rubbed at his arm, where the thick and jagged scars painted his skin. "Before all of this, in my old life, I could make anything look good."

He didn't know why the memory was suddenly rushing back to him, or why he felt compelled to tell Hinni, but the words kept pouring from him. An old and cracked dam had finally burst.

"I used to go to clubs and parties, a lot like your banquets." Eric swept his hand across the air. "I loved to dance, loved the feeling of bodies pressed against me. I felt invincible and I knew I looked hot as hell when I went out. It's where I met my last boyfriend, Carter."

*Ex-boyfriend.*

Eric let his head fall back and sighed, feeling tears prick at his eyes. "We weren't anything serious, just having some fun together, but he made me feel like perfection the way he looked at me. I blew him off the last time I talked to him. Bryce wanted us to go hiking the next morning, so I didn't want to go clubbing and bar-hopping the night before. Not when Bryce demanded we start our hikes before the sun was even up. Carter was so mad at me, and we fought, mostly about how I never put him first. But that was when I realized it was just me who wasn't serious about our relationship. I didn't feel guilt, just sad for him that he thought we were more. After all, I don't remember my father, and I can barely remember my mother. They left, so why wouldn't everyone else? Having fun was easier. It never occurred to me that someone other than my brother might love me."

Eric looked back at Hinni, sniffing. Her petite frame was pulled tight, and her face was pinched, stricken with his feelings. Big, shining black eyes looked at him, reflecting all the emotions he was feeling in her gaze.

Eric never really stopped mourning for his old life, for what he used to be. He was never going to be the same as when he was stolen to the Fae world. The flickers of joy Eric felt back then were snuffed out. The joy of dancing, of having arguments with boyfriends, and of feeling free to do whatever he wanted. The joy of peaceful sleep not infested with nightmares.

Hinni was feeling all that loss from Eric. Joy swallowed whole by the Fae.

Instead of happiness, there was a grotesque and deteriorated thing in its place.

Hate.

Hatred and a hunger for revenge.

“That was the day you were brought to Alonetha.” Her voice was quiet.

It wasn’t a question. She understood. That was the last day of Eric’s old life.

Eric forced a smile, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “It was for the best that Carter never talked to me again. I was a dick when we were together, and we left things on a pretty bad note when I was taken. Besides,” Eric said and smiled again. This time it didn’t feel as faked. “I do get to dance again.”

The last time Eric danced, he was in Cithrel’s arms and the prince had laid his secrets out for Eric to see, leaving himself vulnerable. He wanted to dance with Cithrel again. Thoughts of animosity, plans for revenge, and the accompanying guilt were forgotten for a little while. Eric could let those thoughts consume him tomorrow. Tonight, he wanted to see Cithrel.

“I should get going,” Eric said, straightening. “Thanks for this, Hinni.”

He gestured to his outfit, but they both knew that wasn't what he meant. She nodded, her strained expression softening. "Of course, Eric. It's my honor."

With that, Eric was out the door, his mind in a haze. His footsteps echoed through the stone palace halls. Black and silver metallic minerals glinted in the floor, lit under the rising moon's light. Almost everyone was at the banquet already, or busy with something else. Either way, Eric walked alone. He felt the absence of Cithrel at his side more than ever after his talk with Hinni.

It had been so long since he thought of Carter. Even after Eric came back to San Francisco, to his brother and his old life, he barely registered that Carter was long gone. It didn't sting, or fill Eric with relief—it was indifference. Did that make him an ass? Eric knew the answer before he finished his thought. No, it made him broken.

The dark and lonesome halls were soon illuminated by the soft glow of aether-lit globes and chandeliers that came from the grand hall. Two Fae guards stood on either side of the massive arching double doors that were swung open, revealing the decadent room filled with nobles and aristocrats.

Emerald and obsidian tapestries hung from the walls between the tall flower-clad windows, obscuring the moon. Some outfits sparkled with aether-infused fabrics and others were barely there, showcasing the frames and enchanting figures of the Fae.

Eric only noticed it all for a moment, though. His real focus was on scanning the crowd, looking for the platinum blond braids and broad shoulders he wanted to wrap his arms around. He wanted the comfort of his protector, even if it was nothing more than a band-aid for his problems.

That was when he spotted Cithrel, and he could have sworn all the breath in his lungs was sucked out.

The fourth prince stood tall, clad in a gray jacket that clung to his form and fell to his knees. Eric cursed the long jacket for hiding the prince's ass that he knew looked amazing right now, if the hug of Cithrel's pants was any indicator.

Eric began making his way over to Cithrel, side-stepping and shimmying through the crowd of elegant and horrific Fae. He couldn't take his eyes off Cithrel.

Maybe that was why Eric didn't notice he was slowly being intercepted by Solonar until the lean-muscled crown prince was standing in front of him, blocking his path. Maybe it was why Eric didn't notice where Cithrel was heading at first, either. Cithrel hadn't noticed Eric's arrival yet, but he strode through the ballroom on a mission, his arctic eyes frozen over, determined.

Eric followed Cithrel across the room and his heart stopped when he saw Cithrel's destination—Elasuin.

*Oh, no.*

"Why is it so hard to get your attention, Eric?"

Eric tore his gaze from Cithrel and looked at Solonar. His amber eyes melted, a contrast to the menacing grin spread wide on his lips. The crown prince's long black hair was pulled back, leaving his circlet on full display across his forehead. The onyx and crimson circlet looked like it didn't belong anywhere else but on Solonar's head.

"What?" Eric blinked. "What do you want?"

Solonar sighed heavily, eyes rolling. "I see your hackles are already raised. I already told you, as long as I've got this—" he tapped his neck, "—you're safe with me. So, stop looking at my brother and look at me."

Eric finally gave the raven-haired prince his full attention. He noticed it then, the distinction that Solonar kept making. If Solonar was oath-bound, Eric was safe from him. Without it, though....

"That's much better," Solonar said, looking pleased.

"What are you up to?" Eric asked, studying the crown prince for any change in emotion.

He was up to something, and Eric knew whatever it was wouldn't be good for him. Solonar had the decency to look offended, but Eric remembered what Cithrel told him.

Solonar was always pulling the strings in the background. He was an excellent manipulator.

“It’s good to see you’ve abandoned the wounded animal performance. I like this ‘you’ better.”

“That’s not an answer,” Eric replied immediately. He pressed again. “Stop deflecting or get out of my way. I’d rather look directly at the sun than look at you.”

Solonar barked a laugh. “When you look at the sun, you *are* looking at me. I’m the Prince of Light.”

Eric’s jaw hardened, looking past Solonar to Cithrel. Solonar wasn’t going to tell Eric anything, but now he knew for sure Solonar was trying to draw Eric’s attention away from Cithrel and away from whatever he was plotting. He’d find out what on his own. First, though, he needed to get to Cithrel.

An arm snaked through Eric’s, pulling him from his thoughts.

“Let. Go,” Eric ground out, eyes never leaving Cithrel.

The fourth prince was nose-to-nose with Elasuin. The two of them were speaking quietly, but there was a simmering rage growing in their eyes, seconds from boiling over.

“If I do that,” Solonar whispered into Eric’s ear, his voice a purr, “then we wouldn’t get to see this. It’s long overdue.”

“Why isn’t anyone trying to stop this?”

“Someone step between two pure-blooded princes?” Solonar snorted. “No. I think not.”

Eric scanned the crowd for Luthais, hoping he might do something to stop this disaster, but he was nowhere to be found. Instead, he searched for the one Fae who would be able to intervene. But when his attention fell on her, she just sat there.

Sir Saelihn lurked behind her, bathed in shadows, a permanent fixture. Nithroel was situated on a decorative dais and throne, overlooking the party, her divine gaze trained on

her two sons seconds away from coming to blows. A ghost of a smile played on her lips as she looked on.

Eric's lips parted. She was a monster through and through. What kind of a mother would sit by and delight in her children fighting like this? He struggled to break free, but Solonar's hold on him was hard and unbreakable.

When the pressure in the room crushed down on his shoulders, Eric watched in stunned silence as all attention turned to Cithrel and Elasuin. No, this was bad. He couldn't let Cithrel beat the hell out of his brother on Eric's behalf, not in front of all the nobles and aristocrats. It would only draw more gossip and rumors about them. No matter how badly he wanted to see Elasuin pay for his actions, he didn't want to subject Cithrel to that ridicule. The prince would never admit it, but Eric saw the cracks in Cithrel's mask now. He saw the fractures from every word and insult.

"Elasuin!" Cithrel roared, leveling his sub-zero gaze on his older brother. "It seems public humiliation is the only way you will see reason. I warned you what would happen if you touched him again."

Elasuin barked a cruel, mocking laugh, shaking his head in disgust. "There's a limit to how much I can stomach the words spewing from your mouth. Just how eager are you to please Mother? I know you always do as your told, but I don't think Mother asked you to fuck the human."

A wave of shocked gasps and murmurs rolled through the crowd of nobles. Eric straightened as countless sets of eyes glanced his way, a myriad of expressions aimed at him.

He didn't acknowledge them. He couldn't. It would only make things worse. Several Fae no doubt noticed Solonar's hold on Eric, and their hushed voices increased in a dull volume.

Eric felt the next wave of pressure press down on his shoulders as the exertion of power from the princes' aethers crackled in the air. Some of the aristocrats and lesser-known nobles doubled over, straining to withstand the force.

Cithrel spoke quietly, but his words still managed to carry. “I don’t need my senses to bring you to your knees, brother.”

Eric blinked, his heart thrumming in his chest. He couldn’t smell Elasuin’s magic spilling into the air. His teeth ground together in realization. Elasuin was powerful enough to take away senses from this many beings, including all of Cithrel’s.

The third prince snarled, baring his teeth at his younger brother, even though Cithrel couldn’t see or hear him. But, just as Cithrel warned Elasuin, he didn’t need his senses. He was the Prince of Blades for a reason.

He was unbeatable.

The air churned, a whirling of chaos, and the smell of citrus flooded the room. In its wake, hundreds upon hundreds of weapons manifested in the whorls. Cithrel stood there, unnaturally still, his calm mask of disassociation on his face and his blond braids whipping around his shoulders.

Elasuin’s sneer turned into a scowl as he realized he couldn’t charge his brother and knock him down in front of everyone. He couldn’t take a single step towards Cithrel because those countless weapons were trained on Elasuin. If the third prince so much as swallowed, a sword was close enough to cut his throat.

That was when Cithrel laughed. It was a cold and unfeeling sound. He knew he’d just won. Elasuin kept his hold on Cithrel despite being immobilized, but that didn’t stop Cithrel from stepping forward. He walked over to Elasuin, his blades clearing a path for their prince until he was before Elasuin.

“Yield.” A command.

“I don’t yield to dogs,” Elasuin spat back.

He must have allowed Cithrel to hear his response, because Cithrel smirked. The third prince’s green eyes flared with fury as he charged his younger brother, voluntarily skewering himself on several swords. Gold blood splattered on

the floor, echoing throughout the room that had once again fallen silent.

Eric couldn't take his eyes off them. He kept trying to pull away from Solonar, but the crown prince wouldn't budge. He swore. Why wasn't anyone doing anything? What did Solonar gain from letting his brothers hurt each other like this? What did the empress gain? It made his blood burn.

Cithrel stood motionless as Elasuin pulled back his arm to strike down his younger brother. In a flash of movement, Cithrel moved, dodging Elasuin even though he was temporarily blind and unable to hear or feel.

"I don't give warnings a second time," Cithrel said.

The force of Cithrel's strength came crashing down across Elasuin's back and the third prince slammed into the pristine floors. Stone cracked and shattered around Elasuin's body as it cratered into the floor. Elasuin didn't get up.

Another wave of gasps rocked through the crowd, louder this time. A few Fae even screamed in shock.

Eric tore his focus from Cithrel, whose chest was heaving and his gaze guarded. But Eric saw the wildness there, lurking just beneath the surface. He glanced at Nithroel and saw her resting her chin on her hand, a finger tapping her cheek. She looked thoughtful, as if she was thinking about her next meal. Not like she had just watched her sons attack each other.

Eric felt a sharp sting on his index finger then and he ripped his hand away on instinct. That was when he saw the ring on his finger. His heart stuttered and his pulse ran rapid in his throat. What the hell? Without thinking, he pulled at the ring but it stayed in place.

"Consider it a gift," Solonar said, finally pulling away from Eric. "Don't bother trying to remove it. I enchanted it so that I'm the only one who can take it off. Now you may think of me whenever you look at it."

Then the crown prince vanished into the crowd that was alight with chatter and increasing gossip. Eric looked



down at the ring, turning his hand over to get a better look at it. The band was a shining black metal with a bright red ruby. It warmed his hand and Eric could feel the strength of the magic this enchanted piece of jewelry held.

Eric swallowed. He didn't know why Solonar had given him a ring or what exactly it did, but it couldn't be good if it was from the crown prince. Not that Eric had time to dwell on it, because he was slowly being swarmed by Fae nobles.

They circled him, whispering, glaring at him as they passed by. It made Eric feel exposed and helpless—a wounded fish surrounded by sharks.

Eric wheeled around and began shoving his way through the crowd. No one stopped him, but he heard the whispers now.

*Whore.*

*Filth.*

*Slave.*

*Shameful.*

The insults didn't stop as Eric passed by, most directed at Eric but some about Cithrel. It was embarrassing that a high-born Fae would debase himself by sleeping with a lowly human. A former pleasure slave, at that. It didn't matter that he was blessed by the aether; Eric was still human.

Eric's lungs withered in his chest and his stomach was in knots as he kept pushing through the crowd to get out of the grand hall. It was getting too hard to breathe, like his body was shutting down all together. He needed to get out of there. It was stupid of him to think he could have anything with Cithrel that wouldn't be tainted by this place.

Just as Eric reached the tall arching double doors, he felt a trickle of ice prick at his back. On instinct, he turned.

Eric froze, his eyes glued to the baroness and Lord Aimar. Lady Vessa stood next to them, but her face was twisted with concern, like she was worried about something.

Her gaze darted from Eric to the rest of the crowd. She probably felt Eric's blurry thoughts, his fragmenting mind, but he couldn't focus on her. His attention was snared by the two Fae he hated most. Olaera and Aimar stood along the edge of the throng of nobles and aristocrats. The two Fae were leering at Eric, their smiles delighting in his shame.

They were too far away for Eric to hear their words, but he could tell from the curve of their lips as the spoke what they said.

*See you soon, pet.*

Eric turned and stormed out of the grand hall, his footfalls resounding through the darkened halls of the palace. The voices of the Fae faded the farther he walked, but their words infested his mind.

No matter what he did, there was no reprieve in Alonetha, no room for him to forget why he was back here. Thoughts of Cithrel, of Elasuin ambushing him, and of Solonar toying with him—it all fell away to the abandoned depths of his mind, replaced by the insatiable hunger for vengeance.

His hands balled into fists at his sides, and his expression darkened to storm clouds. They would regret those words to him.

*See you soon, pet.*

That was right. Eric was going to see them soon, and it would be the beginning of their end.

## Chapter Sixteen

Eric was a man possessed over the next several days. The image of Olaera and Aimar's lips moving replayed in his mind on an incessant loop. He couldn't forget them if he tried—he didn't want to, though. They fueled him and drove him to work harder. Eric had spent almost every day since the last party holed up in the library when he wasn't training or visiting the slave trade, scouring the place for any information that could help him against the growing threats against him.

Gnosus appeared occasionally, but he said little. Eric wondered if he knew what Eric was doing, what he was planning, and just didn't care enough to say anything, or if he hovered in the background in case Eric was attacked again. He suspected it was the latter, otherwise he doubted there was any way Cithrel would let him come here alone. Somehow, there hadn't been an attempt on his life since the last time assassins attacked him in the library, but the real danger was living within the capital city.

The crown prince was by far the biggest obstacle Eric faced. He was unpredictable and observant. Eric looked down at the lavish ring forced onto him by Solonar, still having no idea what it did. Cithrel took one look at the thing and shut down. He refused to acknowledge it on Eric's finger.

There was a twinge in Eric's chest. He'd barely seen Cithrel since the events of the banquet unfolded around them. He never reacted to the rumors and gossip that swirled around him, he just acted as if it wasn't happening and threw himself deeper into his soldiers and the Imperial Army.

It would have hurt Eric if he wasn't consumed with his own mission. The less Cithrel was around, the easier it was for Eric to do what he needed to. If Cithrel wasn't there, he didn't have to think about how much his actions were going to hurt the fourth prince. He didn't have to let in the guilt of destroying the city Cithrel worked so hard to protect.

Eric glanced around himself, paranoia getting the better of him despite there not being another soul around in the

library. When he was satisfied no one was nearby, he turned his attention back to the stack of books before him. With eyes fixed on the tattered and frayed cover on top, he ran his fingertips across it. Despite the book's haggard appearance, it thrummed under his touch as the old text attuned to the aether in Eric's blood.

"Tell me what you know," Eric murmured to the book.

He flipped open the pages and found the image of a glorious black doe emblazoned on the front page, staring up at him with an unblinking otherworldly gaze. The symbol of the empire and the Aloneth family. The beast was divine in this part of the Fae world, to the point where even so much as hunting deer was an express trip to rejoin the aether—or worse, rot away in the darkness of the Black Thorn, gripped by insanity and wishing for death.

There was no turning back now. Once Eric kept reading, he would be the one on his way to the wretched dungeon if he was caught reading this. The secrets of pure-blood Fae magic, most of which were privy only to the Imperial Family members. The consequences were irrelevant, though, because he had to know what Solonar was planning. He had to know how he could protect himself against the crown prince if everything went to absolute shit.

Eric turned the page and began reading.

The very first thing mentioned was the rarities within the Alonethan bloodline and the magnitude of how blessed by the aether the Aloneths were. Power was everything to the Fae. *Everything*. It was their religion, their hierarchy, their way of life. The pure gold-blooded Fae, the high-bloods, stood at the very top of that mountain.

Eric pursed his lips at the next line. *Of course*.

It seemed the empire considered it an exceptional gift whenever a child was blessed with an element by the aether. Of course, the arrogant heir to the throne strode around the palace and empire overflowing with power. It gave Eric all the more reason to protect himself against Solonar.

So Eric read.

And read.

He flipped through pages endlessly in the musty corner of the library, absorbing every word about the Imperial Family and their magic until his breath froze in his lungs. His fingers shook as they trailed across the page, like he needed to make sure the page and the scrawling on it were real and not a conjured hallucination. But it was real and staring back at him.

There it was \_the answer.

The art of imbuing oaths.

As soon as Eric saw the words inked on the page, he knew this was dangerous. It was also maybe his only means of protecting himself against Solonar. If he knew how Nithroel bound her first-born son with an oath to protect Eric, then he could know when Solonar tried to break it.

The first tricky part was the sheer number of requirements to perform the binding. First, there were several different plants that were used, some even Eric had trouble recognizing despite all he learned while living at the Adlar estate. Next, specific aether-imbued gems had to be adorned to some degree for the oath to be binding. Most important of all, though, to burn one's aether into another being's flesh and bone, force your power into another and claim dominance, you had to be the strongest.

Eric fell back in his chair and looked up to the ceiling with a fresh coat of defeat falling onto his shoulders. It was a bittersweet discovery. The only way for Solonar to break his oath was to be stronger than his mother. If by some unholy chance he was able to break it, then Eric doubted there was anything he could do against Solonar. He didn't think he was stronger than Solonar by any means, let alone the empress. What was he supposed to do now?

"Shit," he breathed.

"Mind your tongue, creature," Gnosus snapped, materializing from the dusty shadows.

Eric jumped in his chair. "Shit!"

Gnosus clicked his tongue, eyes like static thinned. “What did I just say, creature?”

“You scared me. Why do you have to move so quietly?”

The ancient Fae eyed the book clutched in Eric’s scarred hands. He arched a wrinkled brow. “Is your heart racing because you feared getting caught reading something like that, creature?”

Gnosus jabbed a finger at the book and Eric paled. “I, uh...” Eric sighed. “I needed answers. Your kind and their secrets don’t leave much room for me to feel like I’m not constantly at Death’s door.”

The librarian flicked a single finger and several papers manifested from thin air. They floated over to Eric and then, as if possessed, they snatched the book from his clutches and vanished, taking the book along with it.

“Secrets may be the only thing keeping you alive these days, creature.” His gaze trailed down the rest of the books piled in front of him, then fixed back on Eric. “I think you’ve seen more than enough of bloodlines for today, creature.”

“I’ll be back, then.”

Eric lifted his chin as the librarian narrowed his unfocused eyes. There was a beat of tense silence as he scrutinized him, testing his will, but Eric didn’t flinch.

“I warned you once, creature.” Gnosus leered. “The books will call to you, so mind the ones you answer. I will not warn you again.”

Then, as eerily as the ancient librarian came, he was gone. An involuntary chill slunk its way down Eric’s neck all the way to the base of his spine. Unease began to seep under his skin and into his blood, chilling him. The Imperial Library no longer felt like so much of a haven.

Still, he couldn’t leave. There was one last thing he needed to investigate. Balling his hands into fists, Eric turned and followed the pull of the book he sought. His stomach was in knots, roiling furiously, but Eric ignored it as he meandered

through the shelves. Fear was a luxury he couldn't afford in the palace.

His steps quickened as the pull grew stronger, as if the cord for what he sought had been pulled taut. Eric's heart thumped in time with his steps, rapid and frantic.

Finally, he stopped.

The book of the Impure stared back at him. Eric still didn't know why he needed to know about the Impure, but he wasn't about to ignore the information if his aether was drawn to it. If there was something in there that could help him, maybe find a way to get Lady Vessa to help his cause, then he was going to find it.

Eric snatched the book from its haphazard-looking shelf, fanning the dust away from himself. He didn't bother finding an alcove to sit and read the book; he had a feeling Gnosus was lurking somewhere nearby.

Standing in the middle of the aisle, Eric flipped open the thick and disheveled text. The pages were dark and weathered, torn in some places. It was old and decrepit even by Fae standards. This was a book that wasn't easily found. He could feel it as he turned the first page.

As Eric read, there was something he couldn't understand. If the Fae world revolved around power, then why would they be so against the Impure? From what he gathered, beings like Vessa were incredibly gifted, so powerful it was a challenge to control the abundant influx of aether in their blood. Despite that overflow of power, it seemed like the Impure were never allowed to live long. They were hunted, culled before most could reach adulthood.

Eric grimaced, a lump forming in his throat. Unbidden images formed in his mind's eye of just how cruel and heartless the Fae were. What he was reading was awful. For whatever reason, the Fae hated the idea of the Impure. Eric wondered if the reason for their bottomless heinous acts was simply because there were beings that were part nymph and not wholly Fae.

Shaking his head, Eric kept thumbing through the weathered and old text. It was rare, then, to have Vessa not only live to adulthood, but to hold a position of power, to be a noble.

A thought occurred to him then, and he began flipping through the pages faster, eyes skimming for something. He hoped he was wrong.

His fingers stopped suddenly, and his stomach dropped.

*No.*

Lord Aimar coveted anything that was rare and exceptional, especially anything that could give him more power. Eric realized it, then; all the times he saw Lady Vessa and how the lord and baroness were always nearby. They were using her because she was the extraordinary loophole they needed.

The body of text stared up at Eric, each word a stab and twist of the knife.

*As the Impure are not one being, they are not bound to the laws of nature that the Fae or nymphs are. The Impure are not compelled to tell the truth. They are an incredible danger.*

That was what a Fae would need if they were traitors to the empire—a liar.

Eric swore under his breath. His thoughts raced as his pulse thundered in his ears, drowning out other thoughts. He needed other proof, now. He was out of time.

Glancing down at his hand where the black and red ring nestled on his finger, Eric swallowed hard. He'd been unable to find anything from the records the baroness had given him but he knew she hadn't given Eric all of her records. The crown prince had the rest of them, Aimar said so himself—he worked closely with Olaera. There was something hiding in those documents that would prove they were traitors; Eric was sure of it.

Except, that meant he needed to see Solonar.



A sharp icy chill ran down Eric's spine, pulling him from his manic thoughts. Something was telling Eric to leave and do it now. The last time he felt this, an assassin tried to kill him.

Eric snapped the book closed in his hands and strode the aisles and towering shelves of the library, trying to rid himself of the cold trickle down his back. The library wasn't safe anymore. Even with Gnosus wandering it.

Eric thought the librarian meant the Unseen section when he had cautioned him before, but now he understood the depths of the ancient Fae's words. Every single book he touched in this annex was dangerous, simply because he was the one who touched it.

Eric was being watched. He swore the towering shelves began to close in on him and he couldn't get out of there fast enough.

He didn't feel at ease until he was through the grand wooden doors and halfway down the main halls of the palace, the sun beaming through the arched windows. After that, the lingering sensation of eyes on his back plagued him and worsened each time he passed another noble or servant in the palace halls. His feet couldn't carry him fast enough and before long, Eric was running.

He was struck by the likely notion that Nithroel was having him watched by every breathing soul within the palace walls and beyond.

Skidding to a halt, he fell back against a smooth stone wall in the stairwell that led to Cithrel's living quarters. Eric bit at one of his nails, paranoia seeping into him once again.

He was in over his head. The game he played was a treacherous one and he was playing against supernatural beings born to the game. Doubt overwhelmed him and sent his heart thrumming too fast.

*Cithrel.*

The intrusive thought of the prince broke through Eric's fraying emotions. He wanted to go to him, needed to be

by him. The fourth prince had become his shelter, his refuge from the wretchedness of this world. He didn't know when it happened, or he did and just chose to ignore it, but his steps quickened and then he was almost running down the halls, taking the steps two at a time to get to him. To his protector.

He burst through the doors to Cithrel's private quarters and the front room opened before him. A long sigh fell from his lips at the sight of it. Finally, the phantom splinters digging into his back vanished.

"Eric?"

Hinni stepped through a doorway, fingers steeped at her waist.

Eric swallowed, sucking in a breath. "Where's Cithrel? I need to talk to him."

Hinni paused, her face pinched together. She was worried about something. "He's in the sitting room." She finally gestured for Eric to go forward.

He was in the room in a flurry but stopped dead when he saw Cithrel wasn't alone. The temperature in the room could have frozen over Hell. Cithrel glared at Solonar, who held a goblet of wine in his fingers, the two of them in a staring contest. What were they at odds over now?

In a move that was wholly like Luthais, though, Solonar lurched to his feet and tipped the entire goblet back. A single stream of mauve ran down the corner of his mouth and he met Eric's eyes as his tongue licked it up.

Eric swallowed. The blood in his body stirred, and not out of fear. He hated the Fae, feared Solonar, but against his rational thought his hazel eyes couldn't look away from that tongue. It wasn't Solonar's tongue he imagined licking him, though. His eyes slid over to the other brother, and his mind supplied several scenarios where he hoped Cithrel would be the one tasting him.

Mesmerized, his attention drifted down the lean lines of Cithrel's body, snagging on his hands. Eric's lips parted, lost in the gutters of his thoughts, of how good it would feel to

have his hands wrapped around him. He remembered exactly how they felt, the rough palms that wrapped around his throat, brushed his cheek.

Eric felt part of himself clench at the growing and terrible fantasies.

“Say what you need to and get out,” Cithrel ordered through gritted teeth. “He’s here now.”

The crown prince turned his feline gaze on Eric with a lopsided grin. “Welcome back, Eric. Did you have fun in the library?”

Eric stiffened. How did Solonar know he was in the library? Was he the one watching him? If that was true, though, who was watching him up until he returned?

“You don’t need to know,” Cithrel said, burning holes into Solonar across the room. “Tell him and leave.”

Solonar bared his canines at the fourth prince, his amber eyes thinning to slits. “No one asked you,” he hissed. “If I wanted to talk to a dog, I’d take a walk in the woods.”

“Are you even allowed to go in the Wilder Woods after what you did?”

The crown prince scoffed. “I go wherever our dear Eric goes.”

Eric didn’t know what it was about that, but it made Cithrel’s apathy take a vicious turn into rage. He was out of his seat and at Eric’s side in a flash of movement. His hand came down on Eric’s shoulder, hard. His calloused grip tightened on Eric’s bones and he fought back a wince at the fourth prince’s strength.

“Clearly not everywhere,” was all Cithrel said, despite him obviously fuming.

By some grace, Hinni chose then to appear with a tray of food and two massive pitchers of water and wine. Eric exchanged a grateful look with her before he shirked out of Cithrel’s tight grip on him. The princes could square off

against one another and tear each other's heads off for all he cared. Eric was starved.

Eric ate his plate of honeyed bread and sweet meat wrapped in dark leafy greens as the two brothers began to hurl insults at each other. Instead of paying attention to them, he chatted with Hinni about his day and the little amount of progress he'd made in training. More than a few times he thought he felt Solonar or Cithrel staring holes into his back, but he didn't turn around to find out.

"As much as I'd prefer to argue with you, brother," Solonar said and cut-off Cithrel abruptly. He uncrossed his arms to let one hand began to tap his fingers in a rhythmic pattern. "I was given a missive for you, Eric."

Eric went still, his mouth paused mid-chew. Receiving any kind of summons or request from Nithroel, Eric learned, was never good for him. He swallowed his mouthful, the sweet taste gone bland on his tongue.

"Is it about the slave trade?"

Solonar sneered. His eyes flashed some cryptic emotion, but then it was gone again. "I'm sure you wish it was. No, your presence is necessary to discuss the Belfir kingdom. Tonight."

The little levity at the evening table ground into dust at the mention of the Belfir kingdom. Next to his nightmares of Lord Aimar, Eric dreamed of Krysos the most. Of his time trapped in the lightless dungeons, broken and half-dead.

Hinni stiffened ever so slightly at his side. Eric shoved away the last of his meal, his appetite washed away and replaced with a tension in his muscles. On top of that, Eric would have to face the empress again. The Fae female's presence alone overwhelmed him, her otherworldly gaze a crushing weight on his shoulders. She knew he was up to something, but hopefully wouldn't know what until it was too late.

"So soon," Eric mumbled to himself.

Except Solonar heard what Eric said, because his reply knotted in Eric's chest. "My mother isn't as patient as she looks."

Eric glared at the Marking branded into his forearm. It had to be good for something other than as a tool for death. He would make sure of it.

"We should go," Cithrel said, jarring Eric from his thoughts.

Eric jerked his attention to Cithrel and saw the angel-faced prince studying him. Eric had to turn away and hide the rising heat in his face. Though that meant Solonar saw the scarlet tinge of his cheeks, for whatever reason he said nothing.

Eric opened his mouth to speak when Solonar got to his feet. "We'll meet you there, brother. I need to have a word with Eric. *In private.*"

Cithrel's hands clenched at his sides. "No."

Eric felt the unspoken words, then. The claim in the fourth prince's arctic stare.

*He's mine.*

That wasn't true, though, was it? Whatever they were, Eric didn't belong to anyone anymore. He was going to make sure of it, even if it killed him.

They looked ready to come to blows again. Cithrel glowered at his brother for a moment longer in the crushing silence before he cast his gaze back on Eric at the same time Solonar did. He should have said something to make things clear, but he didn't.

Eric found a spot on the ground to stare at instead. That seemed to be message enough for Cithrel because a moment later, Eric heard his footsteps and the door slamming shut. The stone walls shuddered under the impact.

Solonar sucked his teeth before whirling to turn his ire on Eric. "I know what you're doing."

*Shit. Shit shit shit.* Eric's heart lurched in his chest. He had no idea what the crown prince meant by that. Did that mean he knew about his plans to dismantle the slave trade and the Fae who ran it? Or about what he was doing in the library these past few days?

He felt a trickle of sweat form at the back of his neck as he stood frozen. How did Solonar figure it out so quickly? He'd barely even made any moves other than training at this point. It was a risk to ask for the slave trade, he knew that, but still, to figure it out this fast didn't make sense. Eric needed to play dumb.

"What do you mean?"

In a flash of movement, Solonar was inches from Eric, staring down at him with the full aura of a predator. Raven strands of hair fell around them, shielding the rest of the world. The twinkle of mischief was gone from his amber eyes and instead a hardness lingered. A vicious intent stared back at Eric, the feline slits focused on him.

"I warned you about lying, Eric," Solonar said. His voice was as soft as velvet but it hid foreboding. "If you're going to lie, you need to be better at it."

The crown prince's smile wasn't arrogant now. It was full of malice. Eric swallowed back the growing fear as Solonar looked down on him, towering over him like a cage. Eric fought his instincts to bolt, knowing that would just incriminate him further.

"I don't know what you mean," Eric repeated, and that was technically true since he wasn't sure which lie he'd been caught in. "And I'm getting sick of being called a liar."

"Then stop lying," Solonar flung back.

Eric shoved the crown prince away, but Solonar lingered, not letting Eric get past him. Eric's heart felt ready to burst but he kept his breathing even. If the crown prince knew he planned to destroy a main source of income for the empire, Eric doubted he'd let it slide. But what the hell could he say to get out of this?

*Shit.*

“What exactly do you think I’m lying about then?”

Solonar’s amber eyes flashed. “Now you’re talking like a Fae.”

Eric didn’t know if that was meant as a compliment or not, but to him it might as well have been a backhand across his face. He recoiled from the raven-haired prince’s words.

“I’m not.”

“You’re working awfully hard to hide the truth.” Solonar took a step closer, eating up the little space Eric put between them.

Eric had to give him something. But was it worth the risk? His nostrils flared, knowing he didn’t have a choice now. “Fine. I’ll stop lying.”

“Oh?” Solonar arched a brow. “Are you going to surprise me, Eric?”

“I need to get stronger,” Eric began, his gaze focused on Solonar’s reaction. “But not for the empire. For myself. I refuse to be a prisoner ever again.”

“Ah, there is that human greed I missed so much.” The crown prince’s eyes shone bright, feverish almost, at Eric’s words. His shoulders rolled but he didn’t move from Eric’s path. Instead, he leaned in so they were now eye level and Eric could feel the warmth of Solonar’s breath. The scent of a campfire drifted around him, and he fought with every inch of his muscles not to react to the aether. “But you can relax, Eric. I’m your ally.”

Eric didn’t let out his breath, while every muscle tensed. “I doubt that.”

“You can thank this damned oath branded in my skin.” Solonar pulled down the collar of his coat to reveal the black tattoo with revulsion, as if the sight of it was proof enough no matter how much it disgusted the crown prince. “Rest assured, whether I want to be or not, I’m not your enemy.”

Eric eyed him; his hazel eyes scanned the amber ones that stared right back. Solonar was so obsessed with the oath burned into his skin. Time for Eric to push it, ever so slightly. “So, what are you going to do now?”

Solonar cocked his head to the side. The scent of burning kindling got stronger, assaulting Eric’s senses this close. “I’m going to keep what I saw tonight to myself. It’ll only make things difficult for me if you get caught practicing enchantments.”

Eric’s breath hitched in his throat. Was he really going to get away with it? More than that, could he really trust the crown prince to help him when he was actively working against the empire? Solonar’s future empire?

He turned back to face him. “Why would you help me? Don’t you need the Marked One for your war?”

Solonar’s expression fell. He looked full of anger, or maybe resentment, but somehow Eric knew it wasn’t directed at him, but something else entirely. “I don’t need the Marked One, or anyone for that matter. But I do need Eric Becker to be safe. Why else would I put that ring on you?”

Eric’s lips parted and his eyes widened. His mind had gone completely blank, all words vanished. The way Solonar said those words cut through all the lies and left him exposed.

Then Solonar lifted his chin and his air of haughty arrogance ate up any other emotion. “I didn’t spend my entire life striving to be the strongest Fae alive just to be felled because I’m oath-bound to a human. The further you are from me and my empire, the better off both of us will be.”

Whatever feeling lingered in Eric guttered and died at what Solonar just told him. Eric clenched and unclenched his hands before closing his eyes. He hated to admit it, but what Solonar said seemed right. His mind went over the crown prince’s words, picking through every word choice for a loophole, but he came up with nothing. The idea sounded insane in his mind, but it made the most sense—the crown prince was going to help him.



“Alright.” Eric met those simmering amber eyes. “I’ll trust you.”

“Wonderful,” Solonar said, sounding less than thrilled, and spun on his heel to leave. “Ensure you don’t get caught again.”

He paused at the table and pressed the tips of his fingers to a smoking pile of papers that had suddenly appeared. Then, the door sealed itself shut a breath after, leaving Eric alone again.

He didn’t dare let his shoulders sag with relief yet. The crown prince’s warning echoed in his head. He’d been careless before and was lucky Solonar was going to keep his secret.

It wasn’t until minutes passed in silence that Eric moved towards the table and picked up the pile of papers that Solonar left behind. Every thought, insecurity, and fear drifted away from Eric’s mind one by one. This was exactly what Eric needed. Olaera’s documents.

The smile on Eric’s face was bittersweet. Solonar was having him watched. Otherwise, how could he have known Eric would need this? Eric looked at the paperwork and then back to his finger with Solonar’s ring. He wondered if all of this was Solonar’s way of keeping Eric safe, at least for now. Eric knew better, though. He knew there had to be a catch, an ulterior motive the crown prince had.

He scooped the papers up into his arms and, making sure Hinni wasn’t around, he went to his room and found a place to hide them. After his meeting with the empress, Eric was going to memorize this paperwork and find the evidence he needed.

Eric made his way to the meeting, but his mind was elsewhere. A malicious grin formed then in the quiet of the halls as he walked alone. He would be one step closer to destroying the baroness. He couldn’t wait to see her ruin.

## Chapter Seventeen

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Eric was on edge, and he hadn't slept a wink last night. His meeting with the empress had been mostly about the attempted attacks on the empire's borders. It seemed Belfir was testing the defenses of the empire and Eric sat there quietly as Cithrel and Elasuin planned how to bolster their defenses. What was unsettling about the meeting wasn't the talk of the coming war that Eric would be a part of it was that Nithroel hadn't taken her eyes off him the entire meeting. They never strayed from his face, like she was studying every facet, every reaction he made.

When the meeting was done, he couldn't get back to his room fast enough. Cithrel had stayed behind to solidify strategies, so Eric was alone. The paperwork that Solonar had given him was full of inconsistencies upon closer inspection. The baroness and Lord Aimar were skewing their numbers for some purpose. Eric didn't know what, but it didn't really matter. All he needed was a hint of evidence that he could use against Olaera and it would be more than enough.

The biggest problem was still the crown prince. If Eric saw the issues with Olaera's records, then Solonar definitely did, too, yet he hadn't made a move against her. Eric's mind was a mess of paranoia and adrenaline for this morning, for what he was about to do.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

It was probably for the best anyway that he stayed up reading and scheming, since all he seemed to do was collapse into bed from exhaustion or toss and turn as his nightmares devoured his mind. He was wired and alert now, waiting for it to be time. He was even up before Cithrel, which was rare if they didn't spend the night together.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Today was the day. After weeks of training and pushing himself past his limits, Eric needed to test his

carefully laid out plan. All the late nights he spent working on his plan and grueling days training with Cithrel would be worth it. He'd gladly accept the deep purple bags under his eyes and the countless aches and pains plaguing his muscles if it meant he could pull this off.

*Tap. Tap. Ta-*

"Are you nervous?"

Eric leapt from his seat, eyes wide as he whirled to see Sir Saelihn standing in the doorway like a stone statue. He was there to accompany Eric to the baroness's estate for more meetings on the state of the slave trade. But Eric hadn't even sensed the Fae's magic, let alone heard him.

Eric's heart hammered in his chest, thrown off. "Where did you come from?" Saelihn just crooked his head, still shadowed by his drawn hood, so Eric cleared his throat. "I'm just tired. It's hard to come by sleep here."

Saelihn remained quiet and Eric crushed down the urge to fidget as his pulse thrummed at his neck. He didn't get this far since his return to Alonetha to ruin everything by being too jumpy around the empress's spy. Eric stood there and forced a yawn, really selling his exhaustion that was already there, and waited.

Finally, the Fae elite soldier pivoted in the doorway. "Come."

As they made their way from the palace and up the path of the baroness's estate, Saelihn at his back like his second shadow, he made a mental checklist of how everything would go. He just needed to find a couple people who were desperate enough to try. He'd spotted the perfect bait during one of his earlier visits. Disgust roiled in his stomach at the thought of the broken girl he was going to give a gift to today.

If the Fae were going to treat people like tools and toys, acting like animals, then Eric was going to treat them like animals from now on.

They were the animals and he was the hunter.

Eric curled his hands into fists before stretching them out again. His bones ached and his nerves set every muscle on edge. He felt the edges of who he was, of his past, crumbling away permanently as he neared the slave trade grounds. It was a decision he didn't need to think twice about.

They came up to the grounds where the labor slaves were and Eric met the hollow gaze of a lumbering man. A subtle understanding hung between them. As quickly as their eyes met, they looked away, and Eric's steps never faltered as he made his way towards the pleasure den.

"Marked One," the guard outside the den greeted.

The Fae guard's face had a sheen to it and looked sluggish, by Fae standards, and a pungent murky slime oozed in between the plates of his armor. Eric wondered if he was made of the strange viscous liquid; that could complicate things.

Eric dipped his head by way of greeting and waited for the doors to open before he strode through.

The smell of sex and overpowering floral fragrance assaulted his senses as he stepped through into the dimly lit room. Curtains as crimson as fresh human blood were drawn, creating an atmosphere closer to slaughter than pleasure throughout the room. It would have been nauseating if it wasn't designed to be intoxicating, entrancing any Fae who entered.

Good thing Eric wasn't Fae.

The room was alive with moving limbs and moans, beckoning participants to gorge on lust, but the watching eyes of Fae guards never wavered and were hungry for violence. That was what elicited their true pleasure.

Eric made a show of making his rounds throughout the room, knowing exactly where his bait was. She sat in the corner, curling in tight on herself as if the smaller she was the more likely she was to be invisible. The girl was barely a teenager.

Eric followed the girl's line of sight to another woman whose body undulated in a sinuous rhythm over the man she straddled. The woman's lips parted with a moan that Eric knew was hollow. Eric looked back to the girl and saw her wide brown eyes had gone out of focus, no doubt retreating within her own thoughts to try and find her happy place.

The slimy Fae guard leered from the corner, his malicious gaze never wavering from the woman fucking another man. The hunger behind those inhuman eyes sent a tremor of unease and fury through Eric. The bastard got off on watching these trapped and tortured people being forced into sex, before he found a shitty excuse to punish ones like this girl for breaking the baroness's rules.

After what felt like a small eternity of pretending to study the other slaves, he ventured over to the girl and suppressed a pleased grin when he saw the woman heading towards the young girl as well. She thanked her partner as she reached for a threadbare sheet to wrap around herself, with what little coverage the scanty fabric offered, before she met the girl.

Eric caught the Fae guard adjusting himself, diverting his attention elsewhere when Eric approached.

*Bastard. Just you wait.*

The woman's dark eyes met Eric's and her strained expression lifted ever so slightly when she noticed he was human. She was even paler than the last time he'd seen her. Painted cheekbones protruded too much, and her eyes were more sunken in. The woman was getting sicker by the day or she was being starved\_or both. She didn't say anything, not while Sir Saelihn was in earshot. Still, Eric had made mental notes during his previous visits of the people he thought still had a spark of life in them, still had a will to fight. He needed that spark to burn the baroness to ashes.

When it was clear they wouldn't say anything with Saelihn around, Eric took a chance.

"You're scaring them, Sir Saelihn," Eric said, his tone gentle as he turned to the Fae. "Could you give me a moment

to speak with them? I suspect the baroness isn't feeding her livestock properly, and I'm more knowledgeable with my own kind."

Saelihn said nothing but his form simply dematerialized and reappeared across the room—away from them, and away from the oozing Fae guard.

*Perfect.*

Turning back, Eric bent down to be closer to the two of them. The woman now sat beside the girl. He huddled in and kept his voice low.

"What are your names?"

"Sen Matsuda," the woman replied, her voice faint but firm and with a slight accent.

Even quieter, the girl answered, "E-Edie Miller."

Eric reached out a hand, waiting for Edie to step forward and take it. It still gutted him to see just how small her hand was in his.

"Good morning, Edie." Eric smiled, his voice soft. "It's nice to meet you. My name is Eric Becker. Did you sleep alright?"

Edie slunk closer to Eric as he bent to be eye level with her. Sen shifted so that her body shielded Edie from the Fae guard's view.

"No." Her little voice was tremulous, on the verge of tears. "I want to go home. I miss my mom."

Eric forced a gentle smile. "I can send you home, Edie."

Sen and Edie's eyes both flashed, clear desperation and a glimmer of hope igniting in their gazes. They inched closer to Eric like they were drowning and he was a life raft.

"But I need both of you to help me first."

Sen was already nodding along in agreement. Edie chewed on her quivering lip before she gave a meek nod.

“I need both of you not to react,” Eric said. His attention never left Edie. “Act like I’m asking if the baroness has been treating you two well. I know she hasn’t. Where do you live, Edie?”

Her voice had a little more strength to it. “Seattle.”

“That’s perfect. I know the Space Needle.” Eric reached out and pressed his fingertips to the ground at Edie’s feet. “Here’s the hard part. Sen, I need you to stay behind and help me a little longer—a few days, maybe weeks. If you can do that, I can send Edie home and then, maybe, send everyone home. Can you do that?”

There was a growing unspoken electricity in the air, spreading like a storm throughout the entire room, as if everyone felt Eric’s words. Sen kept still but her eyes blazed. She was a fighter. “I can do it. What do you need?”

Eric was a little surprised with how trusting they were of him, given the fact that he was living with the upper echelon of the Fae. He wondered if that meant they knew about Eric’s past, what he survived in this place, or if the baroness spoke about him when he wasn’t around. Either way, he was glad of it now because it made things easy.

“I’ll take care of my own guard, so don’t worry about him. See the guard to your left, though, the one oozing from his livery?” Eric spoke to Sen, though he kept his attention on Edie. “Make sure he doesn’t look this way.”

“He won’t,” Sen promised.

Eric looked through his periphery as Sen slunk towards the guard, the thin sheet falling from her shoulders. She approached a nearby man, whispering something into his ear before he welcomed her with open arms. The Fae’s gaze locked onto Sen like she was a meal, and he hadn’t eaten all week. Eric wished he had been as fearless as Sen six years ago when he was first stolen away. Then again, there was no one to save him, no one like him until now.

He shot a quick sidelong glance at Saelihn and saw the empress’s shadow was obscured by others starting what

looked like an orgy. He hoped it would be enough to get away with it.

Eric quirked his lips at Edie. “It was nice to meet you, Edie. Say hi to your mom for me.”

Then, Eric let his aether flow, the scent of rot masked by the smell of flowers and sweat, and blackened thorns burst through the ground. They wrapped themselves around Edie and pulled her under before she could scream, straight through the Fae Path Eric had just made.

Last night, when he thought Solonar had caught on to what he was doing, spooked Eric. He thought he was so close to the crown prince finding out he was practicing, honing his magic so that he could make his own Fae Paths. Luckily, he drew his own conclusions and assumed it was just enchantments Eric was practicing in secret.

There were dark purple bags under his eyes, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a good sleep, but after watching Edie wide-eyed and vanishing through his Fae Path, Eric didn’t feel tired at all.

He waited a beat, then another, and then Eric’s nostrils flared and he jumped to his feet and wheeled around. He looked around, confusedly at first and then frantically. He made a show of searching through the crowd of people grinding and sucking, his face contorted with wrath.

“My lady!” Eric shouted at the top of his lungs. The entire pleasure den fell silent, all eyes turned on him. The oozing Fae guard, unsure what was happening, grabbed Sen off the man in front of him as if she had been trying to escape. “Baroness Olaera!”

Eric knew with her bat ears she could hear him. He just had to put on a show and wait. It would make her eyes twitch to listen to his commanding shouts, but the longer it took her to appear, the worse she would look when she stepped into his trap.

His shoulders relaxed a fraction when he saw the Fae guard release Sen from his hold and shoved her forward, back



into the throng of other slaves. She caught herself before she had the chance to fall on her face and another slave pulled her close. Their eyes met and Eric didn't react, but there was an unspoken understanding between them.

*She's free. She's home.*

Sir Saelihn reappeared at Eric's side without a sound. The only indication he was there was a shift in the air. The hooded Fae blocked Eric's path and was about to speak when they heard the baroness approach.

Olaera strode through the crowd. People parted around her, giving her a direct path to Eric. "May I ask why you're shouting and interrupting valuable training, Marked One? How dare you mewl at me on a whim."

Eric's heart thumped in his chest, adrenaline spiking through him. This was it. He whirled to face the baroness, stepping in close so he was up in her face. "Is this how you always conduct your business, my lady?"

"Usually there isn't someone causing turmoil during training sessions." Olaera crossed her arms, lifting her chin so she looked down her nose at Eric. She seethed. "Now tell me what the purpose of this scene is, because if you don't, I'll see to it that you never step foot on my property again, Marked One or not. I don't care if the entire Imperial Family is lusting after you, I won't have you infringe on my business."

Eric straightened, matching the venomous look in the baroness's hawk-like gaze. "Some of your livestock is missing."

Olaera's arms fell at her side, her gaze sharpening to a blade's point. "What?" She flicked her fingers at a guard. "You. Do a head count, now."

Eric didn't chance glancing at Saelihn. He didn't want to know what he'd see or give the Fae a chance to see through his lies. He needed to steel himself.

The nearest guard darted around, taking a tally of everyone in the room. Eric waited, knowing the results before he finished. He flared his nostrils, feigning frustration and did

his best to mask how anxious he felt. When the other guard returned and confirmed what Eric said, the baroness scowled. Her long neck swivelled to meet Eric's glower; her eyes thinned to slits. Her feathered cowl ruffled as suspicion roiled off her.

"Search the estate immediately. The Wilder Woods, too, if it's not found. It has to be somewhere." Olaera looked pointedly at Eric. "Dispose of the livestock when you locate it. We can't sell something that's disobedient."

"The Wilder Woods?" Eric snorted. "They'd have to be suicidal to go there. I would know, my lady. Your stock shouldn't have gone missing in the first place."

"How exactly did you notice one was missing so quickly, Marked One? I'm of course grateful, but I wonder how something like this could have happened, and only after you started overseeing my business? Perhaps you're feeling some camaraderie for your kind."

Eric's eyes flashed, a gleam of victory in them. She thought she was backing him into a corner, but this was the exact opportunity he needed.

Time to bury her.

"I was making my rounds of examining the slaves, ensuring they were being properly cared for." Eric looked down on her, his words turning to ice. "Perhaps it's not so obvious to the Fae, but to a human such as myself, it's clear to see these people are underfed and overexerted. I had just finished attending to two females and then went to attend to others. When I turned back around, one of them was gone. I also wonder how someone who boasts about her quality products can allow something like this to happen in her presence, if at all." He paused, pointedly. "Oh, that's right, you don't actually oversee your livestock. Otherwise, where were you a minute ago?"

The baroness cocked her head to the side, engulfing Eric with her unblinking gaze. The room fell into a weighted quiet. No one dared to move, or breathe for that matter. She looked on the verge of exploding, and the pressure of aether in

the air was stifling. It had to drive her crazy to be spoken to this way. Her precious reputation was being ripped apart piece by piece.

Eric met her psychotic gaze. “If you don’t believe me, then ask your guard who was right by me. He was watching me while I worked, since Sir Saelihn scared the people I was seeing to.”

He swore the guard’s oozing skin dried up at that. His body went rigid as Olaera turned her ire on him.

“Well, what happened?” she snapped.

“The Marked One was tending to the two females,” the guard blurted. He looked straight ahead, avoiding looking anywhere near Sen.

“And then what?” The baroness made her way over to the guard and pinned him in place with her enraged stare. “I’m aware that he saw the females. What else happened? Where is the second female?”

Eric watched the guard as extra droplets of slime began to form on his brow while he struggled to find the words.

“He walked away to see another slave.” The Fae paused, unsure of how he could twist his own words. “I didn’t see the girl again.”

“Why not?” the baroness screeched.

“I was watching the other slaves, my lady.” A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

“I think it was one slave in particular you watched,” Eric cut in. “The other female I saw to. He seemed to want to watch her *very* closely.”

The guard’s eyes widened at the same time Olaera’s twitched. He was dead and everyone in the room knew it.

*Bye.*

“Tell me,” the baroness said, her voice falling into a blood-curdling calm. “How is it you didn’t see the first female again when you were watching the other one? I pay you to

ensure events such as this don't occur. If you're not going to do your job, then why are you here?"

"Apologies, my lady, I didn't—" the guard stammered, clearly afraid for his life now..

Olaera took another step towards her guard, and the black feathers rustled behind her. "When you work for me, there's one rule. Follow my orders. If you didn't break that rule, then say something right now."

The guard's lip quivered, desperate to speak, but the truth bound him to silence. His brows pinched together as he struggled, but the baroness had her answer.

"I see."

The guard held up his hands to plead, but before he could utter a word Olaera's talons snapped out and she slashed the Fae's neck. The guard's head thudded to the ground. Black blood spilled and churned with the gelatin his body was comprised of.

The baroness flicked off the black and gooey liquid coating her talons as if it offended her. She snapped her fingers and turned her back on the body. "Clean this up."

Another guard was already there, hauling off the dead Fae, and Eric didn't feel a shred of pity for him. He didn't know if that made him a monster or not, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Eric felt Saelihn's eyes on him but he pretended he didn't notice, his attention on the baroness.

Eric stepped forward, forcing himself to really sell his lies. "I'm sure the empress will find it curious that a human girl was able to escape your facility so easily, my lady. If something like this occurred so easily, it begs the question: How many other times has something like this happened before and been covered up? Wouldn't you agree?"

Olaera bristled. "I would never allow such a thing."

"Then you won't mind if I have you and your business thoroughly investigated, my lady." Eric stifled a grin. It was perfect. "No need to pass along the rest of your ledgers and paperwork. I noticed there were quite a few documents that

you forgot to include when you gave them to me. I'll see to it I collect them directly from the crown prince."

The baroness bared her teeth at Eric, her hatred for him on full display. Eric returned her venom with a disarming smile. There was nothing she could do, now that he'd publicly exposed her attempt to give him false reports. She just didn't know he'd already gone through the *real* paperwork. He waited for her to fight him on his request but she bit her tongue.

"Of course not, Marked One. Anything for the empire."

"Your loyalty is admirable, Baroness Olaera." Eric gave her his biggest shit-eating grin. "Let's hope there's nothing you're keeping from the empire for yourself. Sir Saelihn and I will take our leave and make the arrangements for your investigation. See to it you keep a closer eye on who you employ in the future, my lady. We wouldn't want any more situations like this in the future."

The veins in Olaera's neck bulged so much they threatened to explode but she managed to keep quiet, simply nodding back at Eric.

"Excellent." Eric waved over his shoulder, "Have a good day, my lady."

He kept the easy smile on his lips as they made their way off the estate and back towards the palace. His pulse thrummed in his veins, adrenaline and euphoria dancing in his blood. He didn't want to show too much glee in front of Saelihn, though. The Fae was still a spy for the empress.

Despite that, Eric had managed to do it. Edie got away and no one caught him. It was a miracle and yet he couldn't wait to do it again. The look on the baroness's face was more refreshing than a full night's rest. The heavy weight in his chest eased a little, relief flooding through him. It wasn't for the good deed; his motive was selfish. Edie was a convenient piece of bait, and the other humans would serve the same purpose. He would use them as the ammunition he needed to

watch Olaera's pride and greed eat her alive as he ripped everything she held dear away—and then let her rot.

Brushing his curls from his face, Eric breathed in the fresh air of the capital city. When Nithroel summoned him last night, he knew why, or at least partially why. She wanted to see progress from Eric. He lobbied for the slave trade and made promises of finding the spies in Alonetha. Now, he was going to bring her that progress. Better yet, now he had proof. He wondered why Solonar had remained silent, letting Eric present the information instead. Just what was the crown prince planning by helping him?

He'd deal with that problem later. Eric had to deal with the other reason Nithroel summoned him. It didn't bode well that amidst a war with Belfir and the growing unrest, the Marked One was scarce during Alonetha's social season.

A small frown tugged at the corner of his lips. Drawing the ire of the baroness had painted a massive target on his back. Whether or not Olaera and Aimar were the traitors, someone was spying on him and helping the Fae king. Having another powerful Fae who wanted Eric dead was dangerous. He didn't like knowing that despite what he was doing he had to rely on Cithrel and Solonar to protect him.

So, in a few days, Eric was going to put himself on full display, the shining piece of propaganda for the empire. He just had to hope it wouldn't get him killed.

## Chapter Eighteen

Eric's face hurt from smiling like an idiot for the past several hours. He was paraded around tonight's celebration, which marked the first black fawn born of the season. It was poetic, really. Just as the Marked One returned to protect Alonetha, the symbol of the Aloneth family was born. New life being breathed into the empire.

"I need another drink," Eric muttered, holding his empty glass out to Luthais, who snickered at his side.

"You should slow down, lovely," Luthais warned, refilling Eric's glass anyways. "You don't have the same kind of stamina as myself."

Eric snorted at that. "No one has your stamina, Lu."

Then, Eric tipped his glass back and took a long drink of the bubbling liquor. The glowing rose-colored alcohol chilled in his stomach, sending a shiver through him. His gaze flitted across the room again, ignoring the countless eyes that sought him out despite hiding off in a corner with the outcast prince, for Cithrel.

He wanted to be at Cithrel's side tonight, to dance with him again, to feel secure at his side. Cithrel had wanted that, too, until Nithroel commanded him to address some nobles' concerns about the borders along their land. Eric was resigned, knowing Cithrel would always choose his mother and the empire before him. Instead, he let Cithrel join the throng of aristocrats and haughty Fae who wanted their piece of him, and he nodded to the ones that greeted him and thanked the Marked One for his blessing. They didn't thank Eric, but what his body held. He was just a vessel for the Fae.

Eric spotted the signature emerald mantle that hung off those broad shoulders he loved so much. Tonight, the entire Imperial Family was adorned in their official regalia, diadems and all. Eric thought the fourth prince looked his best when he was in his formal attire, except of course when he wore nothing at all.

He couldn't take his eyes off Cithrel. The hard lines of his lips and his cheekbones looked regal when paired with his icy disposition. Those blue eyes that seemed to look straight through people, like nothing mattered. Eric's gaze trailed down the prince's strong features to his toned arms and finally rested on his hands. Cithrel rarely drank and tonight was no different, instead opting to cross his arms rather than hold a glass.

Images of those rough calloused palms sliding around his throat and squeezing surfaced unbidden. Eric felt himself strain as his own breathing hitched a little.

"I can't remember the last time I looked at someone like that," Luthais mused.

Eric blinked, remembering himself, and his cheeks heated knowing he was caught.

"Relax, lovely," Luthais said, swirling his drink. "I've been waiting to see how this all plays out since you came to the palace. I am curious, though. What did my dear little brother say when he saw the ring on your finger?"

"Nothing." Eric looked down at Solonar's ring like it offended him. "He didn't say a word about it. Neither did Solonar. I don't even know what this does."

"Oh?" Luthais arched a brow, excitement flaring in his violet eyes. "That's intriguing. It seems Solonar is quite a bit more sensitive than he'd like others to believe."

"What does that mean?"

Luthais clicked his tongue. "If I told you, that would spoil the surprise. Besides, it's not my secret to share. Why don't you go ask him?"

Eric followed where the second prince tilted his head and spotted Solonar amidst a crowd of nobles chattering at him. But the crown prince paid the nobles no attention because his focus was already on Eric. Just how long had he been watching him?

"I'd rather not," Eric muttered, averting his gaze. "The sooner this night is over the better. I can't stand this."



“The symbol of strength simply *must* be in attendance, I’m afraid. My mother wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Eric took another sip of his drink and then looked over at Luthais, the way his silver hair shimmered. He was so much like Nithroel in that instant, yet the two of them seemed at absolute odds.

“Why didn’t she help you?” Eric asked, his tone softening. “Why didn’t she intervene and help any of you? You’re her children.”

Luthais eyed his goblet, his purple eyes darkening as he gave a mirthless smile. “She cared for my father more than any of us combined. If it was his will, she saw it done. Even now, she’s carrying out his wishes in his place until Solonar, or whoever she chooses, takes the throne.”

Eric’s face contorted. “You mean it might not be Solonar?”

This time Luthais turned to Eric, giving him a long and hard look. “Power is everything, Eric. Whoever proves they have the most will sit on that throne.”

A shard of unease sliced into Eric’s chest as that information sunk in. He knew power was all the Fae cared about, but it never occurred to him that someone other than Solonar might be the next emperor. Just what would this world look like if the raven-haired prince didn’t sit on that throne?

On instinct, Eric’s gaze slid back to the crown prince and found him staring back. The two of them didn’t move or blink, drinking the other in. What would Solonar be if he wasn’t the crown prince? If he wasn’t the emperor? Was he ever anything else? Eric’s gaze shuttered and he looked away. It didn’t matter to him what became of Solonar, or what his fate would be.

Instead, Eric scanned the crowd again, in search of the baroness and Lord Aimar. At every event prior to this one, they made sure to taunt Eric, challenging him one way or another. It couldn’t be a coincidence that mere days after Eric

launched an investigation on the baroness's estate and her business dealings that the two of them were suddenly scarce.

Eric ran a hand through his hair, pulling his curls from his face. Her absence put Eric on edge, regardless of the fact that he stood next to a prince and had another two waiting in the wings like murderous sentries should anything happen.

"It's a complicated web my mother weaves," Luthais said and sighed. "The most I can hope to do is disappoint her in every way imaginable."

Snapping from his train of thought, Eric clinked his glass against the second prince's. "I'll drink to that. Maybe the next drink should have a touch of aether dust?"

Luthais's purple eyes flashed, and in a rush, the smell of clay washed over Eric and a palace guard stood next to him instead of the second prince. "Careful, lovely. My mother might accuse me of corrupting you."

Eric shot Luthais a conspiratorial look. "It was her decision to have me striding around tonight as the Marked One. I suppose I should give her a show."

Luthais pulled a small packet of a dozen vials from the gauntlet of the guard's appearance he wore. It was insane, the levels of what Luthais could do with his aether. Eric took the packet and cracked open two vials, pouring the aether dust into their drinks.

"So this is where you've been hiding, Marked One."

Eric almost choked on his drink, quickly shoving the remaining aether dust in his pocket before he turned to face Vessa. He focused on calming his racing heart and thinking of nothing but the banquet, masking everything else, in case Vessa's power worked its way inside him.

"Lady Vessa," he said and smoothed his coat. "It's good to see you again. You'll have to excuse my absence. I grow weary in crowds easily."

"Of course," she answered. "I'm familiar with the animosity of being the center of attention in a room full of noble and wealthy Fae."

Vessa's mismatched eyes flickered then, some hidden emotion resurfacing. She recovered and smiled brightly again. She shifted and the wisteria that grew from her body rustled, some leaves fluttering to the ground.

"Well, I don't mean to darken the mood. It's a banquet, after all. I simply wished to offer my greetings and give thanks to the Marked One."

"An unnecessary gesture, my lady, but one I will gladly receive from you," Eric said, dipping his head.

For whatever reason, Luthais never shifted back, and Lady Vessa never addressed the fact that Eric stood next to a seemingly random palace guard. She didn't so much as look at Luthais. It struck Eric as odd, but he couldn't place why.

"Then I shall take my leave and allow you some respite. Have a good evening, Marked One."

Eric lifted his glass and watched her leave as swiftly as she had arrived. The way she moved reminded him of Creusa again. He supposed that was a trait all nymphs had, whether they were pure-blooded or not. They moved like a force of nature, beings in harmony with life in a way Eric could never understand.

"Such a curious female."

Luthais was in his original skin again and had downed his entire drink full of aether dust. Eric blinked once, stupefied, and then he did the same and drank deep. He knew it was a bad idea, letting the aether dust muddle with all the enchanted alcohol in his body, but he realized he was beginning to trust Cithrel. To protect him, at least.

"So you only show your face during social season if it's to inebriate Eric." Cithrel had finally broken through the crowd, banishing the throng of nobles that demanded his attention, and he had firmly planted himself between Eric and Luthais.

"My dear brother, if only you had this kind of strength in the Throne Room."

Cithrel shot his older brother a dark look. "Enough."

“Cithrel, it’s fine,” Eric intercepted before Luthais could say anything else. “I’ve been waiting for you. Now that you’re here, why don’t we go for a walk?”

The fourth prince’s anger lingered on Luthais a breath longer and then he turned to Eric, the frigid edges of him melting a little. “The banquet is almost done. Then I promise you, we can walk the entire city if that’s what you want.”

Eric caught sight of Luthais lifting his brows at Eric behind Cithrel’s back before the second prince sauntered off into the crowd. Cithrel’s declaration wasn’t lost on Eric, but he hated that they couldn’t go now. He knew the reason why, of course. It was because Nithroel wanted it that way.

“Eric,” Cithrel began. “Please, I’m try—”

The wall behind Eric exploded, sending hunks of stone and debris like missiles straight at him. They would have shattered him and left nothing but blood and bone and if Cithrel hadn’t reacted faster than a lightning strike.

Thorns were already wrapping around Eric, building a wall of vampiric brambles around him and Cithrel before he sat up. Cithrel shielded Eric with his body, already on his feet. He held his favored blade in his hand, thin and impossibly sharp.

“On my command,” Cithrel said, keeping his eyes trained on the haze of the explosion, “disperse your thorns.”

Eric nodded, clambering to his feet. Adrenaline ripped through his body as his breathing kicked up. Something moved from the corner of Eric’s eye in the shadows. A sickening chill that slithered along his skin a second before the night exploded was his only warning.

“Now!”

Several things happened at once. In the same fraction of time that Eric beckoned his thorns, Cithrel burst forth, and the assassin appeared. The Fae cloaked in darkness charged Eric, her body bathed in some kind of oil that smelled worse than a carcass left in the baking sun all day. Whatever her magic was, the scent was overwhelming.

The fearless Prince of Blades clashed with the assailant as Eric made a break for it, summoning a mantle of charred vines at his back as a shield. A cry tore from someone's lungs and for a heart-splintering second, Eric feared it was Cithrel's scream. Then a sound like paper and fabric shredding filled the air, followed by a strange sizzling. Then the scent of magic intensified as the strange noise continued. Eric realized with horror as he chanced a look over his shoulder that the marbled and speckled stone floors were half eaten away. The Fae assailant's magic was acid.

"Eric!" the crown prince bellowed.

In an instant, the entire ballroom was bathed in blinding white flames. The scent of ash stuck to Eric so thick it swallowed the decomposing smell. Cithrel was able to sense his older brother's assault coming but his opponent wasn't as fast. The assassin recoiled with a shriek, clawing at her own eyes in an effort to shield herself from the impossibly bright fire.

In the light, Eric saw it wore all black fabric that hugged so tight he could see every inch of the Fae's body. Then Eric realized that the black was her skin, and that she was almost entirely naked. The female Fae had her head completely shaved and fingertips that glowed green with her acid, eliciting a tremor from Eric. The last time he saw a green glow like that, it was in the hate-filled eyes of Sir Malor, the Fae that had betrayed Cithrel and abducted and tortured Eric in the dungeons of Belfir. Everywhere the female moved, a sizzling noise followed as her magic ate away at whatever it touched.

The outline of Solonar shadowed over the room, making him look like an angel, or Lucifer himself, as he descended on the assassin. His hands clawed out at his sides as licks of flame coated his arms before they shot out like daggers at the attacker.

The female was faster and moved so quickly it was like she blinked out of existence in one place and back in at another. Solonar snarled at her, engaging in the deadly dance of speed, the two of them circling the room. Except, now it

was two on one, and she was taking on two high-blood princes.

Eric had his hands open at his sides, ready to react in a split second. His heart thundered in his chest, but he wasn't afraid. He was exhilarated. A smile split across his face as the female Fae made her move. Her hand shot forward as fast as a whip and Eric shouted in defiance. The bright acid reached forward, ready to wrap around his throat, but that was when he felt the aether dust coming to life.

Everything tumbled into slow motion as the aether in his blood ignited. The sudden burst of magic that flooded through his body in a desperate bid to get out had his spine arched back in agony. His bones screamed in protest as they threatened to splinter apart as black thorns erupted from his chest, his hands, his mouth.

He wanted to cry out, whether from joy or pain, he didn't know, but he was being choked by his own power as it all poured from him, forming an impenetrable writhing cage of putrid vines and thorns. The assassin wailed in surprise and pain as Eric heard her hand crash into the vampiric cage, the thorns latching on to her and their sharpened barbs digging into her skin, tearing away at it.

Eric watched, tears streaming down his face as he gagged on the thorns still coming from his mouth, as his magic ate away at the Fae assassin. He watched as the thorns and vines pulsed around her, *drinking* from her. As they drained her and grew, the female's eyes shifted from shock to rage.

In one fluid motion, she brought her other hand coated in acid down and sliced her hand off without blinking. Eric collapsed to his knees, fear trickling into his body as his vines threatened to choke him into unconsciousness. It was all he could do to cut off his aether and cough up the rest of the fetid thorns hanging from his lips.

He looked up, gagging, as the female smirked at him once. The same hand that just ripped off her other hand, still coated in her black blood, snaked out towards Eric, ready to kill him in one merciless slash.

Eric's eyes went wide, unable to reign in his power as it gagged him. Then her muscled arm got stuck in the air at an awkward angle. Her eyes bulged in shock as she hung there, immobile, and Eric was still alive. The smell of burning flesh stung his nostrils as Solonar's monstrous form appeared behind her and then his hellfire licked all over her skin before consuming her.

In utter terror, Eric watched as the assassin burned alive from the inside out, her gaze fixed on his as her mouth opened in a wide soundless scream. Between the assassin's magic and the smell of her flesh baking, it was hard to know which smell caused him to vomit up the contents of his dinner and all the alcohol he had drunk. Either way he retched on the ground as Fae nobles and servants stood preternaturally still, all eyes hooked on Eric.

The air shifted and Eric heard the slashing sound of Cithrel's blade cutting through thorns, and then his rough hands were around him. Emotions thrashed in Eric's chest as he worked through being sick, fighting to catch his breath: the guilt of what he was doing behind Cithrel's back, a Fae who cradled him with a fierce protective will. Anger at the Fae monsters who thought his life was nothing more than something to be snuffed out. The strongest emotion of all, though, was the pleasure of what just happened.

He knew the baroness would try something. His suspicions were right all along, and after the humiliation she suffered at his hands a few days ago, she would absolutely retaliate. Eric was nothing more than livestock to her, an animal. It must have eaten away at her, being forced to obey the words of an animal.

Eric buried his face in Cithrel's chest, drinking in his lingering citrus scent and hiding his pleasure until he could control himself again.

"How did this fucking female get through the sentries in here?" Solonar raged.

The crown prince was at Eric and Cithrel's sides, barking orders at some servants in the ballroom. His eyes

focused on every possible entrance to the ballroom while the rest of his body gravitated towards Eric.

Glancing around the grand hall, the nobles and aristocrats were dispersing, the empress and her retinue already gone. Eric spotted Elasuin and Rhistel locked close together in a heated exchange. His attention waned though as the rush of power faded, and the backlash of his aether slammed into him full-force.

Each bone in his body felt like it was being crushed, ready to be ground into dust. The splintering in his head intensified and he hunched over, holding himself tight to weather the pain.

Then smooth fingers ran over Eric's arm and an alien sensation of heat trickled into his veins. Solonar's healing magic burned through him, gentler this time. Healing magic always felt like an invasion, but by the crown prince's standards, he was being careful this time.

Eric wasn't aware someone had approached until Solonar spoke. "What did you find?"

One of Solonar's personal attendants, who spoke. His soft voice was taut. "Crown Prince." He kept his head low and eyes trained on the ground. "She came through the western wards. Tanyl had ensured they were reinforced as you ordered."

Solonar swore and his grip on Eric tightened.

"What does that mean?" Eric rasped. His pulse still raced at his neck, as if his body was still in survival mode.

"It means," Solonar bit out, "that my servant Tanyl is dead. And we now know for certain someone in this city let the assassin in."

The crown prince wasn't looking at Eric, but at Cithrel. The two of them had a wordless conversation then, coming to an understanding, but of what Eric didn't know.

Solonar finally pulled away from them, taking his aether with him, but as he did Eric felt his fingers trace over



the ring he'd given him. What was the significance of that ring and why were the princes guarding its truth so fiercely?

"Take care of him." Solonar's feline pupils sharpened to slits. "We'll deal with this situation later."

Cithrel, for once, had no rebuttal for his brother. But as he moved to take Eric away, Eric shrugged out of his hold and stood before Solonar.

"I know who's responsible for this," Eric said, willing his voice to stay even.

"Oh?" Solonar's tone pitched.

His amber eyes were alight with a mischievous knowledge of something, but Eric didn't want to know.

"Go on then."

"Baroness Olaera and likely Lord Aimar as well."

The crown prince grinned wickedly, like what Eric said amused him rather than infuriate him like it should. What the hell was Solonar playing at? It didn't matter. Eric was going to see this through.

"I have evidence," Eric said, filling the quiet before someone else could object. "Both from my time overseeing Olaera's business and looking over her records. They've broken Imperial Law. I know the kind of beings they both are, and after what I've seen and found out about them, I'm sure it's them. She would have orchestrated the attack tonight to get rid of me before I could prove her guilt."

"Are you sure about this, Eric?" Cithrel's brows pinched together, and it took Eric a heartbeat to collect himself. Not because he was one step closer to destroying the baroness and Lord Aimar, but because Cithrel's face was etched with concern—concern for him.

Eric had seen that look before on countless boyfriends in his past. His heart ached in his chest, thumping painfully, and sent a rush of heat up his neck. Cithrel was looking at Eric like he was seeing the full moon on a summer's night for the first time. The way that could only be described as love.

But Eric had never reciprocated his exes' feelings before, and he didn't come back to the cruel world of the Fae for love. He came back for revenge.

"I'm sure," Eric said, voice hard like stone.

Solonar's lopsided grin widened, though, relishing in this for some reason. "Well, then. There's no fairer law than death."

## Chapter Nineteen

Eric continued to visit the slave trade at the baroness's estate as if nothing had happened. Solonar had said he'd spoken with the empress, and she agreed to allow what the three of them planned for the baroness. So Eric continued on, overseeing Olaera's actions, letting her think she was getting away with her attempts to kill him.

The only problem that bothered Eric was Sir Saelihn. There was no guarantee that he hadn't seen that Eric was actually the one responsible for the missing girl. If he saw Eric, then the empress would know he was framing Olaera. The empress could know this entire time and Eric could be sealing his own fate.

He wasn't going to stop either way.

Enough time passed for Sen to get word to the rest of the slaves. They knew Eric had plans for them, they just had to be patient and trust him. Whether they did trust him or not wasn't a choice, really, not when Eric was their only shot at freedom. It was a risk they were all more than willing to take.

In the pleasure den, Sir Saelihn walked behind Eric, a silent observer, as he visited people. Sen, for her part, barely acknowledged him and made sure to remain scarce, as if he frightened her. The empress's spy never said a word, or had a lingering gaze, nothing at all to show something caught his attention.

After he finished going through the labor slaves and the cleaners, Eric felt his heart begin to pound a little louder and a little faster. It was time to summon the baroness. Their footsteps echoed on the smooth wood floors as they headed to her office, his steps much louder than Saelihn's.

He didn't hesitate to knock, because if he did Saelihn would notice it. And because he wasn't afraid. He was excited. Eric hated waiting in the weeks that followed the attack on him at the banquet. All his thoughts were on Olaera and Aimar

and how he wanted to see them lose everything. Have all their power that they coveted ripped away from them.

“Enter.”

The baroness sat in her chair, studying some aether-imbued jewelry and clothing. Her black feathered mantle hung across her thin shoulders as always and her sharp eyes lifted to Eric upon their entry.

She smiled, practically preening.

Eric smiled back. She was so confident, so sure she'd gotten away with it.

Before she could open her mouth, Eric cut her off. “Baroness Olaera, as the Marked One, blessed by the aether, on behalf of Her Imperial Majesty, you are hereby summoned to court for questioning at once. You may come willingly, or Sir Saelihn shall force you.”

Olaera shot to her feet, the enchanted garments forgotten entirely. She was absolutely seething, hawk eyes boring into Eric like daggers. It made his chest swell with a satisfaction he'd never known.

Somehow Olaera managed to bite her tongue and stood there, silent, willing calm into her body. Her chin was held high, refusing to let go of her arrogance. “Anything for the empire.”

As she walked past Eric, he put his hand on her back to lead her out, but she whirled on him. “Do not touch me.” She said, spitting venom.

Eric backed up. “Apologies, my lady. After you.”

So confident, not realizing that Eric had slipped an enchanted brooch inside her beloved feather cape that she never took off. She held on to her confident air the entire walk back to the palace and even up until they approached the emblazoned doors of the Fae court. It was when the doors opened, and she saw who was waiting for her, that her poised posture faltered.

There was a trickle of genuine panic in her gaze as she stared back at Solonar and Cithrel, who were seated waiting for her. She wasn't expecting to see the fourth prince, never mind the crown prince, as the ones to question her.

Just the way Eric planned.

It should have scared him how much joy it brought him to see Olaera's world crumbling around her, but it didn't. It just fuelled him, egged him on, kept him tearing pieces from her until there was nothing left of her but a husk. Then, then it might be enough to kill her.

"Greetings, Your Highnesses." Olaera dipped her head and Eric didn't miss the rigidity to her posture.

*Good.*

Let her squirm.

The Fae court had been altered for this interrogation. The usual rows of chairs adorned with wood carvings of magical beings and flowers were all gone. Any sign of whimsy was stripped bare from the room, leaving only three extravagant wood-carved seats that the two princes sat at. Cithrel sat with his hands curling around the arms of his chair, his posture hard and his expression unreadable. He was in his official prince commander armor with a vibrant green cape hanging from his gleaming pauldrons. Solonar reclined to one side with one leg crossed over the other, an equally lopsided smile playing on his lips. His slender build was accentuated by the tight crimson suit he wore. A black velvet coat overtop covered nearly all his exposed skin, including his oath.

Before the princes' chairs was a solitary stone chair, carved straight from a hulking boulder. There was no marble, no speckling of fine gemstones. It was cold and unforgiving in slate gray.

Olaera's chair.

"Baroness Olaera," Solonar said, gesturing to the stone chair in the center of the room. "Do you know why you're here, my lady?"

She took her seat in front of them, head straight forward. Eric lingered in the uneasy quiet before he made his way to his seat next to the princes. He wanted to see her face as she realized he would be part of the interrogation as well if she hadn't already come to that conclusion.

The grim stillness of her face told Eric she had. It apparently hadn't escaped her notice now that Eric was also dressed in official and very lavish-looking finery. The black doe was fashioned over his breast pocket and on his pine-colored jacket sleeve.

"I was informed my presence for questioning was mandatory, though I'm unsure why. I'm more than willing to do whatever the empire requires of me."

"Splendid," Solonar deadpanned. "Then let's begin, so that this may be concluded quickly."

Olaera simply nodded and said nothing else but her brows pinched together, looking confused. The enchanted brooch was working. The tone in the court shifted and the air somehow grew colder, as if it could give frostbite. Solonar's mirth vanished, and Eric sat forward, his hands folded in his lap.

Eric began.

"Baroness Olaera, you submitted your transactions and your business ledgers to the crown prince for review. After some time, these records were handed over to me to look over per the investigation. Is this accurate?"

A single nod.

"Answer him, my lady," Cithrel said, his words like ice.

Olaera exhaled hard, struggling to speak. "Yes."

"Were you aware of the discrepancies in your business transactions, my lady?"

A pause.

"He won't warn you twice," Solonar chimed in.

“Yes, but—”

Eric raised a hand, cutting her off. “So you were aware that you were withholding income from the sales of slaves?”

“Yes, but if you’ll allow me—”

“I will not allow you,” Eric said.

His blood rushed through his veins, pumping fast and hard with adrenaline. He couldn’t let her say anything else or the truth might come out, even with the enchanted brooch making it hard for her to speak at all, which for once he didn’t want. She had to be the one to take the fall for this. Then he could take care of Lord Aimar once his most powerful ally was gone. A merchant could be replaced easily enough, regardless of his status as the designated merchant for the palace.

Olaera’s nostrils flared but she stayed quiet. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, like she could set Eric on fire with her mind somehow.

“It seems as though this discrepancy has been going on for quite some time, my lady,” Eric continued, tilting his head. “Perhaps even longer past the records you gave us. Almost all of them are transactions with Lord Aimar.”

“Then why is Lord Aimar not being questioned along with me?” Olaera asked, the bite returning to her voice.

“He will be later,” Eric lied.

He had to deal with Lord Aimar, but he still had some other things to work out first. But she didn’t need to know that. She was stronger than he anticipated, the brooch wouldn’t last much longer at this rate.

Olaera narrowed her eyes before she turned to Cithrel and Solonar. “Your Highnesses, there is an explanation for these discrepancies, I assure you. Lord Aimar is a traitor, n—”

“Enough, Baroness Olaera!”

Eric’s voice resounded through the room, loud enough that even Saelihn shifted, ready to move in a flash. There was no way he would let her finish that sentence and ruin

everything. Cithrel and Solonar both looked down at the baroness, their focus darkening to pitch. There was no pity, no empathy, for Olaera.

It was the crown prince who leaned forward to speak, his canines flashing. “You admit to stealing from the empire and working with Lord Aimar, who you have just said so yourself is a traitor. Yet, you dare to speak freely as if you are not also a traitor. It seems you don’t understand the situation you are in, my lady. This investigation is not about your fealty to the empire, but about whether you get to keep your life.”

His words hung in the air as the reality of Olaera’s situation pressed down on her in a crashing wave of dread. Her blue skin paled. She looked lost in the hopelessness of what was happening to her.

“Good, you are aware.” Solonar reclined in his chair again. “Continue the questioning.”

Eric kept his placid demeanor and asked, “Were you also working with Lady Vessa?”

At that, Olaera whipped her head back up. “Lady Vessa? What did she do?”

“It seems you were unaware of her involvement,” Solonar said.

“Sir Saelihn, would you let the Lady Vessa enter?” Eric asked.

The empress’s guard said nothing, but in a breath he’d opened the door and gone back to where he stood like he’d never left. Lady Vessa entered, wearing a form-fitting tunic with her shoulders exposed so that her branches could freely grow. Tight training pants hugged her legs, and her hair was pulled back into a braided ponytail. The lady’s mismatched eyes looked to Eric and the princes.

After she offered her greetings, Eric looked back at Olaera. He could see the wheels turning in her mind, trying to solve an impossible equation. This would be her end soon enough.



“Lady Vessa, you’ve been summoned to give your testimony regarding Lord Aimar and Baroness Olaera. You are aware they are both accused of being traitors to the empire and of stealing the empire’s wealth for their own greed, are you not?”

“I am, Marked One.”

From the look on the baroness, Eric guessed she would be sweating about now if she could sweat. Her lithe form was shuddering, her breaths coming in and out rapidly.

“The baroness was unaware of your involvement in this situation. Please enlighten her.” Eric gestured to Olaera and waited.

Vessa stepped forward without hesitation and her pleasant voice filled the court.

“Baroness Olaera and Lord Aimar were conspiring to make some of her livestock disappear and mark it as deaths in her ledgers. Then, with the lord’s connections, he would sell the unaccounted-for livestock and they would retain the profits. The lord informed me of what the baroness was doing, claiming that she forced him into it. I assisted the lord in keeping his secret and monitoring the actions of the baroness. Lord Aimar sought help to stop Baroness Olaera, but her greed only continued to grow, especially after the Marked One began to oversee the slave trade. She was in talks with the Belfir kingdom through Lord Aimar’s merchant contacts. The last attempt on the Marked One’s life was of her accord. She is the traitor to the empire.”

“No!” Olaera cried, lurching in her chair, face pinched tight.

Eric drank in her reaction. He was a little surprised that Olaera seemed to know much more about Lady Vessa’s species than he’d thought. She was a cunning Fae; no wonder she was able to amass so much wealth and power in the empire. Not for much longer, though.

Cithrel stood in an instant, hands ready at his sides.

Olaera shrank away further in her stone seat, silenced by the sight of Cithrel's stance.

*Goodbye, baroness.*

"Baroness Olaera, Lady Vessa is part Fae and thus, speaks the truth as she is compelled. The crown prince and the prince commander will now decide your fate."

This time, Eric didn't hide his smile. He let the baroness see it, see his happiness at her death sentence.

That was enough for her to snap.

"You filthy human!"

Olaera shrieked and lunged from her chair, talons extended and reaching for Eric's throat. Her feathered mantle billowed behind her like a bird of prey diving towards her kill. But she never had a chance of reaching Eric, not with his angel-faced protector at his side.

Cithrel darted in front of her and backhanded her so hard the whole room echoed with the snap and crunch of the bones in her face. Black blood splattered across Cithrel's armor. Before Olaera could catch herself, Cithrel had moved again, faster than before, and grabbed her by the scruff of her short hair. He slammed her face into the plain stone chair, cracking and shattering rock and sending debris everywhere.

Cithrel pulled her back up, her body battered. One of her pointed ears was caught in his grip, but he ripped her up so that she was inches from his face. Blood trickled from her mouth, her face crushed in and covered in rubble and dust, but she was still conscious. It seemed, despite her rage, her pride was still intact. She didn't look away from Cithrel or flinch from the pain she had to be in.

"You have just threatened the life of the Marked One, blessed by the aether and chosen by Emperor Volodar. It is my duty to imprison you within the Black Thorn. Consider your title and possessions stripped. Your aether will be consumed by the Black Thorn until your whole rejoins the aether. May your next life be more honorable."

Eric watched as the baroness shook, tears rolling down her quickly swelling and bruised face. He knew they weren't tears of sadness, but of anger, fury, and hatred for Eric. She didn't fight Cithrel or say anything more to defend herself. Olaera accepted her fate with the final piece of dignity she had left.

"Sir Saelihn, you may inform the empress of Baroness Olaera's fate," said the fourth prince.

The cloaked Fae vanished before Cithrel finished his sentence, leaving the four of them in a treacherous silence. Cithrel stood over the disavowed noble like she was garbage, waiting until one of his own Fae came to collect her and take her to the Black Thorn.

Eric shuddered involuntarily at the thought of being in that dungeon. The way the walls moved, the smell, the awful hallucinations as the dark place had eaten away at his mind and body. That was where Olaera was going.

Eric was elated.

His eyes were bright, and his cheeks felt warm. He'd done it, he'd taken everything from her and destroyed her, just like she'd destroyed him. How long would she last in that dungeon? He hoped she fought it and let the Black Thorn torture her until the very end. The slower her demise, the better.

Lady Vessa flashed Eric a knowing look before she left quietly, after bidding the princes goodbye. It wasn't until after Eric watched Olaera's limp body, conscious but resigned, be removed from court that he realized Solonar was watching him. Again.

His brows were pulled taut, frowning.

Eric instinctually stiffened. Was he on to him, what he was really doing? It was getting harder and harder to keep his lies straight. No, Solonar would've done something sooner if he knew. He wouldn't let Eric get this far if he knew. So why was he looking at Eric that way?

“Is that not fair?” Eric asked, wary. “You’d decided her fate before this meeting.”

Solonar didn’t reply at first, his frown deepening. Then he recovered and straightened his velvet black jacket, ensuring his neck was entirely covered. It was becoming a nervous tick of his.

“Am I not allowed to be concerned for you? Is that something only my brother has the luxury of?”

Eric was taken aback. What did that mean? “Now that she’s been sentenced, your concern, or anyone else’s, is unnecessary.”

“No,” Solonar murmured, “No. I think it is.”

The crown prince lurched to his feet and went out the door, giving no room for discussion, leaving Eric alone with Cithrel. His armor was stained with Olaera’s blood, but he was unmoved. His attention was only for Eric.

“We don’t need to be here anymore, Eric,” Cithrel said softly. “Let’s leave this behind. It’s settled.”

He reached a hand out to him, and then realized it was covered in Olaera’s dark blood. The Fae prince pulled it back and then cleared his throat in apology.

It didn’t matter to Eric. He happily took the prince’s hand, letting him lead them away. Nothing could ruin this moment for him.

Nothing.

Something was wrong. Not with Eric’s plan—that had been flawless. No, something was off about Cithrel. Their walk back through the palace was pleasant but too quiet, even for Cithrel. After they returned to their private quarters, Cithrel said he wanted to be alone for a while.

Eric was well aware of Cithrel promising to try and win Eric over, to prove to him that he could be trusted, that they could be more than whatever they were. And yet, after what happened with Olaera, the prince seemed... on edge. Worried, even. Was he worried about Olaera? But why would

he be? They were nothing to each other. He'd never seen them interact with each other. Even if they did, he was aware that she sold Eric to Lord Aimar all those years ago. If he cared about him the way he claimed, then it didn't make sense for him to be concerned about that awful Fae.

Eric shook his head, his leg bouncing as he sat in one of the divans. Hinni had left him with some water and then disappeared, probably sensing his state and knowing he wanted to be alone but not cooped up in his room. He ran his hand through his hair again, his curls now a frizzled mess from how many times he'd done that since they got back.

His gaze tore over to the end of the hall when he heard Cithrel's door open and his footsteps approaching. Why the hell was he so nervous? Cithrel didn't know anything about what he'd been doing, what he still planned to do. He couldn't make sense of his frayed emotions.

"Eric," Cithrel began.

The Fae prince looked unsure of something. Eric fought the urge to fidget any more than he already was. He willed his leg to stop bouncing and settle down. He needed to get it together.

"What is it? Just tell me."

Cithrel finally brought his gaze up to his, blue eyes searching through clouded hazel. "I'm worried."

Eric knew it. He knew something was wrong. How did he not see this? What did he miss that he didn't realize—

"I'm worried about you, Eric." Cithrel finished.

Oh. "Oh."

"I know today must have been hard for you. The past few months have been, I know. Every day you had to spend with Olaera must have been difficult. I know of the animosity between you two."

That was a subtle way to put it.

"But there was something different about you today," Cithrel said, like he needed to say something. "Something

hardened.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Eric said with a smile, admittedly not following.

If Cithrel didn’t have any connection to Olaera, then he should be happy she was gone. She was a traitor to some degree to the empire. For all Cithrel knew, that’s all she was. It was his duty to be glad to get rid of her.

So why....

“It was like you weren’t human, Eric.”

*Oh.* “Oh.”

“You know how I feel about you. No matter how much it tears at the fabric of my being, I do care about you. I won’t let this place take anything from you. I won’t let it take what’s *mine*.”

Guilt twisted in Eric’s gut, but he smothered it with a forceful resurgence of irritation. “I’m not yours, Cithrel. Let me make that clear because I’m getting tired of saying it.”

Eric’s breathing grew heavier as he let his anger towards the Fae in general bury the guilt of what he was doing behind Cithrel’s back, so he didn’t have to feel.

Revenge.

That’s all there was. Revenge for himself, revenge for his life that was taken from him.

Eric shoved to his feet, feeling bolder now that he stood over the prince, as if it made a difference. “You don’t own me. I don’t belong to anyone.”

He stormed to his own room, shutting the door and fortifying it with his own aether. It was strong enough that he felt his nose bleed from the exertion. He ignored the pressure that drilled into his skull from using so much of his power. He didn’t care. The hunger for retribution was fuelling him now and he wouldn’t let the pain of his aether’s recoil wear him down.

Eric slumped to the floor, closing his eyes. His mind's eye replayed the events of the Fae court; the sight of Olaera being broken and thrown away soothing him. That was why he had come back. And soon, Lord Aimar would be next.

## Chapter Twenty

Damn him.

Eric had been hunkered down in the library all day—and the day before that—and the day before that.

Olaera was taken care of and currently being eaten alive by the Black Thorn, as the dungeon swallowed her sanity day by day. Though she'd been able to name Aimar as a traitor, Vessa's testament proved his innocence. Even though there were conflicting statements, it was easy enough for Eric to convince the princes that in her manic state, she truly believed what she was saying. The brooch's enchantment would have worn off by now but she was isolated at the bottom of the Black Thorn. He just had to wait the baroness out until she was driven entirely mad, then it wouldn't matter what she said in court.

Olaera would be as good as dead soon, but Lord Aimar was not.

Eric had been waiting for Lady Vessa to show up since that day in the court, where she'd lied for him, but she was yet to appear. There wasn't much time left before Eric had to act on his plan. Any longer, and the princes could find out the truth of what he'd been doing. If that happened, he'd never get the satisfaction of watching Lord Aimar fall to pieces before his very eyes. The Fae lord had to die, and soon.

Eric cursed Aimar again as he flipped through some more pages of an old Fae text, not really reading the lines. He hadn't even been the one to approach Lady Vessa all those weeks ago. She'd come to him. It sent his hackles up, knowing she was up to something, but in the end, they had the same goal: getting rid of the baroness.

He needed to accept Vessa probably wasn't coming today, either. With a heavy sigh, Eric shut the book and collected everything before making his way back to his rooms.

He waved goodbye to Gnosus, who grunted something unintelligible but likely rude. It was part of his charm.



Several servants mingled throughout the palace halls, drifting in and out of their back passageways to get to their needed rooms. Their black, silver, and green livery swayed around their forms as they flitted about. None of them looked his way, like he didn't exist. It was refreshing to be ignored after having all aristocrats' eyes on him everywhere he went. The more he was left alone, the easier it was for him to think.

Lady Vessa's lies had secured safety for Lord Aimar for now, but he needed a way to still incriminate him. There had to be a loophole for him to exploit in what Lady Vessa had said during Olaera's questioning. Just how close was Vessa to Aimar, for her to willingly lie on his behalf? She made it seem as though Aimar had been forced to assist the baroness in her actions. Except, Eric had never mentioned there was a traitor working for the King of Belfir before. He'd merely said she was profiting from missing slaves.

Eric's eyes went wide and then he was running down the palace halls. His feet pounded the speckled and marbled stone floors as he raced to the training grounds, where he thought Cithrel should be about now. He had to tell him—he needed to know if he didn't already.

Realization slowed Eric's steps. They had to know. Even if they weren't aware that Vessa could lie, they wouldn't have missed the fact that she brought up the Fae king. So why hadn't they done anything yet?

His face twisted, a fresh hurt blooming where he hadn't expected it to. Cithrel and Solonar were both there, yet neither one had mentioned her slip of the tongue. The hurt morphed and shifted into one of anger. The guilt Eric had felt about everything he was doing behind Cithrel's back was suffocated. Cithrel, it seemed, was still keeping his secrets, despite his efforts.

He was still a Fae.

Eric turned on his heel and strode in the opposite direction, a new path in mind. The fourth prince had his plan and Eric had his. He didn't need to feel sorry for keeping his

own secrets from Cithrel. Why did he keep having to learn that the hard way?

Eric's steps came to a halt when Sir Saelihn appeared before him, blocking his path to Nithroel's private courtyard. "I'd like to speak with Her Imperial Majesty."

Saelihn's shadowed face inclined ever so slightly to gauge Eric's expression. Silence lingered, the Fae guard saying nothing. After another long beat of silence, though, Saelihn stepped to the side and held out his arm for Eric to go forward.

As Eric entered the private courtyard, the first thing that hit him was the gust of warm wind that brushed against his cheek. The rest of the city was clouded, foreboding a raging storm ready to fall from the sky, but in here there was nothing but sunshine and a gentle summer breeze. Her courtyard had to have been covered in a powerful enchantment to manipulate the weather like that. Probably her own magic at work.

Nithroel was walking through her own little garden, the ground crawling with a rainbow of ivy and carpeted flowers. In some places, the flowers grew up like trees, twining together to reach the sky. Her two attendants walked in her shadow wordlessly, neither one glancing up at him. A loose silken dress trailed behind Nithroel; the long flowing merlot train glided along the flora as she went. Her hair fell down her back in countless braids, smaller braids wound together to form larger ones. Without looking over her shoulder Eric felt her presence weigh down on him.

"How unusual for you to come to me on your own, Eric," the empress said without turning to look at him.

Her attention was on a cluster of orange and pink blotted flowers, their petals curling up and around like a crown. She reached out and plucked the largest of the flowers, twirling it between her two fingers.

"Greetings, Your Imperial Majesty. I hope I'm not intruding." Eric filled his voice with reverence. "But in light of

recent events, I felt it was necessary to speak with you as soon as possible.”

Nithroel paused twirling her flower and then lifted a single hand. Sir Saelihn and her two attendants made themselves scarce and a heartbeat later it was just the two of them in the courtyard. The empress continued walking and spinning the flower. “Speak freely, Eric.”

Eric moved forward to fall in step with her as she ambled through her garden. “I don’t believe Lord Aimar is as innocent as we were led to believe during the baroness’s prior questioning.”

It still felt good talking about that vile female’s nobility in past tense. But Eric suppressed the relief and focused on his task at hand. If he got the empress on his side, then it gave him a final opportunity to take down Lord Aimar along with the baroness.

“What leads you to this conclusion?”

Nithroel still hadn’t looked at Eric. He didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Was he even getting through to her, or was she more pre-occupied with her flower?

“While Lady Vessa was able to prove Olaera’s guilt without a doubt, there was no concrete proof that Lord Aimar is not also guilty.”

This time, the empress turned and looked at Eric. “You seem to be quite fixated on the Fae lord who previously owned you, Eric. Despite the testimony that was given on his behalf, whether intentional or not, I’ve still yet to hear any evidence of his guilt.”

Eric steeled himself. She was listening intently. Her ringed eyes bore into him, absorbing every detail of his face, down to the last freckle spattered on his cheeks.

“Lady Vessa said Lord Aimar was forced to work with Olaera,” Eric said, leading the empress where he wanted her to go. “But she didn’t say he wasn’t working with anyone else. The fact alone that Lady Vessa came to his aid proves they’re working together. Plus, I realized something today about the

lady's testimony. She mentioned that Olaera was the traitor working with the Fae king, but I had never mentioned anything about the King of Belfir during Olaera's questioning. She was there because of her trade discrepancies, initially. So how is it that Lady Vessa knew about someone working with the Fae king, but never proclaimed the lord's or her innocence in that regard?"

Nithroel studied Eric's expression, no doubt drinking in his steady gaze and rampant heart rate. He wanted her to pick up on his spiking adrenaline, his need to convince her. He wanted her to feel his desperation because she needed to believe him.

"Lord Aimar never does anything unless it benefits him," Eric said and took a cautious step closer. "He only ever works with others if he has something to gain from it. The lord is loyal only to his desire for power. I know that better than anyone. If Lady Vessa knew about the traitor working with the Fae king, I'm sure Lord Aimar has something to do with it."

The warm breeze died in the air, and the gentle rustling of branches ceased. The private courtyard fell into an unnatural stillness as Eric waited like a bug under a microscope. Nithroel never took her gaze off him. He felt her immeasurable power pressing down on his shoulders, stifling him. The air was too cold, but his body felt like he was suffocating in a scorching heat. Still, Eric didn't waver, and waited for the empress to say something, anything. He needed her to believe him.

"Alright, Eric, I'll play along with your human notion. I'm not going to wait much longer, though."

The sky fell dark in the private courtyard, as if a curtain closed on her enchanted summer's day, and everything was plunged into night around them. Some of the flowers in her garden began to glow, luminescent under the moon's gaze.

Nithroel gestured to the moon in the now twinkling night and Eric looked up. "Deliver me Lord Aimar and Lady Vessa, with your proof, by the new moon. For the sake of my

emperor, I'll give you that. But this is the last act of generosity I shall give you in this matter, Eric."

Eric bowed, relief washing through him in an unrelenting rush. "Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty. I'm grateful for your kindness."

The night was eaten by the day again, dissolving the evening scenery before their eyes. Nithroel's enchanted summer returned. Flowers bloomed anew around them and that was when Eric noticed the flower Nithroel was holding had wilted.

Sir Saelihn reappeared in the background and Eric took that as his cue to leave. Nithroel's lips curled into an utterly inhuman smile. "Good luck, Eric."

Eric was basking in his latest victory as he made his way back to his rooms. Whether the empress believed him or not, she was intrigued enough to give him more time to prove himself.

That wasn't what he was after, though. He just needed more time to take care of Aimar himself. Then he could come up with whatever story he needed to fit. A malicious feeling was spreading inside Eric's chest, and he let it grow, let it feast on all his old fears and nightmares, on all of his guilt.

Eric's moment of reveling in the next part of his plan was cut short when a hand darted out from a darkened corridor of the palace and pulled him in. The impossibly strong grip slammed Eric's back into the stone wall with the only source of light coming from the main hallway. He knew who it was before he could see them because he felt their aether. It was an aether he was used to and an aether that had lived and breathed inside him now for some time.

Solonar leaned in close, forcing Eric to press his back up against the wall. The crown prince's arms planted on either side of Eric's shoulders, caging him. Amber feline eyes glinted in the light as Solonar leaned in. His canines flashed as a wicked smile formed.

“I can hear that human heart of yours beating a little faster,” Solonar breathed. “If this is all it takes to get you excited, I’m going to have a hard time not devouring you all at once.”

Shivers ran down Eric’s back and he told himself it was from fear and not the fire those words lit in him. Normally, Solonar’s long hair hid part of his features, but now with his hair completely pulled back into a tight bun, Eric could see his every striking feature. His jaw line and cheekbones were sharp, which only highlighted the vibrancy of his liquid gold gaze. Every detail about Solonar, down to the devilish arch of his brows, screamed of animalistic elegance.

Eric lifted his chin in defiance. “If my heart’s racing, it’s not from excitement.”

“Oh? Fear then?” Solonar ran his tongue over his teeth as his grin widened. “Afraid of how good I might make you feel?”

“Unlikely,” Eric scoffed. “In case you forgot, let me remind you. I don’t like you. I don’t want to be near you, and I don’t trust you or anything you have to say. Now get off me.”

For all his brave words and insults, Eric’s gaze still betrayed him and slid towards to Solonar’s splayed hands. His long fingers were digging into the stone wall. For a treacherous beat, he imagined what it would feel like to have those hands wrapped around his throat, or around his dick. He jerked his attention back to the crown prince and slid a dismissive expression onto his face, regardless of how belated his efforts were.

“You don’t have to trust me to let me fuck you until you’re screaming for me.” Solonar leaned in closer, his faint stubble grazing the most sensitive part of Eric’s neck. “Oh, how I love to hear that delicate heart of yours race for me. The thought alone exhilarates me. What I can’t stand is seeing you with my brother. I don’t like it when he’s emotional; it makes him unpredictable.”

Eric's entire body went rigid and he put up his guard at the mention of Cithrel. "Are you done panting over me yet? I have no desire to be under you and I don't care what you like or don't like."

Solonar let out a throaty laugh, as if he read Eric's thoughts. The crown prince shoved away from the wall, a cocky swagger in his step. "Rest assured, Eric. Whether you're under me or over me, I won't lay a hand on you until you're begging me to touch you. When that time comes, I guarantee I won't be the only one panting."

Eric's cheeks blazed as he watched the crown prince turn and leave him there with every filthy image drowning out any other thought. His head fell forward once he was alone in the dimly-lit corridor of the palace. He felt flushed and out of breath like he'd just run up a mountain. If the mountain was on fire, and he was on fire, and everything was on fire.

*Fuck.*

Eric shook his head, cursing himself. He told himself that again when his cheeks were still hot, and he pictured Solonar's hands all over him.

"What are you doing in this part of the palace? And why are you just standing here alone? Did something happen?"

Just when Eric's day couldn't have gotten any more complicated, Cithrel, his own personal, complicated, guardian angel appeared before him. Concern was etched into the hard planes of his face.

There was a flash of guilt that ripped through Eric's stomach, but he channeled the feeling into something else. Anger. He remembered that Cithrel was keeping his own secrets. Eric knew the fourth prince wasn't stupid, he knew there was something off about Lady Vessa and he'd kept that to himself. So Eric deflected.

"Solonar is what happened." Eric grimaced.

Cithrel's expression mirrored Eric's, his jaw hard. "What did he do?"

“Existed.”

Cithrel glanced over his shoulder quickly, and when he was sure they were alone he stepped in close, his fingertips grazing Eric’s cheek. His touch was so feather-soft that Eric barely felt the rough calluses on his skin.

Eric’s breath quickened. His body was alight for an entirely different reason now, Solonar long forgotten. “I’m fine, really. I was on my way back when he found me and dragged me over here.” Eric frowned. “What are you doing over here? I thought you would still be at the training grounds.”

“I had some business to take care of along the city’s border. I just got back now. I was actually on my way back to find you.”

A mischievous smile played on Cithrel’s lips as he stepped even closer to Eric, pressing the hard lines of his body against his, molding to him. Eric felt *everything*.

His lips parted in surprise as he felt the Fae prince hard against him. It sent a thrill through him to see this side of Cithrel. A playful deviant\_and Eric couldn’t get enough of it.

“Well, here I am, Your Highness.” Eric leaned in and trailed his tongue along Cithrel’s neck before he nipped the Fae’s ear. “What are you going to do with me?”

Cithrel’s body tensed and then slowly the fingertips that traced Eric’s cheekbones ran down his jaw line before settling around Eric’s neck.

Cithrel squeezed, just tight enough to make Eric’s throat bob with excitement as pain and pleasure threatened to clash. “I do whatever I want with what’s mine.”

Eric squirmed, his breaths coming out as pants now. He wanted to get out of this creepy dark corridor and back to their rooms, to their bed. It should have pissed him off more that Cithrel was still calling Eric *his*, but he found it too hard to focus on that right then.

With all the smolder he could muster, he kept his attention fixed on Cithrel. The prince’s eyes were heavy with



lust and focused on his mouth. Eric leaned in, brushing his mouth along Cithrel's battle-hardened skin. "It's cute that you think I belong to you."

Faster than sin, Eric slipped out of Cithrel's hold and was halfway down the hallway when the prince caught up to him.

In a blink, Cithrel was at Eric's side, matching his stride with ease, a look of boredom on his face. Eric saw the truth behind that glacial stare, though. He saw the burning want and the hungry tick to his jaw as they walked side by side, no longer touching.

"Deny it all you want, Eric." Cithrel spoke so quiet Eric almost didn't hear him. "But it's my name you scream when you come all over yourself."

Eric bit the inside of his cheek, doing his best not to picture exactly what had Cithrel said and failing miserably. He picked up his pace back to their private quarters and he found Cithrel was doing the exact same.

Eric and Cithrel laid together, bedding tangled around their limbs, gazing up at the wood-clad ceiling. Cithrel held Eric close to his chest, a fresh gleam of sweat on his skin.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," Eric said, his fingers drawing invisible patterns on Cithrel's bare chest. "I wish we didn't have to go back to the rest of the world in the morning."

To his surprise, Eric meant it. He liked having time like this where he wasn't constantly looking over his shoulder or thinking twenty steps ahead of everyone else around him. To be able to shut his mind off and just *feel*—that was something he wanted more of, and knew he couldn't have.

Cithrel squeezed Eric tighter, his loose blond hair tickling Eric's cheek. "That's a dream we both have, Eric."

"But we all have our duty," Eric muttered, rolling his eyes. "I saved you the trouble of saying it."

The angel-faced prince clicked his tongue, looking indignant. "That is not what I was going to say."

Eric rolled to get a better look at Cithrel. The familiar ache of his back sung in his muscles as he did so. “Oh yeah? Then what were you going to say, Your Highness?”

The Fae prince’s eyes narrowed on Eric, as he considered whether to prove Eric wrong. Finally, though, he snorted at him, probably realizing he never stood a chance against Eric’s bright entreating hazel gaze.

He reached across the bed and a fresh gust of citrus went through the bedroom. When he turned back over to face Eric, there was a small, gnarled collection of roots. He held it out in his open palm.

When Eric looked closer, he realized the roots were tangled together in an intricate but somehow symmetrical pattern. He looked back up at Cithrel, his lips parted in surprise.

“What’s this?”

“I said I had some business I was taking care of before I found you, didn’t I?” When Eric cocked his head to the side, Cithrel added, “I told you I would find a way for you to trust me. I hope this helps.”

Eric looked back to the small bundle. In truth, he’d guessed what it was since he’d seen similar things to it in the marketplace where his old master did business. It was an enchanted box, usually with something even more precious inside. He’d never seen a box with this complex of an enchantment, though. Aether imbued of that magnitude would have cost a fortune. He couldn’t believe Cithrel was giving this to him.

Eric swallowed a lump of emotion. Slowly, he reached out to touch the enchanted box, but as soon as his fingertips touched the wood, the elaborate knot of tiny roots began to undo themselves before they opened. The tendrils of wood unfurled the same way a flower bloomed, revealing a ring.

The band was obsidian, a lot like the ring that Solonar had forced onto Eric, except for the sky-blue gemstone. It was asymmetrical and jagged, as if freshly unearthed and

unaltered. The longer Eric looked at the ring, the more it seemed alive. He swore the ring hummed, the way a cat purrs when it's with its owner. It was radiant\_and terrifying. Just what had Solonar put on his finger beforehand? Was it worse than the foreboding feeling that this blue ring gave him?

"Cithrel." Eric's face had gone pale. "What is this?"

Panic swirled in Eric's chest, raging like a blizzard. Cithrel studied Eric's change in expression and the prince's own expression faltered. Confusion and concern warred against each other before the hard planes of his face smoothed back over, composed.

"I'm sorry. I thought you would like knowing what my brother attached to you," Cithrel began, choosing his words carefully, as if the wrong ones might scare Eric off. "But I didn't like him giving you anything, so I would like you to willingly wear one from me. It's a protection ring. These kinds of rings are imbued with one's aether if something should happen and I can't be at your side. This one has some of my power in it—for you."

Eric bit down on his lip to hold in the warring feelings that threatened to spill out of him. Part of him wanted to tell Cithrel everything in that moment. If the cold and ruthless prince was willing to give some of his own aether to Eric, to know it would keep him safe, he felt like he owed Cithrel honesty. It was more than some of his power—it was a part of Cithrel's being.

"My brother would never tell you what his ring entails, for his own selfish reasons. But will you willingly wear *this* ring?" Cithrel's nervous tone cut through Eric's train of thought.

The Fae was opening up to him, tearing off a piece of himself for him, and Eric just sat there mute. "Of course, Cithrel," Eric said, plucking the ring from the unknotted roots.

He looked at his hand stupidly for a moment, hesitating, then slid it onto his index finger. As soon as the ring was in place, it resized itself, molding to Eric's finger. Then, Eric's blood sang.

*Thump.*

Eric's eyes went wide, as what felt like a heart attack rushed through his body. The sound of blood pulsating rang in his ears, sending black stars shooting across his vision.

*Thump.*

He felt it, felt Cithrel's aether invading his veins, radiating from the ring. The enchantment worked its way through Eric's body and the sensation was nothing but painful. Each heartbeat felt like he was being electrocuted and resounded throughout his whole body. It stole his breath.

*Thump.*

Eric gasped as the last of Cithrel's enchantment wormed its way inside blood and bone. He panted, catching his breath. For how much Cithrel's power tore him apart, the sting sent a thrill of delight through his nerves. Teetering on the precipice of pain and pleasure was ecstasy to Eric. He didn't know when he got a taste for this kind of indulgence, but now, he craved it. This sweet torture was his release.

"Are you alright, Eric?" Cithrel peered into his hazel eyes with bright arctic ones.

Eric looked back and his eyes shone. "I'm amazing. *This* is amazing, Cithrel." He held out his hand so that they could both look at the ring. "Truly, thank you."

Cithrel stared at Eric, hard, and if Eric didn't know any better, he'd think the prince was furious. He looked like he was struggling to say something, but the words were firmly lodged in his throat, choking him.

There was a flicker of what Eric realized was hope. Hope that Cithrel could really take his mask off with Eric. He coveted knowing who the real Cithrel was, wanted to steal that prince away for himself.

It was something he wasn't allowed to want, though, not when the truth inevitably came out. After all, they were a habit, a toxic compulsion for one another. That didn't change who they were as individuals. Cithrel was faithfully chained to

the empire and Eric was determined to tear their capital city down and abandon them.

Eric rolled away as if to sleep, their backs to one another as the aether-lit bedroom dimmed until they fell into quiet darkness for the night. He stared at the two rings now ensnared on his hands. Guilt reared up, plaguing his mind. Even though Cithrel's actions were embedded in his duty to the empire and his family, Eric knew there was more to it than just obligation. Yet, he laid there accepting the gift while plotting their destruction.

Sleep eventually claimed him, but he still didn't have an answer to his own question. Who was the real monster?

## Chapter Twenty-One

Everything was ringing. Why was the world so loud? No, not the world. Someone. Someone was screaming. Slowly, painfully so, the voice came into focus so Eric could understand. Fear jolted through him when he realized whose voice it was and what they were shouting over and over.

It was the baroness. She was screaming at Eric. They were back in court, with her chair made of stone shattered and the wooden floors splintered around it, forming a massive crater. The baroness stood at the center of the carnage, her face a bloodied and mangled mess. The crisp and expensive black and feathery clothing she usually wore was in tatters, hanging off her broken body in rags. Her fine skin was torn and gored and one of her eyes was forced shut from the swelling, but she still stared at Eric. Stared and screamed, her voice ringing.

Eric tried to cover his ears, to muffle the noise, but it was no use. She just got louder and louder. It hurt his ears and Eric was crying, begging her to stop, but she wouldn't listen. She just kept shouting louder and louder.

“You will be the ruin of the empire!”

Gasping for air, Eric clutched at his sweat-soaked bare chest. His fingers clawed along his old, jagged scars, as if he could somehow hold himself together amid the screaming. Another nightmare, except this one was worse than usual. It wasn't like the others, where they felt impossibly real. This one was like his own conscience was shouting at him, demanding that he find a scrap of his humanity.

A rough palm slid over Eric's shoulders and rubbed up and down his back. Cithrel's touch calmed him and he let the prince pull him close. Eric was damp with sweat and felt repulsive, ears weary with sleep, but Cithrel felt cool to the touch and another wave of calm cascaded over him. The prince was so reassuring with his presence alone. How was it that no one else saw the kindness and gentle way of him?

Eric knew why. Even he saw Cithrel as nothing more than a ruthless killer until they were forced to be together. Cithrel had spent so long wearing his mask that everyone around him forgot who he was without it.

Cithrel didn't say anything to Eric, he just held him, letting the sound of his steady breathing fill the night's quiet. He didn't need to say anything. That was more than enough for Eric. It was enough for Eric to forget about the clawing feeling of Olaera's final warning and drift back to sleep until morning.

Except, when morning came, Eric felt like he was still trapped in a nightmare. Everything seemed to be falling apart before him and there was nothing he could do about it. He felt helpless, as if all his careful calculations and nights without sleep never mattered.

Cithrel was pacing up and down his hallway, the missive crumpled in his fist. Hinni had looked stricken when she handed the message to Cithrel, like it had physically pained her to hand it to him, knowing what effect it would have.

By now, the news of Krysos's assault on the border of Lady Vessa's land had to have spread throughout the entire capital city. The palace was crawling with activity now, with several nobles in meetings, and Elasuin was coming and going from Cithrel's quarters. Honestly, Eric was surprised that Cithrel hadn't mobilized yet, but there must have been specific instructions for him to follow in that missive. Otherwise he couldn't imagine why the prince would still be here, oozing unease.

Krysos was making his move. It seemed he learned he wouldn't be able to have Eric killed by the assassins he kept sending. With him escalating things, it would inevitably come to light who was really helping the Fae king in the background, working against Alonetha, and that it likely wasn't Lord Aimar. Eric couldn't let that happen. He thought he had more time to do what he needed. He needed more time to get rid of Aimar—he needed to be the one to kill him.

Eric wanted to scream. Was it all really for nothing? Was that bastard Fae king going to ruin this for him?

*Son of a bitch!*

“Your Highness, Prince Commander,” a Fae soldier said, appearing in the doorway next to Hinni. “Her Imperial Majesty has asked for your final orders.”

Eric recognized the soldier, knew the near-translucent gray skin and long black hair that was always tied back tight from his glazed eyes. It was Sir Paeris, standing at attention and awaiting his commander’s reply. Even with his mouth closed, Eric could see the indents where Paeris’s long, sharpened teeth protruded from his mouth into his bottom lip. He was in full armor, every silver piece glinting in the light, making him stand out amongst the wood that covered Cithrel’s quarters. Paeris looked lethal and the unwavering stare he had for Cithrel promised bloodshed for their enemies.

“Tell the empress I’ll be there shortly,” Cithrel said. Once Paeris nodded and vanished, he turned to Eric. “I have to go, Eric. I don’t know how much time we’ll have. Once I know more, I’ll come find you, I promise.”

Those arctic eyes pinned Eric in place, as if memorizing the planes of his face. Then Cithrel was gone. Loneliness and gnawing worry took hold in Eric’s heart, dragging him down now that Cithrel wasn’t there to keep them at bay. It was suffocating, feeling as though his heart and mind were at war with one another, each one fighting for dominance.

Shaking his head, Eric chased away the thoughts that might plunge him into the worst parts of his psyche. He needed to make the most of this time he had to himself, without anyone’s eyes on him. Distractions couldn’t happen anymore, not with the baroness’s threats dwelling in his head.

Eric went back to his own room and found a pair of black leather training pants with padded knees and a fitted tunic that exposed the sides of his body far too much. Eric was used to the revealing clothing at this point, especially since it was clothing provided according to Luthais’s taste. Some of his scars peeked through the shirt, but more than that, Eric was brought up short by the definition his muscles had. He’d always been in shape, and after his time at the Adlar estate



he'd really thrown himself into being physically stronger, but this was exceptional. He wasn't built like Cithrel, but now his thin body was full of lean muscles. How had he not noticed?

Never mind. It wasn't important. He needed to stop ogling himself and get going. Casting another look over his shoulder, Eric made sure not even Hinni was aware of him, and he slipped out the door. He made sure to avoid all the main walkways of the palace as he made his way through the marbled and speckled halls. Aether-lit sconces were burning low this morning and the sky was dark, threatening a massive downpour.

Eric picked up his pace, his footsteps hitting the floor a little faster. Everything around him felt like a sign that something terrible was about to happen. His teeth ground together as he mulled over everything.

He still had no idea what Solonar was planning, if Olaera was cognizant that Eric was in danger of her spilling the truth at any moment, Aimar and Vessa still needed to be dealt with, and now Krysos was making his move.

*Damn it!*

Eric shoved through the library doors and the ancient archivist was there waiting for him. Gnosus glared at Eric, static eyes roaming. His withered and dried-out skin rumped further when he scowled.

"You shouldn't be here right now, creature," Gnosus said. "You're hard of hearing, it seems, since I have to tell you this often. Get out."

"It's good to see you too, Gnosus," Eric replied, voice laced with sarcasm. "I don't have much time. Actually, I'm out of time, and there's something I need to know for sure."

Eric found his hands trailing down to his pockets, as if reassuring himself. The ancient Fae never took his eyes off Eric, but he said nothing. Instead, he turned, the chains and ropes around his body jangling as he moved.

"Stupid creature." The librarian shook his head. "Hurry up, then. Be prepared to find more than what you seek."

Eric shivered, feeling a line of ice slide down his spine. He hated the way Gnosus spoke in cryptic warnings. It set him on edge every time.

Letting his aether pull him in the direction he wanted, Eric followed the invisible string that tugged at him, getting tighter and tighter as he closed in on the text. The old, weathered book was never in the same place, or where Eric left it. It was like the books moved themselves, had minds of their own. After what he'd seen in the Unseen Section, Eric believed it.

Finally, the tether attached to Eric's aether snapped in place and the power in his blood started to sing, crying out for the text before him. He was in a cramped aisle of the library, where some of the trees that grew in this area hung overhead. Leaves floated down from high above, littering the shelves and ground around him. He closed the distance, shimmying his way through the cramped space, and snatched the book from the shelves.

His fingers traced the cover of the forbidding book, sensing the power and knowledge in its pages. The last time he read this, Gnosus stopped him, warning him that he was being watched. Eric needed to read more, though. He needed to be prepared.

The spine cracked loudly as he opened it, echoing through the thin aisle, and he began flipping through the thick pages.

Oath binding.

Eric scanned the pages, re-reading what he learned last time. He knew it was rare and it was all a matter of dominance. Whoever performed the binding of the oath had to have more power than the recipient, just like Nithroel had done to her son, Solonar.

That meant if Solonar was in fact planning to break the Oath that kept him tied to Eric, he'd have to overpower his mother's magic. Eric's blood thrummed in his veins as he kept reading, his pulse speeding.

The text went into more detail of the requirements, with the plants and the aether-imbued gems, all of which Eric

understood already. He needed to know more than that, though. He kept flipping through the pages, reading faster and faster, frustration building and nerves fraying. Was there any way around the oath?

Eric flipped the page again and then he saw it. At the top of the page was a headline—*Breaking an Oath and Its Bindings*.

A sharp feeling dug at the back of Eric's head then, as if eyes were on him, burning holes into his flesh. His head whipped around the cramped quarters, but there was no sign of anyone. He cursed under his breath. Clutching the book tight, he began shuffling his way out of the aisle.

The book groaned under Eric's death grip on it as his knuckles whitened. There was no way he was going to let this book go. He couldn't risk Solonar finding this book or anyone else stumbling across it.

Paranoia crept into Eric's mind, his old friend since his return to Alonetha, and began burrowing into his thoughts. There was a good chance Solonar had come to the library in search of this text. He had to assume the crown prince had already found this book and come to the same conclusion Eric had. If Solonar was intent on breaking his oath, he'd need to find a way to become stronger than his mother. Or....

Eric squeezed the book to his chest and bolted from the Imperial Library. The feeling of being watched intensified and unease rippled under Eric's skin, crawling all over him. He ran faster, almost bowling over servants and other lesser nobles in his haste to get to his rooms.

The door slammed behind him as his chest heaved. The magic in the two rings on Eric's fingers drummed wildly, as if the protection enchantments were thrown into alarm. He was in danger; he was sure of it by now. The baroness might have been stealing money for herself, but she wasn't the one working with the Fae king. If it was Vessa and Aimar, then they knew Eric's movements and when he'd be alone.

Swallowing back down the trickle of fear, Eric shoved off the door and set about hiding the book. Hinni would go

looking around, but if there was someone spying on him and moving around the palace freely, he needed to be twice as careful. Stowing away a giant old book was easier said than done, though, especially in a palace where he had little privacy. Even less so, staying in the same quarters as one of the princes.

Eric crouched down, twisting so that he could reach underneath his bed. There was just enough room for his hands to reach under while holding the book. This would have to do. At the very least, if someone got ahold of the book here, Eric would know about it.

With a long drawn-in breath, Eric willed the aether in his blood to wake up. Thorns and vines erupted from his palms, coiling around the book like its prey. More and more fetid barbed vines spilled from Eric, encasing the book entirely, and clinging to the bottom of the bed. By the time Eric was done, he had built a trap of his own aether around the book, his blackened and writhing thorns stilling as they fused themselves to the bottom of the bed. If someone got this book, there would be blood, or signs of other aether at work to get to their prize.

It would have to be enough.

Eric spent the rest of the day running laps around the training grounds, which were unusually quiet. Everyone else was readying themselves to meet the Belfiran Fae at the border of the empire. War was a night, maybe two, away. Eric didn't stop running even after his lungs burned like they were full of acid. He kept going after his legs felt like they'd give up. He kept going until his head swam, stars danced in his eyes, and his stomach rolled. Only then did Eric stop running. He let his aether flow freely in his body, coursing through every fiber of his muscles and enhancing him. He was superhuman when he let his power loose, when he let it feed on the weakness in him.

By the time Eric stopped, he realized he'd run three times as long as he used to be able to. He looked down at his own body, at the steady rise and fall of his chest as he caught his breath. The pain against his skull was a dull throbbing.

Nothing he couldn't manage. The Marking on his arm looked unchanged; the same black lines burned into his skin stared up at him.

But he wasn't the same as before. The aether wasn't killing him, eating away at his life like it was before.

A smile crept up his face. Eric was changed, somehow. Stronger. His physical body was more muscled, and he had incredible endurance, but this was more than just that.

Eric had more power.

*Perfect.*

Now all he had to do was wait until nighttime fell and he could make his next move. He knew what he had to do to keep his eye on Solonar, to make sure if something changed between them and the oath, he'd know and have a plan. He had the book to keep other eyes from it. The next problem he needed to take care of was Olaera.

She needed to stay quiet.

Back in his rooms, he bit into his meal with a renewed hunger. After the superhuman training he'd put his body through, he didn't realize how starved he was.

"Do you think he's coming back tonight, Hinni?" Eric asked.

He was already on his second helping of charred meat and a heaping pile of steamed vegetables. Of course, Hinni was prepared and had an entire basket full of honeyed buns for Eric as well.

Hinni shook her head. "It's unlikely, Eric. With discussions such as these, he will need to make many final decisions for their plans of attack and retaliation. The lives of countless soldiers and warriors are in his hands. As Prince Commander of the Imperial Army, it's his burden to bear and something he takes seriously. As well, he must now consider your part in the war."

"My part?" Eric's eyes were hooded.

He knew what his part was in the war, but he wanted to hear what Hinni had to say about it. Maybe her words could offer him more insight.

“As the Marked One, of course the symbol of Alonetha’s power and legacy must be present on the front lines. However, he’ll have to make changes to prioritize your safety, as you’re not a warrior in your own right. I’m sure your life weighs heavy on his conscience.”

Eric snorted, bitterness seeping into his tone before he could help it. “Of course. The empress wouldn’t be pleased if her piece of propaganda was no longer of use.”

“No, Eric.” Hinni turned her black eyes on him, full of worry. “He cares deeply for you. You were never just the Marked One to him. I’m sure he feels guilty for how much your life outweighs the lives of countless Fae, regardless of your title.”

His eyes widened a little as his lips parted. That caught him off guard, and he didn’t know what to say back. The two of them stayed quiet for a while. As soon as Eric finished the rest of his meal, in uncomfortable silence, he slipped back into his bedroom.

Eric lay in bed, the covers pulled over him, and stared blankly at the wood-clad ceiling. Was what he was doing right? Everything he’d been planning, the revenge, all behind Cithrel’s back. Cithrel was trying so hard to gain Eric’s trust and all he was doing about it was destroying the world around the prince. If he stopped now, would it be enough for him? He could turn back now, leave his plans abandoned and give Cithrel the chance he desperately wanted. Was there a chance that Eric could find a different way to be happy?

Eric reached up and looked at the sky-blue stone on his ring. Even now, he felt a piece of Cithrel’s aether imbued in the gem. He’d willingly given a piece of himself for Eric’s sake. But....

Eric’s hand fell back down to his side and an eerie calm settled over him.

But it wasn't enough for Eric. The jagged and necrotic void inside him could only be satisfied by one thing.

Retribution.

Why had he been so against killing before? Was it his way of holding on to his old life? He'd been so afraid of letting go and allowing himself to become someone new, to move on, that he'd crippled himself.

The truth was that the old Eric was long gone. He'd died that day in the woods six years ago. That Eric was a ghost.

The moon was cloaked in thick, menacing clouds. The wind howled against the window, blowing relentlessly at the ivy and carpeted flowers that grew all around the palace walls outside.

It was time.

Eric threw off his covers and slipped out of his room, fully dressed in all-black skintight clothes. There was no sign of Hinni or Cithrel, and soundlessly he sneaked from their private quarters and made his way outside. The wind was even louder there, wailing as if it were already in mourning for the blood that would be shed soon in war.

Still, Eric slunk through the darkness, avoiding all of the guards stationed about. He couldn't afford to be seen by anyone, not where he planned to go. He made it to the edge of the palace and to the annex where no plants crept over stone. The stench of death rose in the air, swept up by the angry winds, as Eric reached the darkened corridor.

The Black Thorn.

Eric drew in a steadying breath. With his shoulder set, he plunged into the dungeons and towards the place he never wanted to be again. The dank and foul-smelling corridors filled Eric's lungs and he gagged the lower down the winding stairs he went. The sounds of sobbing, pleading, screaming, and roaring echoed in the darkness. This was where all the worst criminals and despicable Fae went when they deserved a fate worse than death.

How could Cithrel have locked Eric away in here a year ago? This place had almost killed him, poisoning him from the inside out. The deeper he went, the more he felt the sinister touch of the Black Thorn's power on him. It was invasive, demanding, hungry. The poisonous dungeon was like having a hive of insects in his brain, scrambling his thoughts and filling his mind with impossible nightmares.

Still, Eric went deeper and deeper until he heard her. She was cackling to herself, chittering and hissing, like whatever she was doing was hilarious. It turned his blood cold, stilling in his veins.

Eric stood before her on the other side of her prison cell.

She was a shell of her former glory, little more than a stinking husk of the majestic and proud female Fae. "Good evening, Olaera," Eric said.

Her head swiveled around like a bird's, and she smiled wide. Far too wide. "Wretched thing. Filthy thing. Evil thing!"

The Black Thorn had already crept inside her mind and eaten away at her sanity. She seemed to struggle to form proper sentences. The enchanted brooch he'd slipped onto her had done its job, keeping her voice sufficiently strangled as she was driven mad. He thought the enchantment would have worn off by now but he guessed not. That was a good sign for him, but he needed to be sure she wouldn't be coherent enough to speak the truth about him.

"It looks like you're enjoying your new accommodations. Although, I'm sure this is less comfortable than your mansion."

"Fool." Olaera jabbed a dirty finger at Eric in the dark. "Fool fool fool!"

Eric sighed. "I might be a fool, yes, but what about you?" He gestured back at her, waving his hand. "How pathetic for a wealthy noble such as yourself to be so blinded by greed? All your ambition did was lead you into Lord Aimar's toxic embrace. What did you hope to gain by working with him? He never does anything unless it benefits him. Only him. You



were a fool to trust him. Now look where you are. Wasting away, being driven past the borders of insanity, dying every possible death until you're nothing but bones and dust. You should have stayed away from him all those years ago when you sold me to him. If you had, you might not already be half-mad and have ruined your long life. Instead, in your final moments, you can remember my face and know one thing. You're here because of *me*."

The disgraced baroness's hawk eyes burned with a sudden clarity; her searing rage given voice. "Lies after lies. You should have been cursed by the aether instead of blessed by it. You're nothing but a snake in a bed of thorns!"

"You're right," Eric said.

He raised his hand, revealing the rotted thorns that had been quietly spilling from his hands this entire time. They wrapped themselves around the baroness, squeezing her tighter and tighter, their barbs cutting into her skin and drinking deep as her black blood spilled from her. Eric felt the surge of power as his vines crushed Olaera.

Her eyes bulged, full of fear and horror, knowing what was about to happen.

Then Eric crushed his hand into a fist and his thorns impaled the Fae in their grip. Her body exploded into a mess of black blood and tangled pieces, leaving nothing but a mess of gore.

Eric just looked on, his gaze hooded, but there was a shine to his stare. A light that was one of relief—of pleasure, even.

He sighed again before he turned and made his way out of the Black Thorn. That was it. No more baroness. One less problem to worry about; one less truth to fear coming out.

"What a sight to behold."

Eric's heart stopped, the blood in his veins icing over. He had just emerged from the dungeons into the darkened corridor where no plant grew. Everything came to a screeching halt around him as the voice called out to him.

“It’s so late at night, yet who could’ve imagined that the blessed Marked One would be skulking about in the shadows. And coming from the dungeons, of all places?”

Lord Aimar pulled back his hood, all-white eyes almost vibrant in the clouded night. Aimar wore a thick black cloak, but underneath Eric saw a shining silver shirt like chainmail clinging to his thin frame. True to form, his long, pointed ears were clad in expensive and rare jewelry, his neck an intricate mess of necklaces. His pants looked more like hundreds of pieces of fabric tied together tightly like rope, as if one of his slaves painstakingly wrapped each piece onto Aimar. His red hair was braided, just like Cithrel’s hair usually was. He looked so puzzled, but Eric saw the ecstasy brimming in his eyes, in the tightness of his muscles, as if restraining himself.

“I wonder what I’d find if I went down there?” Aimar gestured to the darkened corridors leading down to the Black Thorn.

Eric opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. They died on his tongue, shriveled and withered in fear.

*No.*

Lord Aimar, of all Fae, had seen him. He saw Eric, when no one else should have, and now he had Eric’s life in his hands. *Again.*

*No!*

“You were always so shy, my pet,” Aimar drawled as he stepped closer to him in the howling night. “I was worried all your time with the fourth prince would sully that part of you, but I’m glad to see it’s very much intact.”

“Shut up,” Eric finally ground out.

Aimar needed to stop talking. The lord’s honeyed words were laced with venom, sinking under his skin and festering. Eric’s nails dug into his palms hard enough to draw blood. The anger was blinding, tinging the corners of his eyes as his aether started to break free of his control.

“Hmm, so you did learn some disobedience from that prince.” Aimar clicked his tongue in distaste. “No matter. Now

that I have you, I can fix it.”

“You won’t fucking touch me.”

Eric’s heart was beating too fast, too hard in his chest. His vision was blurring, and the little color in the night bled away from his sight. It was all he could do to maintain the thread of control he had.

“If you don’t want me to speak of what you were doing out here tonight, then I think you’ll be more than willing to let me touch you.”

*What?*

Eric went completely still, as if Aimar’s words had turned him to stone. He stared, not wholly accepting what the Fae lord was saying.

“You should know by now that everything has a price, my pet.” Aimar wagged his finger. “My silence has a simple price. Your body. I won’t tell a soul that I saw you tonight, but in exchange, I want you back. You’re far too irreplaceable and it pains me to see you with those other males. They have no idea how precious you are. They’ve never heard how exquisite your screams are. Ahh, my skin is tingling just thinking about it.”

The Fae lord tipped his head back and ran his fingers along his neck, reliving the memories and the sensation.

Eric’s body was trembling. He hadn’t realized it, but hearing Aimar talk about him like that had pushed him to the edge. He was at the precipice of tipping over into a pit of darkness.

No. He needed to maintain control. He couldn’t lose control.

Then Eric felt Aimar’s thrall graze along his skin.

The rest of the world fell away at the sensation of the lord’s aether prodding at him. It searched for any weakness, any way into Eric’s mind to take control. The sick bastard was desperate to have him, willing or not. Memories flooded into

Eric's mind's eye, flashing faster and faster with painful clarity. All those years of torture at the hands of this Fae.

*Pet.*

Eric's hands shook at his sides. His eyes had gone wide, staring off at nothing, trying to keep ahold of himself.

*My pet.*

Anger blazed in him, burning away every other thought and impulse but one. He wanted to kill Lord Aimar. He wanted to rip him to pieces, to end him. He never wanted to feel that piece of shit's aether touch his skin ever again.

"Come back to your master," Aimar's sick voice cooed. "You always belonged to me, dear pet."

The thread frayed and snapped.

Eric looked up at Lord Aimar, his face a blank slate, all emotion and color drained from him. Black aether sizzled in his hands, pure energy crackling like a hellstorm as his power bled out from him, pouring uncontrollably. The world tinged to red then. The full potential of his power took up residence in his body, nestling into his heart. A weight fell on his head and Eric had a detached sort of awareness of the disembodied crown floating above him.

Eric was a wraith.

His hand lashed out faster than any eye could follow and thorns erupted from the ground, skewering Lord Aimar. Hundreds of vines coalesced out of the earth and stabbed and stabbed at the Fae's body.

Not enough. It wasn't enough.

Aimar opened his mouth to scream for help, but Eric couldn't have that. It would ruin the moment. Eric clawed his other hand in the air and then Aimar, the monster of Eric's nightmares, was gagging, choking, as barbed vines began to spew out of his mouth. They writhed like living beings, coated in black blood as they tore Aimar's insides apart.

It still wasn't enough.

Eric stepped closer, his hands ripping and clawing at the air in a masochistic symphony. Blood and flesh flew, staining the ground around Lord Aimar and coating Eric as he neared the Fae.

Eric didn't stop. He only moved faster and faster, tearing away at Aimar, piece by piece, without relent.

His eyes were wide and unblinking. His nostrils flared as his mouth curved into a vicious smile.

More and more.

Not enough.

Eric's hands froze in the air. They were warm and coated in a hot liquid, but he wasn't aware of what. He felt like he wasn't quite present, almost like he was in a dream. He stood over the mess at his feet that was once a living being. Then he noticed what his hands were soaked in.

Lord Aimar's blood.

Eric sighed and felt his arms slacken. Laughter bubbled up his throat and then he was cackling alone in the dark. Pure bliss filled him, overflowing and radiating off him. He grinned at the moon through peals of laughter, riding the high of his own personal justice. The countless scars that marked his body were his own personal armor now, proof of what he'd suffered and that he'd paid each lashing back ten-fold.

There was one less monster in Alonetha.

Lord Aimar was finally dead.

"Eric?"

*No. Please, no.*

His private moment of ecstasy came crashing down at the sound of his name. Instead of delight, the color drained from his cheeks and terror threatened to swallow him.

Eric turned around and looked at Cithrel, who saw him standing over a dead noble of the Imperial Court and covered in the Fae's blood.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Eric imagined this is what wild animals must feel like when they were wounded and cornered. There was no way out of this situation, no lie that would be convincing enough. How had everything gone so wrong after how hard he'd worked to orchestrate his revenge? If it weren't for Aimar's stalking, then he could have taken care of the Fae lord in his own time and none of this would be happening. The sky wouldn't be falling before him.

The wind wailed around them again and Eric shivered. The Fae blood covering his skin had gone cold. He felt so cold and isolated as he stared at Cithrel. The fourth prince still hadn't said a word. Those piercing blue eyes that were so unfeeling were now gazing at Eric, swimming with countless emotions.

Cithrel's gaze didn't stray from Eric's. Angry tears rolled down Eric's cheeks and mixed with the black blood splattered across his face. He was so close. It was within his grasp to have it be over, one step closer to achieving it all. Even as his world crumbled and his heart was filled with a bottomless aching, he didn't regret his actions. He wouldn't change what he'd done. Aimar, that sick bastard, had tried to enthrall him and rape him *again*. The thought alone sent his heart into a rhythm of fury.

"I don't regret it," Eric said, his voice thick. "What I did. I'd do it a thousand times over if I could. It felt so fucking good to finally be rid of him, to watch him feel everything I felt at his hands for years."

Cithrel took a tentative step closer, his emotions in check now. He was guarded. "I know."

"He was a monster." Eric realized that his hands were shaking. He was panting but he felt cold, frozen to the bone. "He was never going to stop. Even after I escaped him, he was still obsessed with me. I had to end it."

Cithrel stood before Eric now and looked down at him. "I know."

Eric scoffed. Yes, Aimar was a Fae noble, who was important to the Imperial Family. But was Cithrel going to turn him in for this? Over that fucking rapist prick? He jerked his chin to Aimar's corpse, what was left of it, and bitterness laced his words. "Do what you have to, then."

"Eric." Thick arms wrapped around him and pulled him into Cithrel's chest. "If you didn't kill him, then I would have. Knowing what he did to you will torture my thoughts for the rest of my life. I'm sorry that I couldn't erase the pain he caused you. It tears me apart. But I'd happily let it flay me alive if it meant your nightmare ended. I don't care what you are, Eric. I love you."

It hit Eric then with the force of a lightning strike. Why was it so hard for him to see all this time? He and Cithrel were the same. There was no hero in Eric's life, no miraculous savior. He shouldn't have fought it for so long because they were never anything else.

They were villains.

Just like that, the tears refused to stop falling. Eric hid his face in Cithrel's warm body, squeezing the Fae tighter, and sobbed. His head and heart were a fucking mess. He'd just killed Lord Aimar, his rapist, who was also Fae nobility. He was so sure he was destined to waste away in the Black Thorn that hearing those words come from Cithrel's mouth elated him. The shackles that kept Eric imprisoned with his fear, his nightmares, were finally broken. Someone saw the ugly, scarred, and broken pieces of him and didn't turn away.

He pulled away to look up at Cithrel through his tears and saw a future in those intense blue eyes. They were an endless sky of days they could have together. Eric saw it, a life he could have with someone else. And it didn't scare the shit out of him. Cithrel stared back at him, like he just might be seeing the same thing in Eric.

"I love you, too. I love you, Cithrel."

Then Eric kissed Cithrel and the world exploded into infinity.

Their lips met and Eric felt like he was intoxicated, like he was addicted to the taste of Cithrel's mouth. He couldn't get enough; he was desperate for more. Citrus flooded his senses as he tasted salt and felt the heat on their lips. Every nerve in his body was alight and burning and he was soaring. Cithrel was gentle at first, but when Eric molded himself against the prince and found his tongue, then there was only hunger. His dick throbbed with a sudden and desperate need. They couldn't taste enough of each other.

Eric could taste the salt of his tears and Aimar's foul blood on his lips mixing with Cithrel's. He nipped at the prince's bottom lip, starved for more. Cithrel growled, half in warning and half pleading for Eric to keep going. And he knew he was ruined when it only made him harder. He wanted every inch of the prince, to taste all of him. Then he wanted to be devoured by Cithrel.

The prince pressed into Eric harder, trapping him in his arms. He was demanding, his tongue forcing itself into Eric's mouth. He was as crazed as Eric was, tasting every inch of his mouth. They fought for dominance as they kissed, neither one slowing. It wasn't gentle, or soft, or beautiful. It was hard, angry, carnal.

When they pulled away from each other, Eric's lips were swollen and there was a haze of lust in his eyes, but he noticed that Cithrel's soft white tunic was now covered in smears of black blood. The Fae lord's blood.

Eric had been so consumed by Cithrel and their descent together that he'd forgotten about the dead body lying out in the open. There could have been countless knights or guards who would have been able to happen upon them and see what Eric had done.

His heart started to thump erratically at how careless he'd been. He needed to take care of the situation, now, before it was too late. The thought of damning Cithrel along with him was like a lead weight in his chest. That could not happen.

"I need to take care of the body," Eric said, pulling away from Cithrel.



Already, the slight degree of separation was like losing a limb. His body ached for the feel of the prince on him again, but it was time to focus. No more mistakes.

Eric got to his feet, his mind working on a good place to bury the body. With his aether it would be easy enough. But he had to choose a location in the Wilder Woods where it would be years before anyone had a chance of finding Aimar. He was deep in thought when Cithrel's voice broke the quiet.

"I know where to take him," the fourth prince said. "I can do it. You should go back and get cleaned up. It'll be easier for me to explain if I'm seen by any of my knights. If they see you there will be too much suspicion."

Eric stiffened. So, he was respected by the Fae, but they still disliked him. The levels of distrust for a human ran deep in the capital city, regardless of his decision to return and his endorsement of the Imperial Family. Of course they didn't like him. The force of reality being brought down on him was enough to erase the lust pouring from him and fill his mind with the real reason for his return. It began to keep Bryce safe, but now it was so much more than that.

It always had been. Eric came back for himself.

"No, I'm going with you." Eric shoved past Cithrel and heaved up the massacred mess of Aimar. "I won't let you do everything for me. I did this. I'll be the one responsible."

Cithrel, the beautiful monster, acted as if Eric hadn't spoken and stretched his hand out into the night. Then the howling wind dulled around them as the hum of a Fae Path sounded. The glowing light of the portal illuminated them, highlighting the horror that was Eric covered in death.

"Follow me," Cithrel said.

Eric shook his head with a snort. "Don't tell me what to do."

He followed the prince through the portal, dragging the pieces of Aimar. The first thing Eric noticed as he came through the Fae Path was the utter silence that surrounded them. His footsteps crunching on the leaves that had fallen to

the earth were the only sounds. Somehow, Cithrel managed to avoid making a single sound with his footsteps. The next thing that caught Eric's attention was the familiarity of this area in the Wilder Woods.

Dread knotted in his stomach. He'd been here before. Not just in these woods, but in this exact area. The trees were so overgrown there was almost zero light that filtered through the great branches. The roots of the trees broke through the ground, winding and cresting like earthen waves.

This was where Eric had tried escaping, the night he first met Cithrel and his world shifted forever. It was the night he saw his only allies murdered before his eyes by the Fae he loved.

Why would Cithrel bring them here? How could he think this wouldn't hurt Eric by making him relive that night? He already visited this place in his nightmares far too often.

This was who Cithrel was, though. He wasn't a prince in shining armor who would come to his rescue and fix everything. He was a mythical being, covered in the blood of his enemies and unforgiving.

Cithrel was the Prince of Blades. He was a demon.

And Eric still loved him, because he wasn't a good person, either. He loved Cithrel, but it didn't stop his desire to ruin what Cithrel valued and protected every day.

Eric dropped Aimar's body, treating it worse than trash. He shook his hands, trying to banish some of the lord's blood from his skin. The sooner he crushed this sick freak's carcass under the earth, the better he would feel. He wanted that ecstasy back, the feeling of unfiltered bliss coursing through him again. He wanted to watch Aimar's mangled form be utterly destroyed.

"You're sure this place is hidden enough?" Eric asked.

He already knew it was because it was the route Eric had chosen over a year ago when he first tried to escape. It was harder to navigate, which made it harder to track or search

through. Only someone as powerful as a prince could have followed him through here and found him so quickly.

“I’m sure,” Cithrel answered, crossing his arms over his chest. “You can get rid of him here. This area of the woods is under the supervision of my knights and guards. No one traverses this area, whether to forage or hunt. There’s no reason for Fae to come through this area.”

He flashed Eric a knowing look. Damn it, he looked too good when he quirked his mouth like that. He wanted that expression to only be for him, to hoard it like his treasure.

“Good.” Eric turned his attention to the body and his eyes glazed over, the hatred sizzling under his skin. “I hope the worms take their time devouring you. Rot in hell, you fucking bastard.”

Cithrel stepped forward and his hand fell on Eric’s shoulder. He glared ahead at the body at their feet. “May the aether curse you and the earth reject you.”

Aether ignited in Eric’s veins. He called his power forward, and gnarled and putrid thorns burst from the earth, snaring around the lord. They wound their hungry barbs around his gored corpse, coiling tighter and tighter. Eric’s eyes blazed with malice and triumph as his hands clawed, and then his blackened vines pulled the source of his nightmares under. Soil rumbled and churned as Eric pulled the body deeper and deeper. He didn’t stop; he just kept pulling Aimar deeper and deeper until he couldn’t sense his own power anymore.

Eric clapped a hand over his mouth then to stifle his laughter. He couldn’t take his eyes off the ground where the Fae was now buried.

*Dead. Dead, dead, dead!*

He must be losing his mind. Eric couldn’t help himself and then both of his hands were over his mouth, smothering the giggles that wanted to tear from his throat.

Cithrel’s hand squeezed his shoulder.

The walls of the world came rushing back, closing back in around him and bringing him back to reality.

*Oh. Right.*

“Let’s go,” Eric said once he got ahold of himself. “I’m done here.”

“Good, because I’m not done with you, Eric. I’m not even close to having enough of you.”

Eric’s eyes sparked, reignited with a desire he hadn’t felt in too long—well, other than half an hour ago. He wanted to be wrecked by Cithrel, wanted the prince to destroy him and rewrite all the scars on his body.

“Hurry up then, Prince Commander.”

He swore he saw Cithrel get hard at Eric addressing him by his military title.

Then they were falling through a new Fae Path and collapsing hard on the smooth hardwood of Cithrel’s private quarters. Eric’s back slammed on the wood as Cithrel’s rough hands pressed down on his arms, pinning him with enough force to bruise.

Yes. He wanted him to squeeze harder. Eric felt his dick hardening as he was pinned beneath Cithrel.

Eric shoved at him, challenging him, prodding at his pride. Cithrel answered in kind, just the way Eric wanted, and slammed him back down onto the hardwood floor. Planks splintered and the floor cracked around him as he hit the ground harder.

It felt so good, having the aether flowing through him, heightening his desire and pleasure. It might have been messed up that he found a new pleasure in pain, but this was different. This was his choice; it was something he wanted. It wasn’t something that was taken from him, stolen from him. It made Eric feel powerful. Stronger.

He felt invincible.

Cithrel ripped at Eric’s torn and bloody clothing, shearing it from his body and leaving his lean frame exposed. They were both panting, frantic to feel each other. Cithrel ground his

hard length into Eric and Eric's dick twitched in response. He moaned, his self-control fracturing.

"I need you to fuck me," Eric breathed. "I need you to ruin me right fucking now."

Cithrel growled, eyes hooded and dark. That was all the encouragement the prince needed. His hands traced over every ridge, every mark on Eric's naked flesh, finding his pants and sliding them down until his ass was exposed.

Eric moaned into Cithrel's mouth as the prince's fingers found him. His back arched, his dick straining. Every nerve ending was alive and electric. His body was writhing, he needed to feel more, it wasn't enough, he needed all of it, everything. All of Cithrel.

"Please, Cithrel," he panted.

Cithrel obeyed, dominating Eric. A devilish grin played on his lips, his blue eyes shining. Then he flipped Eric over, shoving him face down. His hands gripped either side of his ass, squeezing hard.

The Fae prince's tongue was heaven as he licked his hole. He felt his hot breath on his skin as Cithrel teased his entrance, tasting and worshipping him. Eric's nails dug into the floor, scratching the destroyed wood further. He was losing his mind and he pushed his ass into Cithrel's face hard, eager for more.

This heaven was hell.

Then Cithrel slid two fingers into Eric as he tongued him, one hand gripping his hip to keep him pinned as he took his time. The pads of his fingers found the spot and Eric cried out. He was too desperate, his patience gone.

Eric writhed, precum spilling from his tip. Then he gripped his own cock. He began stroking himself in time with Cithrel's fingers as they stroked the perfect spot, his tongue relentless.

"Fuck, Cithrel."

"I didn't say you could come."

Cithrel's words were furious and before Eric could react, Cithrel's hands dug into his hip, no doubt leaving deep angry

red marks, and he threw Eric onto his back again. He was so fast, and the scent of his aether was like a drug to Eric. It was dizzying as he inhaled the citrus and lay there, at his mercy.

Eric was in agony, his cock twitching and begging for release. But then chains manifested from thin air and Eric knew out of instinct this was Cithrel's aether. The chains wrapped around Eric's arms and tightened around him until they dragged his hands up and out of reach of his dick, out of reach from Cithrel.

"You are *mine*."

His mind was a fog, his face flushed and panting. His hips rolled, trying to get closer to Cithrel. "Then prove it."

Cithrel pulled back to free himself, and his length sprung free. He was so hard for him it made Eric even more crazed, if that was possible.

Eric fought his restraints, relishing in the bite of the metal on his skin. It just proved to irritate Cithrel, and then his demonic Fae prince was above him, features shadowed. Citrus and sweat mixed in the air as Eric leaned up to meet Cithrel the rest of the way. His lips crashed against the prince, groaning deep. The prince had Eric splayed before him as they kissed, Eric's leg over his shoulder and his other hand had a rough grip on Eric's hip. Just as Cithrel was distracted by Eric's hungry mouth, Eric pulled back and bit down hard on his neck. He tasted sweat and blood.

With a hiss of pain, Cithrel plunged into him without mercy. He wasn't going to be gentle; he was going to take what was his.

Eric cried out in surprise, pain, pleasure, he didn't know. He didn't care. Cithrel's pace was punishing as he pulled all the way out and then pushed into him with his full length. There was no rhythm, no beauty, only hard and relentless fucking.

Eric felt like he couldn't breathe, couldn't get enough. He pressed himself harder against Cithrel, wanting to mold their bodies together as he was filled with the prince. His skin

burned and he was moaning, biting his lip to keep himself from cumming as long as possible.

Letting go of Eric's hip, Cithrel reached a hand up and gripped Eric's chin. He yanked his face down hard and forced Eric to meet his gaze. It was like looking into an ocean on fire.

"Look at me when you cum."

Cithrel pumped faster into Eric, reaching his own climax, as sounds of their flesh meeting flesh filled the darkness.

It was all Eric could take and then he fell apart. His release exploded and he came onto his own chest. He tightened around Cithrel's cock as he rode out his release and the prince sucked in a sharp breath through clenched teeth.

Then the prince followed Eric into oblivion and heat filled him as Cithrel came inside him. For a broken and endless moment, they were nothing but heavy breaths and twisted limbs, basking in the euphoria.

In a gust of orange and lemon, the chains wrapped around Eric's arms vanished and his body went limp, momentarily satiated. He sighed as the hard planes of Cithrel's body pressed against his chest. Their sweat-slicked bodies clung together as he caught his breath.

"I need to clean you up," Cithrel whispered into Eric's ear, his voice thick. "I need to take care of what's mine."

He pulled back to look down at Eric before lifting him up and carrying him to the bathing room.

Eric grabbed the back of Cithrel's neck. "I don't belong to you."

How many times had he uttered those words? How many times did he really mean it? Certainly not now. He just liked the fight, liked being disobedient. Cithrel's mouth curved into a scowl, but Eric saw the glint in his gaze.

They both liked to play this little game of theirs.

After their bath, and after Cithrel was done taking his time with Eric, one leisurely stroke after another until Eric was driven mad with pleasure, they fell into bed together. The

smell of soap clung to their skin as Eric curled into Cithrel's bare chest.

He was covered in bruises and his entire body ached, but he'd never felt better, never felt happier to be in his own skin. He liked this new Eric, the new him. Even the part of him that hadn't forgotten what tomorrow would bring. The final piece of his vengeance.

Eric was going to kill the Fae king—and he was going to enjoy it.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

Eric was trapped. One on side, Cithrel walked with him, eyes trained forward on their surroundings, but his aura felt like iron. The power he exerted with his aether spilling from him was crushing Eric. On the other side, Solonar sauntered too close to Eric, their shoulders brushing far too often to be coincidence. He felt the crown prince's eyes on him constantly as they walked through the wooded perimeter of Lady Vessa's land. Solonar was ridiculously possessive of Eric, especially when they couldn't stand each other. Or rather, he was possessive of anything that wasn't his, of anything that Cithrel had touched.

It was the next day, close to dusk. The night of killing their inhibitions had ended and the dark days had begun once again. It seemed that when Cithrel found Eric standing over Aimar's body, he'd been only then leaving his meetings with the empress. They had solidified their plans for retaliation and that included Eric's presence; the Marked One was to be on the front line. Eric's presence meant several other things, though, namely Solonar being at Eric's side. He was still oath-bound to Eric, so if he wanted to keep his place as heir to the throne, he needed to keep Eric alive.

Cithrel and Nithroel had gone half mad coordinating how to protect their two greatest assets for the warfront, given that the two of them would be shoulder to shoulder. They would be a near unstoppable force with their overwhelming aether gifts combined, but they would also be the Fae king's number one target.

He wouldn't say it out loud, but Eric hoped Krysos would find him. It would make it easier to end him.

After Nithroel was given a solution that satisfied her, and Cithrel's growing worry for Eric was addressed, the three of them had to set out for the border immediately. They took a Fae Path to get to the edge of Lady Vessa's land. From there, the three of them went together on foot—in far too close quarters with each other.

Eric was seconds away from snapping at Solonar to back off when Cithrel shifted, halting them in place. Solonar fell into that stillness that only Fae could manage, and Eric froze instantly. It had been raining all day, and the fearsome gray clouds had finally burst. Despite the downpour, Eric heard nothing else in the woods with them. But if Cithrel was on alert, then so was Eric.

The fourth prince was at his brother's side in a flash. "Do you feel it too?"

Solonar nodded and Eric felt left out. He didn't feel a thing apart from the aethers of the princes.

Cithrel's mouth hardened. His older brother had confirmed something grim. "Stay with Eric. I'm going to investigate. Sir Elyion is aware of our location; he's attuned to my aether, so if anything happens, he'll portal to you both with reinforcements."

"Run along then," Solonar sighed, like he knew all of this already.

Cithrel's jaw hardened as he looked at Solonar and then cast Eric another worried glance. "The rings will protect you, even if he does not," he said to him.

The comment earned a scowl from Solonar, but Cithrel ignored it. Eric gave him an honest smile, which Cithrel returned even though Solonar could see the display of emotion, and then summoned a Fae Path and was through it. The two of them were alone in the woods, rain pouring around them, and now they were stuck waiting.

Eric rubbed at his forehead, feeling the beginnings of a headache. He was days and days behind on sleep by now and all his training and sneaking around at night was catching up to him. It seemed even with all his improvements he couldn't escape the recoil of his aether entirely.

"Is it painful?" The question caught Eric off-guard, and he blinked, bringing his attention to the crown prince.

"What?"

Eric didn't think the Fae prince cared about his comfort, or about him at all for that matter. Solonar just stared, expectant. The arrogance hung off his shoulders as if his emperor's mantle was already there.

"Using your aether. Is it painful for you?"

"At first it was." Eric answered honestly, to his own surprise. "But I learned how to better control it when I was a captive in Belfir. And back in California, uh, the severed world, I guess, it goes dormant, so I didn't even feel its presence. Plus, with all the training I've undergone since I came back, I can manage now."

Solonar sucked his teeth, unsure if he was satisfied with Eric's answer. Eric waited for him to make some snide comment, but he just stared, studying him, looking for an answer to a question Eric didn't understand.

The headaches weren't as bad since Eric returned to the Fae world, and he wasn't sure why. At first, he thought it was a result of all the training and practice he'd put himself through. But by now, he could tell it was something else. He used so much of his aether day to day that his nose should be bleeding non-stop, yet he felt fine the majority of the time. What was it about being back now that made his body able to endure the recoil of using his aether? Had Solonar done something permanently for Eric's sake? He was the one that had even made it possible for Eric to go home, to see his brother again. He had let Eric go.

Eric laughed to himself. Of course not. The crown prince didn't do things for other people. He did whatever he felt would get him closer to the throne.

Solonar was planning something behind everyone's backs, just like Eric, and he was going to be prepared for when the crown prince made his move.

"Fine. Now that we're alone, though, we need to discuss how I'm going to get you out of here and far away from this war and our world."

Shock rippled through Eric. Solonar stared back, silent and waiting. So this was his plan? No, that couldn't be all there was. There had to be something more.

“What? Just how do you think we're going to do that with all the eyes of the empire on me? Even if I do manage to get away, I'll just be hunted down again like last time.”

Solonar scoffed and his feline eyes fixated on Eric, absorbing every one of his features. His words were laced with condescension. “You are a clever human, but you're also a fool.”

Eric reared up at that. “Says the Fae trying to ruin his own empire and future.”

“Are you starting to care for me, Eric?” Solonar touched his hand to his chest. “Finally, you're seeing reason. I'm getting tired of smelling the stink of my brother on you.”

“You're pathetic,” Eric snapped. “It's not enough for you to torture your siblings growing up, you aren't satisfied until you have everything, and they have nothing. Besides, what I do is my choice and has nothing to do with you. You're the one who tried to kill me. You got yourself in this position, being forced to be oath-bound to me. Leave Cithrel out of it.”

Solonar rose then too, towering over Eric. The amber boiled in his eyes. “You have no idea what I went through as a child. What I was *forced* to do by my father. Tell me, Eric, what would you have done differently if that was all you were told? If doing anything different earned you beatings and starvation from your father, from your mother? I didn't choose to be the first-born son of the emperor, and I certainly didn't choose the blessing the aether gave me.”

“I would rather starve and be beaten than hurt my brother,” Eric said, his words fierce.

“I am nothing else but His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince, Heir to the Throne.” Solonar didn't blink. Eric faltered, hearing the quavering in Solonar's voice.

“All I am is my birthright, the crown. . There is nothing less than perfection for me. Nothing else and no one else

matters.”

It sounded like it pained Solonar to utter those words. Eric just stared. He didn't know what to say to that. The truth had Eric second-guessing himself. Solonar was certainly planning something once he got rid of him, he knew that, but now he had to consider that Solonar might be considering Eric's future as well as his own.

Eric focused on the ground. The raven-haired prince had no idea that Eric had no intention of running away from the Fae world or from Krysos. In fact, he was running head-first to the Fae king.

But maybe, he could use Solonar. He suffocated the trickle of guilt. If he could survive loving Cithrel and destroying his world, he could handle betraying Solonar, too.

He looked back up at Solonar, meeting his intensity. “What's your plan, then?”

The crown prince studied Eric, sensing that something was off, but not knowing what. Eric folded his arms, waiting. Solonar flicked his damp strands of black hair from his face and lifted his chin, regaining his air of superiority with a single move.

“It's simple. I'm going to pick a fight with my brother and you're going to summon a Fae Path and leave. That's why you've been perfecting how to summon them all this time, after all, isn't it?”

Eric gaped at Solonar. Then he snorted, scowling. “You son of a bitch. You knew what I was doing this whole time, after all.”

*Not quite.*

“I told you, Eric. If you're going to lie, then you have to be better at it.”

“You did say that.” He smirked. It looked like Eric was an excellent liar. “How long were you spying on me for? Otherwise, how would you know I perfected it?”

“You expect me to trust you in the hands of my brother? My fate is in your hands. Of course I’ve kept my eye on you since you returned. From the very start.”

Eric swallowed, his hands fisting at his sides. From the very start. Just how much of Eric did he see? Did he know everything? Know what he did to the baroness? Know his lies to the empress? No, he couldn’t have seen everything. None of the traps had been triggered in his room. Besides, Cithrel would never have missed Solonar invading his wing of the palace.

He needed more information, since it seemed they were sprinting towards a disaster. Eric just needed to avoid the fallout until the Fae king was dead.

“When do you plan on making our move, then?” Eric crooked his head. “We’re on the precipice of battle and you and I are the keys to Alonetha’s victory. I won’t be able to stay hidden in the severed world. What about my brother?”

Eric realized he hadn’t thought of Bryce once since he’d left his old home, not really. Not the way he used to. His brother used to be his mental sanctuary, his reason to keep going in the cruel, unforgiving world of the Fae. Now, though, he’d almost forgotten about Bryce.

He should’ve felt some kind of reaction from that, but there was barely anything. Something was changing inside of him, a permanent thing that couldn’t be erased. Maybe it started all those years ago when he first discovered this world against his will. Maybe it happened as soon as he crossed back over into Alonetha with Cithrel. He didn’t know when, but part of him was gone, erased, and now something else had taken its place.

There was a belated curiosity that piqued in Eric. Bryce would be a father by now in his own right, not just the forced responsibility he had to take on by raising Eric. He would make a great dad, that much Eric was certain of.

He didn’t have many good memories of his childhood, not when the two of them just barely scraped by on their own.

They bounced from foster home to foster home and then once Bryce hit eighteen, that was it. Just the two of them.

Bryce looked after Eric, taught him how to cook, clean, and do his own laundry, how not to get an STI and to always wear a condom. Eric had always felt like a weight on Bryce's shoulders, a burden he'd never asked for, and that was why Eric always did whatever his brother asked. He didn't want to give Bryce any more trouble than he'd already caused. It was why Eric got talked into pretty much anything with his brother. Other than the hiking and school, Bryce got him into dancing, which led to an awful period of break dancing that Eric was thankful to have left behind. But still, because of that Eric fell in love with dancing, even if he never learned to quite enjoy the outdoors the way Bryce did. It was like the guy thrived on the wilderness, as if he was part bear or something.

Looking back on it now, those memories didn't feel like his own anymore. It was more like watching a different person's memories. That was what they were, though. Someone else's memories. That old version of Eric.

"I should be insulted with how little faith you have in me, Eric." Solonar sighed heavily, annoyance lacing his tone. "I didn't give you that ring just to anger my brother. It's infused with my aether and that's aether I can manipulate. I've been using it to hide your aether from others trying to track you. You're as good as a ghost as long as that ring is on your finger."

*Shit.*

Eric bit his lip, concern bleeding into his features. He couldn't control the anxiety that rolled off him at that. It was great that Solonar could keep him hidden, except that it probably meant Solonar could also see exactly where Eric was at all times.

There had to be a way out of it. He couldn't stop, couldn't hesitate. His revenge was within his grasp, he could feel it.

"When." Eric's voice was cold.

Solonar paused, assessing Eric's shift in demeanour. He could look away; he wouldn't know the truth. Finally, though, he answered. "Tonight."

"Fine."

The two of them didn't talk, didn't look at each other for the rest of the day. They stayed hidden in the forest under the relentless rain, waiting for Cithrel to return. Eric felt Solonar casting sidelong glances his way but he ignored them. He was too lost in his own thoughts. He didn't expect Solonar to know as much as he did, or for these damned aether-imbued rings to be capable of that much power. His final plans were falling apart around him and it was too late to stop. It was all already in motion and he was powerless.

Cithrel's face appeared in his mind's eye, and a fresh wave of inner turmoil overtook him. He relived the moment Cithrel told Eric he loved him; that he would suffer for Eric's sake.

Eric was a hypocrite. Cithrel had done everything Eric demanded of him in the past, given him nothing but the truth, and soon Eric was going to reward him for his efforts with treachery. Doubt was a hungry beast and it ate away at him for hours, never having its fill. At least not until Cithrel finally returned.

Eric was all too eager to go to Cithrel, to forget his own actions and choices and enjoy Cithrel's presence. Cithrel's focus fell on Eric instantly and it was all he could do not to tell Cithrel the truth of everything. But for all Eric's doubt and guilt, the need for vengeance was stronger.

Eric didn't say anything.

"Whoever it was vanished as soon as I went in search of them." Cithrel ran his hand down Eric's cheek and Eric melted. "I tracked their trail all day, but they were too fast. They know this area well and were prepared to escape."

"It's alright. I'm just glad you're back." Eric smiled back up at him.

Solonar clicked his tongue, voice full of disgust. "I think I'm going to be sick watching this display. This is rather



pitiful, seeing our Prince Commander of the Imperial Army pawing at Eric like he's in heat."

"Then close your eyes," Eric said, keeping his attention on Cithrel. "We should get some rest while we can, then. Solonar can maintain the fire and take the first watch."

Eric heard Solonar muttering some kind of insult behind him, but he ignored it. Instead, he curled up next to Cithrel on the ground, relishing the heat of his body and the feel of his muscles when he took off his armor and took out his war braids.

Cithrel's hair fell down his shoulders in loose waves. The platinum locks made him look colder and more detached to others, but to Eric it made his strong features stand out more and showed how big and bright his arctic blue eyes were. Eric couldn't stop staring, enamored by every angle of his cheekbones and the thin curve of his lips. His skin was flawless, which showed just how powerful of a Fae he was. No wound was ever dire enough to have a chance at scarring. He was a powerful commander of legions, and now he looked at Eric like he was the only thing in the world worth really looking at.

It gave Eric such a pure feeling of peace being next to Cithrel, even now, at the end of their time together before he ruined it all. He wasn't sure when but he eventually drifted to sleep.

When he awoke, he heard Solonar and Cithrel arguing over something and Cithrel had gone rigid.

"Watch what you say, brother." Cithrel's voice was as cold as death, the warning clear. "I don't care that you're the crown prince. I am responsible for Eric's life, and I won't let you do anything to risk that."

"Oh good, he's awake," Solonar chimed, unbothered by Cithrel's threat. "Sleep well, Eric?"

Eric shivered, ridding the rest of sleep from his mind. "How long was I asleep for?"

"Not long. But you look cold, Eric. Shall I warm you up?"

“Do not touch him.” Cithrel’s aether bared down on Solonar. “You’ve done enough already.”

The crown prince scoffed in his brother’s face. “I can’t believe how thoughtful you’ve become, and towards a human no less! I knew you two were fucking but this, actually caring for him. The rumors swirling around the nobles are true. My, my. This is quite the scandal, little brother.”

Cithrel fired back at his brother, maintaining an icy calm exterior. “Perhaps you could manage a thought that doesn’t revolve around yourself. Then the Marked One could protect himself and the empire. The empire you’re supposed to put above all else in the future.”

The two princes’ interactions were likely always this volatile and it was clear one didn’t want to be trapped in the middle when they exploded—like Eric was now. Except, Eric knew what the crown prince was playing at, provoking Cithrel like this.

A vicious scowl crossed Solonar’s face before he calmed himself and replied. “I’m surprised you were able to make time to guard Eric given how consumed you’ve been. Cull any criminals lately, brother?” Solonar inspected his fingernails, switching tactics.

“I don’t oversee the Black Thorn.” The fourth prince spared Eric a charged look and chewed his lip ever so slightly. “Sir Saelihn looks after it.”

Eric lifted his chin, forcing a calm demeanor to take root. Cithrel was on the defensive, for Eric’s sake. The crown prince’s words were too pointed to be a coincidence, though, so why was he trying to drag this truth from Cithrel’s lips? It would only hurt Eric and Cithrel at this point, but Solonar was supposedly helping him escape. Just what was his damn plan?

There was a glint in Solonar’s eye, like he’d found his prey. “Did Sir Saelihn take over before or after you stuffed poor Eric at the bottom of it?”

Cithrel surged forward, his face inches from Solonar’s. “I’m not in the mood for your snake tongue. Some of us are on

the border, protecting our city and empire, while others hide behind their decadence and do nothing.”

Eric stared in disbelief. The apathetic Fae that never gave in to his emotions around others had not only pulled back his mask but shattered it into a thousand shards of hostility. He looked over at Solonar, whose lip pulled back in anger, threats dancing in his feline gaze. The two eyed each other tensely as a silent battle raged between them.

It seemed like Solonar was waiting for Eric get some rest before he incited his brother’s rage. Eric was officially out of time. He had to be ready for what came next.

“I decide for myself what the empire needs.” The crown prince straightened his black coat. The gold and scarlet buttons on either side of the coat gleamed in the moonlight, and he arched a brow at his brother, “I don’t let someone else do my thinking for me. That’s your specialty, isn’t it, Your Highness? I think that Eric is better off with me than with you. It’s about time I intervene.”

“I warned you,” Cithrel growled. “I don’t care that you’re the crown prince. I won’t let you put Eric in danger. He’s mine.”

“Still nothing but a barking dog, I see.” Solonar sighed, like he was disappointed. “At least now you’ve developed a bit of a bite. Tell me, little brother, do you claim dear Eric because you want him, or because mother wants him?” Solonar kept prodding, with thinly veiled hostility behind his playful tone.

The woods exploded with charges of overwhelming aether. Citrus and smoke clashed in the air as fire materialized. The rain hissed and sizzled as it met Solonar’s flames and evaporated, filling the air with steam.

Cithrel summoned his blades in the air all around Solonar. Countless weapons aimed at Solonar before slicing towards him. The crown prince incinerated anything that got too close to him, the heat of his fire melting everything in its wake.

Eric backed away, giving Cithrel one final look. This was it, his moment to slip away. It was what Solonar was counting

on. He felt the earth quaking under his feet as Cithrel launched himself with blinding speed towards his brother. His obsidian blade cut through the flames and Solonar used his fires to propel himself out of the way, dodging and trying to burn his brother alive in a single movement.

Tearing his eyes away from the monster he loved, Eric turned and disappeared into the woods, into the steady rain, towards the magic he had sensed since they entered these woods. Towards the magic that Cithrel chased all day.

A cloaked figure appeared from a cluster of trees, its shadow misshapen. Eric slowed to a halt before the figure, his heartbeat steady.

“Hello, Lady Vessa,” he said calmly.

Vessa pulled back her hood, mismatched eyes glinting in the downpour as she met his gaze. “Hello, Marked One.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

“Lord Aimar was right about you.” Lady Vessa spoke in a melodious tone, so confident and proud. “You are special. And clever.”

The rain continued to beat down on them, soaking the ground and turning the dirt into muck. Eric shifted on his feet. His gaze flitted across Vessa’s cloak, searching for any signs of weapons or what she could likely be hiding under the fabric. He tested shifting his own weight, mentally counting off everything he had on his own person, making sure he had everything he would need.

“It’s just you and me, Vessa.” Eric flashed his teeth. “You don’t have to flatter me anymore. I know when I’m being lied to, better than anyone in this world.”

Vessa crooked her head, and the branches that grew from her groaned at the movement. Her pure white hair whipped around her face in the wind, but she didn’t seem to notice or care. “Tell me, Eric. How long have you known the truth about me? How long did you know I was working with King Krysos?”

Eric tipped his head back, pretending to be lost in thought, but the gesture let his eyes wander through the woods around them. Good. They were alone, with no audience. He met her blue and green eyes again and began to pace.

“As soon as I learned you and Lord Aimar were friends.”

“That’s all it took? Don’t lie to me, Eric,” Vessa chided.

Eric shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “You’re naïve, Vessa. Aimar doesn’t have any friends, only things he can use. I thought perhaps he might be using you, but it was the other way around. You were both leeches, bleeding the other dry for your own purposes. I’m just glad I got to kill him before you did.”

He grinned widely at her. The hazel in his eyes were bright with delight. He hoped she saw the corruption behind his stare,

saw the pleasure Eric still felt at killing Aimar. She stilled and her cloak billowed around her statuesque form, the way an animal freezes in front of a predator.

“I wasn’t done with him yet, so it was annoying to lose both of my instruments.” Vessa arched a brow, studying her hand. “But thanks to you, my hands were kept clean of any suspicion, leaving me free to move as I pleased.”

Eric kept pacing, inching himself closer to her with each passing. “If you think your hands aren’t dipped in the same blood as mine, you’re wrong. We’re both stained—don’t fool yourself. What I don’t understand is what the hell your motivation is to betray the city and people who took you in? They gave you wealth, land, a title. What’s so rotten to you about Alonetha that you’d turn to Krysos Therion?”

Vessa looked at him like he’d said something peculiar. “You really don’t know about the baroness, do you? Well, Lord Aimar also said you were quite gullible. I can see everything he said was the truth.”

Eric snarled. “I know enough about the baroness to know that she deserved everything she received. She was a greedy, despicable Fae. Her and Lord Aimar.”

Vessa shrugged, which only made Eric angrier for some reason. “If you insist. Either way, thank you for the assistance.”

He had to keep her talking, just a little bit more, and then he could make his move. “So are you going to tell me why you chose the Fae king as your ally? Why you did all of this?”

Vessa’s face crumpled a little, before a wondrous smile spread on her silvered skin. She had the eyes of a devout worshipper the way she smiled.

“You never had parents, isn’t that right?” She asked it lightly, which gave Eric pause. She could only know that from Lord Aimar. “I didn’t either. At least, not until recently.”

She looked back at him with that same dreamy glow to her eyes. Eric thought he might be sick. No, that couldn’t be true.

“Your father?” he asked, voice barely audible above the winds.

She sounded like she was in a trance when she replied. “It wasn’t the witch queen who calls herself empress that gave me everything. It was my father. Everything he did was to keep me safe until the time was right. But my blood, it’s unstable. He needed to be sure that I was strong enough to be by his side. All I want and all I do is to make my father proud. And when I bring him back the Marked One, he will smile upon me.”

She was insane. Blinded.

Eric’s head was spinning. How did he not see it? He should have suspected it was more than simple manipulation. It was plausible for her to be swayed and convinced to side with Krysos because of the prejudice against her kind, the Impure. But this was much deeper. Much more ingrained, and easier to control.

Krysos—her father—was using her.

A sickening thought occurred to Eric. Yes, if he had her, then the wound would be all the deeper when Eric threw her at Krysos’s feet before he killed the Fae king. His hands ran down his coat once more, ensuring he was prepared.

Eric stopped his pacing. “Oh, we’ll go to see your father together, but I won’t be the one in chains.”

Vessa frowned at the same time that Eric lunged forward, the aether in his blood bursting to life like an explosion. He moved as fast as any Fae, with blinding speed, as he attacked Vessa. His hand came up to slam into her jaw, but she dodged at the last minute. One of the branches jutting from her shoulder snapped out and tried to wrap around him.

*What?*

Vessa had more than one aether blessing? Eric cursed. He wasn’t prepared for that. Putrid thorns tore through Eric’s forearm, severing Vessa’s hold on him and in turn trying to grab a hold of her, to taste her blood, her power.

The hunger of Eric's power began to fill his thoughts and his sight became tinged with red. Then he felt the weight of the wraith crown settle above his head, floating over him. Finally, Eric could let loose and truly test his power.

His mind was so full of nothing but a lust for power that she had no hope of reading his thoughts or foreseeing his attacks. There was nothing to read but his hunger.

Blackened and charred vines shook the ground beneath them. Trees were felled and tendrils of Eric's power filled the sky. They were everywhere, overwhelming and ravenous, and they darted towards Vessa, sensing her blood.

She moved faster than Eric anticipated, and that was when he realized she was more than a noble. She was an assassin in her own right. This female was a trained killer and she wanted Eric's head.

He focused his power on protecting himself and was able to block the branches that grew from her body and darted towards Eric to skewer him. His rotting vines chittered and writhed around him, slicked with rain protecting their master, and searching, constantly searching, for blood. For more power.

A stray branch snapped out of the dark cover of the woods and smashed into Eric's gut. It sent him hurtling backwards and he slammed into a far-off tree. The force of the impact snapped the great tree in half. Slivers and pieces of wood showered the earth, blending with the heavy rainfall.

Eric's eyes went wide from the pain, but an instant later he was on his feet again, pushed forward by the grotesque brambles that manifested at Eric's back. They lapped up the blood that poured from his split-open back, absorbing the crimson liquid.

Eric wanted her power, wanted it like he wanted to breathe. The urge consumed him and the red tinge to his vision deepened. He would take it from her. He dashed forward again, sending his vines from all over surging and whirling through the air at the Impure female. He was grinning from ear to ear, his eyes wide with the thrill of the fight.



More. He wanted to fight more.

He commanded more of his aether to come forward and bend to his will. He ran faster and faster at Vessa, throwing out punch after punch after punch, his thorns a vicious shadow at his back as they followed all his strikes.

Even though his mind was focused on defeating Vessa, some of his attacks were still broadcast through his thoughts and Vessa was able to dodge him again and again. But the gap was getting smaller and smaller and soon his attack was going to land.

Finally, his thorns shot through the ground at the same time as another one of his fists struck. She couldn't dodge both attacks. His knuckles cracked against her jaw and she felt the skin split on his hand. But more than that, he felt her bone break under his fist.

She roared an angry cry of pain and dashed further and further back from him, trying to regroup and heal her wound.

"Yield and I will make it painless for you, Vessa." Eric's voice had a disembodied echo to it, like he was more than himself. Something *other*.

"I will never yield!" she shrieked and then began sprinting towards him, as fast as Eric had seen Cithrel move. Suddenly she was just a blur of pink petals from the willow tree that grew from her body.

Vessa was a force of nature and Eric was compelled to go on the defensive as he struggled to track her movements. The world around them was a tornado of black and rotting vines, and beautiful swirling pink petals from her willow tree. It was beautiful and horrific. Dreams and nightmares coalesced as they battled.

He wouldn't lose to her; he needed her power. But he was one breath too slow and that was the opportunity Vessa needed to drive one of her branches straight through Eric's stomach.

*No! No no no no....*

Eric gasped, the air dying on his tongue as he was stabbed clean through. His face crumpled in anger and confusion

before it twisted in pain. Everything was blinding pain. His body erupted in wave after wave of agony. He hadn't felt this kind of suffering in so long, it immobilized him.

Vessa leaned forward; a heavenly smile played on her pale lips. "My father will be so pleased with me."

Eric looked up at her, blood dribbling from his mouth and down his chin. Then his expression contorted from one of pain to one of pure, wicked joy. His eyes burned with the thrill of victory and he relished the pain that seared into his flesh.

His hand snaked out and grabbed onto her branch that had impaled him. His festering vines split through his skin and dug into Vessa's branch and stabbed into it, splintering and burrowing further and further until the two of them were trapped together.

Vessa wailed in torment as Eric's thorns tore at her. It just made Eric's smile wider. The more pain she felt, the more destroyed Krysos would be at the sight of his daughter at Eric's feet when he came for the king.

"I can't wait to see his face." Eric grinned. His teeth were stained a dark crimson from his own blood, but he didn't notice or care.

"You'll have to kill me," Vessa choked out; her mismatched eyes shone with defiance. She was so full of pride.

Eric couldn't wait to take that from her.

"I learned a lot about the Impure, Vessa," Eric said, his voice thick with gore. "The nymph and Fae blood makes you strong. But it also makes you so very susceptible to enchantments. And oaths."

Realization hit Vessa a split second before the dawning horror did. She opened her mouth to scream, to thrash and fight, but as soon as she came into contact with Eric, it was over. His aether had burrowed into the tree that was a part of her and had nestled within it. The more she moved and fought, the more pain ripped through her body, tearing at her insides.

Eric had everything he needed to perform the oath binding, to shackle Vessa to him. He'd known for a long time that he would need to use this awful power sooner rather than later. But she would make an excellent experiment and a fierce ally if she survived.

He'd collected and crushed all the plants and herbs he needed. It was simple enough to ask Hinni for them, insisting they were for a tea. It hurt him, lying to her. She was always so kind to him. But he needed to do it.

"Do me a favor, Vessa," Eric panted through the pain of the gaping wound in his abdomen. "Swallow this."

Her eyes went wide in shock and her mouth clamped shut. She knew what he was about to do, that he was about to strip her freedom from her and bind them together. Eric just shook his head and laughed to himself before he summoned more of his putrid vines. They crawled all over Vessa's body until they found her mouth. She whimpered but kept her mouth closed as long as possible, but Eric's thorns were stronger. Eventually, they tore at her flesh, drawing blood and greedily absorbing her power before they held her mouth open.

Eric poured the powdered plants into her mouth and closed her mouth and nose until she swallowed.

"Good," he ground out.

Eric looked down at the sky-blue gem on his finger then. He needed Solonar's ring for later, so he had no choice but to use Cithrel's gift now. It fractured something inside him, knowing he was about to destroy something so precious to him.

"Thank you, Cithrel," he murmured, and his smile softened.

Eric closed his eyes and the world fell silent. The sounds of rain falling, his and Vessa's pained breaths, and his thundering heartbeat all faded away until there was nothing.

*Thump.*

A whisper, coaxing his aether to shift and morph to his wishes.

*Thump.*

More commanding now, louder. No longer a request for the power within him to ignite for a single purpose.

*THUMP.*

It was an order, a demand. There was nothing but his will.

His aether detonated inside him and his blood and bones were singing with the unfettered power as it all came rushing out of him, channeled through the aether-imbued ring Cithrel had given him.

Eric's power ran wild, unleashed and searching for its host. Travelling through the sky-blue gem, his power flowed freely into Vessa and devoured the plants within her, finding its new host.

She screamed from the invasion of Eric's aether forcing itself within her, under her flesh. It burned at her as Eric began to speak in an ancient Fae language even he barely understood. Vessa's screams grew louder the more Eric spoke, the enchantment branding itself onto her skin.

His ears were ringing from Vessa's shrill cries. She sounded like a wounded animal being tortured, but Eric didn't stop. He spoke louder, drowning out her wailing, and continued the binding.

It was getting harder and harder to breathe, to keep his eyes open as his power ate away at him. It didn't help that he was still impaled and bleeding out.

*Focus.*

Eric's eyes blazed with determination, and he held fast, until he was seconds from blacking out and he uttered the final words of the oath.

He slumped forward, his limbs growing weak, and he let go of his hold on Vessa's branch that was still stuck inside him. Falling to his knees, Eric gasped for air. He squeezed his eyes shut to try and bear the pain.

He was never good at manipulating his aether to heal, but from the blood his thorns had stolen from Vessa, he did his

best to fix the gaping hole in his stomach that threatened to spill his entrails.

The world buzzed dully around him as he waited for Vessa to move, to scream, to do anything, but she'd gone still.

Eric didn't know if she'd survived it or not, she was so still. A small, frail part of him was hoping that she was alive. That he hadn't killed her. She was just being used by her father, she didn't deserve his bloodlust, his craving for vengeance. He wanted her to live.

A sharp gasp cut through Eric's jumbled thoughts and his head whipped around to look at her.

Vessa was on all fours, vomiting. The tree that was part of her trembled and shook as her body convulsed. But eventually, she settled and stilled. Slowly, she lifted her head and through damp white hair her eyes met Eric's.

"How does it feel to be oath-bound to me, Vessa?" Eric asked, weakly.

She looked at him, indifference in her eyes. The shining worship for her mission to bring him back to Krysos was gone, as if it was never there. Now it was just Eric in her eyes.

"It feels like a fate worse than death."

That earned a bittersweet smile from Eric. He guessed it really was that bad for Solonar, after all. But it wasn't the time to think about the crown prince he'd just betrayed.

He needed to find Krysos.

Eric got to his feet, slower than he would have liked. He held out his hand for Vessa and she eyed it incredulously before she took it.

"I'll have to ask that you heal my wounds the rest of the way for me," Eric said. "I didn't do a very good job."

"Of course, Eric."

Total obedience.

"Then you will bring me to your precious Fae king."

Vessa hesitated for a second, just a second. “Of course, Eric.”

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Eric sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth as Vessa finished working on him. He had some of Hinni's vials on him, but they wouldn't be enough to fix the damage he'd taken. Vessa had been brutal. If it wasn't for all his planning he might not been sitting there right now.

Vessa's aether flowed through him. Well, it was worse than that—more like being shocked over and over by her aether, as it zapped through his body and healed him. It was like sitting through a low-grade electrocution as she used her power.

Eric studied her, curiosity spiking. She didn't look very much like Krysos, but he guessed she inherited most of her looks from her nymph mother. It was so strange to think of the Fae king as a father, as someone who would bed a nymph, a being he saw as beneath him. Further than that, he couldn't reconcile in his mind why Krysos would let a child of a lesser being live. Then again, Krysos had been waiting decades to finally act against the Alonethan Empire. A bastard child was something he could manage with ease.

"I'm done, Eric."

"Thanks, Vessa." Eric let his shirt fall back down.

It didn't make much of a difference, though; his shirt had a gaping hole in it. But he just had to pull his cloak in tighter against the rain.

She looked up at him with a quizzical expression on her face, but said nothing.

"What is it?"

Vessa hesitated a moment longer, but he supposed the oath burned into her silver skin compelled her to do what Eric asked. She was bound according to his wishes and Eric needed someone he could trust without a second thought.

"You speak strangely, Eric. Your voice—it's changed."

Eric snorted, amusement coloring his features. “I’m speaking how I used to, in the severed world. I’m not trying to be proper anymore. I guess it’s weird for you if you’ve never been around a lot of humans.”

She nodded, seeming to understand. She looked like she had a million more questions, but she didn’t ask more. And Eric didn’t prod her for her thoughts. There was something much more important he needed.

“Take me to him, Vessa.”

She rose to her feet, almost possessed. “Yes, Eric.”

The night air shifted in a way that felt wholly unnatural as Vessa began to summon a Fae Path. Her aether and the power in her blood was so different from anything Eric had experienced. The nymph blood in her blending with the Fae blood was like living through an earthquake, a tsunami, and a volcanic eruption all at once.

The wind roared with a renewed violence; a promise of destruction screamed through the branches of the great trees around them. Bark was ripped from their trunks, whipping and swirling around the air that coalesced before Vessa. She held one hand outstretched as the air grew frigid and sweltering simultaneously.

A Fae Path began to materialize before her splayed hand, and the trees curled inwards towards it, falling in tune with the nature of his power that she commanded at her fingertips. She was a terror, and now she belonged to him.

His lips pulled back and curled into a malicious smile.

She was going to be perfect against Krysos. His own daughter betraying him against her will.

Vessa stood aside, the unbridled power of her portal snapping and crackling like a whip in the air as it glowed. Her head was bowed slightly, submissive.

Eric pinned his wrists together, summoning some of his own thorns to wrap around him like shackles.



Vessa's mismatched eyes snapped up to meet Eric's and he smirked at her. "Take your prisoner to the king, Vessa."

"Yes, Eric."

With delicate and tentative hands, Vessa led Eric through the Fae Path to the place he wanted to be more than anything, more than he wanted to see the sun again.

He was going to see Krysos.

Their feet landed a snap later onto the cold stones of the Belfir castle's courtyard. He remembered this place, but it was different coming here of his own volition and not trying to escape its death grasp.

The dark stones of the castle, almost black, loomed before them. The great stone walls towered and looked more like a fortress than a castle for a king. It was a beacon of war, of violence, of bloodshed. Stones and pebbles surrounded the courtyard, their colors shining and sparkling like a garden of precious gems. Sapphire, emerald, topaz, opal, amber, and ruby gleamed in the rock gardens leading up the grandiose gates of the castle.

But all the fine gemstones paled in comparison to the majesty of the Fae king who stood amongst them, who stood before Eric.

Krysos Therion. The King of Belfir.

He looked just as breathtaking as the last time Eric saw him, though last time the king was drenched in his own gold blood and crippled on the floor beneath Eric. It was foolish to show the Fae king mercy, to spare his life. He didn't deserve mercy. He deserved to bleed out under Eric's boot.

Auburn curls shaped his face, highlighting his brilliant bronze skin like a halo, which further accented the pure gold and no doubt aether-imbued diadem resting above his brow. A brilliant purple mantle hung from his shoulder and wrapped around his sculpted form that bordered on perfection; that was fit only for a king. There was even more golden thread detailing on the cloak, laurels and other images of wealth.

What really spoke volumes about Krysos's otherworldly presence was the purity of his golden eyes. They shone brighter than anything Eric had seen before, and they were fixated on him. Bound before the king.

Krysos was as close to what humans imagined a god would look like. And that god was looking at Eric with all the joy of a demon that had found its next meal.

Except, Krysos wasn't the only nightmare anymore. He didn't know what Eric had become.

Eric was a devil.

"Ah, Lady Vessa, you've returned." Krysos's deep voice purred, smooth as silk. "And you've come back with the quarry you promised. So reliable, so much promise for you, Lady Vessa."

Eric looked up at Krysos as the hunger, the demand for his death, erased all other thoughts and desires from his mind. He didn't think about the ring he'd destroyed from the monster he loved, he didn't think of the deep ruby that still snared itself on his other finger, he didn't even think of what he had to do next. All that remained was the Fae king. Just him.

"Bring him to me, Lady Vessa," Krysos commanded with all the power of a king. He flicked his fingers and looked so leisurely.

Oh, how Eric couldn't wait to tear that look from his face.

Vessa hesitated, but Eric gestured with two fingers for her to bring him forward and she obeyed. She was so careful with him Eric had to suppress a laugh that Krysos was oblivious to what was really going on. He was so arrogant in his own power he didn't even consider the possibility that there was someone who didn't fall to his will.

"A promise is a promise, human," Krysos said, looking down at Eric. "I was going to have you and that aether pulsing in your blood one way or another. Where are your glorious princes now to protect you? To keep you from any harm? Are you not the savior of the great and unbreakable empire?"

He barked a laugh and it was full of disdain and cruelty. “The emperor was so ignorant to choose you, a weak human, to give his aether to. Though when Lady Vessa told me of what you did to the baroness and then to the lord, I rejoiced. Olaera was a pestilence, spying on Vessa and Aimar, doing her best to find evidence to bring the truth to her empress. She was the only one who could have revealed my plan, and you saw to it that she never had a chance to say a word. It was marvellous. I have waited too long to tear away the legacy of the Marked One from that whore of an empress. That viper will have no choice but to watch her empire, her capital city, burn at her feet after I kill you. I can’t wait.”

Those golden eyes were shining, a hideous toothy grin smeared across his glorious and impeccable features. Eric wasn’t even a living thing in his eyes. He was just a piece of flesh that held the power he wanted.

Eric couldn’t wait to disappoint him. His last shred of patience dissolved, and his own wicked grin spread on his face. His hazel gaze had almost turned black.

It was time to slay a god.

“It’s a shame,” Eric said, voice coy, “that a being as gorgeous as you is so fucking stupid. I suppose it can’t be helped. I must have done some permanent damage the last time we fought.”

Krysos whirled and cracked the back of his gold-ringed hand across Eric’s cheek. His own aether already coated his body like a second skin of impenetrable armor, but he still felt the sting of the blow. Gold eyes burned down at Eric.

“How dare you,” the Fae king seethed.

Eric looked up at him, tonguing his cheek and smiling wider now. The pain was so sweet, impeccable, electric. It sent his body and rousing aether into a thrill.

More, more, he had to have more.

“I think I’m going to take my time, stripping the aether from your bones.”

Eric rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck before he tipped up his chin to meet Krysos's fiery glare. "Vessa, don't intervene. Go somewhere safe, I'll find you later."

The look of superiority fell a little from the Fae king's face. His smile wavered as he watched Vessa listen to Eric's orders. It was almost too much to hold in, watching the pieces fall into place for Krysos as realization dawned on him.

His traitor didn't belong to him anymore.

"What did you do?"

"Turned your spy, your daughter, against you," Eric answered, his tone easy.

"My daughter?" Krysos asked, incredulous.

He openly shifted, ready to argue something, but Eric had already moved. The thorns that he'd summoned, and that sank into his flesh, burst forth and slashed at the Fae king.

Krysos only had time to dodge before Eric was on him, his eyes bright with the taste of death in his mouth.

The scent of Eric's aether permeated the air, and an overwhelming stench of decay and rot hung heavy around them. His festering vines tore free from the ground at their feet, slithering and snapping at Krysos.

A look of pure rage marred his beautiful face and then all the light and intense heat of the sun blinked into existence. The pure power of Krysos's aether slammed into Eric full force, sending him to his knees as the brilliance of the sun at Krysos's fingertips blinded him. All he could see was white and his skin burned all over.

The aether coating his body was bubbling, boiling, under the illuminating gaze of the Fae king's sun.

Eric shuddered, relishing the pain, feeling the full extent of Krysos's relentless power as it assaulted him.

*More.*

Eric's eyes were squeezed shut, but being blind didn't unsettle him. He didn't need to see to fell the king. The weight

of the wraith crown settled above Eric's head, his aether doubling, tripling, quadrupling. It kept growing and growing, drinking in Eric's essence, eating away at his body to grow stronger.

Blood dripped from Eric's nose and his tongue snaked out to lick a droplet of it. Finally, this might be enough.

Then Eric summoned his garden of death.

Vines spilled from his palms and spiked out from his back, anchoring him, while others grew from the ground. The earth shook as more and more of Eric's blackened and molding thorns formed a gruesome garden that was fit for a devil. Eric didn't stop letting them come forth, chittering and writhing in search of something to devour. He kept going and unleashing his power until he felt the blinding and burning white light of the Fae king's sun start to dim. To be blotted out. Only when the light had completely faded did Eric open his eyes.

All around him was his aether, hissing and churning like a living beast. He still felt the heat of Krysos's aether in the air, so he knew the Fae king was fighting his way towards Eric. He was burning away at the thorns Eric manifested, but they were alive and hungry now. They moved of own volition, and they were swarming the king.

Eric felt them cutting away at Krysos because he felt the pulsing of his thorns, felt the influx of power when they drank the Fae's blood. He couldn't summon his putrid spikes from within Krysos and end him the same way he did Aimar. Krysos was a king, after all, and his aether would just burn away Eric's power from within his body.

Still, tearing the king apart tiny piece by tiny piece was better. Eric let the joy of his slow death wash over him as he stood in a prison of his own thorns.

Finally. Finally, it was starting to feel like enough.

"You idiotic bastard." A too-familiar voice cursed from behind Eric.

Eric's eyes blinked open before they hooded over. He knew this moment was coming. Slowly, he turned to face the

crown prince, who had seen better days. Clearly his battle with his brother, the distraction he'd orchestrated for Eric to get away, had cost him.

"I never agreed to follow your plan, Solonar." Eric held up his hands in a shrug.

"I felt it all, you know," Solonar continued, his voice growing angrier by the second. "I felt all the pain you took in, from every single fight. I endured it all in silence because I never feared you might be in danger. But I felt something *wrong* and then I sensed your presence here, in the castle of the Fae I sacrificed everything to keep you away from."

"Why doesn't anyone ever listen to me?" Eric shook his head, irritation coloring his words. "I am not a prisoner anymore. I'm not your damn toy to do with as you please. I don't give a shit what you do, *crown prince*, as long as you stay out of my way."

Solonar reared up, his amber eyes turning hard into stone. His cat-like pupils thinned to slits until they were barely discernable. "You are nothing but a short-sighted human. I don't know what my brother sees in you, but everything you do infuriates me. I can see now that I was right to prepare for this and rid myself of you, once and for all. You're the one standing in my way."

Eric's hands trailed to his cloak on instinct, sensing where Solonar was going with this. He steadied his breath, ignoring the pounding in his skull and the steady trickle of scarlet he kept wiping from his nose. He cast a final look at the obsidian and ruby ring on his finger, the gift Solonar had given him.

Now it would be his undoing.

Krysos bellowed through the forest of thorns, enraged, but Eric felt him weakening now. His vines had grown out of control and began to drink deeper and deeper from the Fae king. They were taking more and more of his power from him.

"I always suspected you had something orchestrated to rid yourself of me," Eric said, working his hands over the clasps of his cloak. "I knew when I found the text of imbuing oaths

that you had found it, too. You'd been spying on me since the day I set foot in Alonetha again. Your father would be proud of the manipulative Fae you've become, masterminding everything around you to get what you want."

Eric let his cloak fall from his shoulders, with over a dozen vials in his hands. He mentally thanked Luthais for the gift he'd given him all those weeks ago.

Solonar gave a derisive snort. "Always such a clever human. Did you plan for Cithrel's fragile little heartbreak as well? You should have seen the look of pure despair when he felt the ring he gave you shatter. It was like watching his soul fall apart. He has no idea where you are. Likely suspects you tried to run away again. Even I had no idea you'd been stupid enough to come here. I'll have to take care of this mess before he figures it out and comes running for you. And it doesn't matter that you know I found the old book. There's nothing you can hope to do. There's no way you'll be able to stop me from shattering this cursed oath burned into my skin. I am one of the most powerful beings in all of Alonetha."

The charred vines coalesced and squirmed around Solonar, eager to taste his blood as well. The sound of their rotting mass squishing together was enough to curl Eric's stomach, but he couldn't feel anything but anticipation for this moment.

"You're right about that. We don't have much time." Eric lifted one hand so he could eye the pile of vials he held. "But you're wrong about the rest. Up until this moment, you *were* one of the strongest beings in Alonetha."

Eric cracked the handful of vials and swallowed all of their contents at once. The several doses of aether dust hit him with the force of a god, crashing into him and burning through his body so fierce it threatened to melt his bones.

His head fell back as his entire body went rigid, twisting under the strain of all the drug's power infusing with his blood, with his own aether. It was so much, almost too much for him to take. His heart thundered, galloping and threatening to burst, as his aether pulsed erratically and screamed in his blood and bones.

*It's enough. It's more than enough.*

Eric's muscles relaxed and his head fell forward again, his chest rising and falling steadily as the excess of aether poured from him. When he looked up at Solonar, the world was tinted in brilliant red and gold.

His eyes had gone entirely red, his wraith form surging with power. The blood vessels in his eyes had ruptured, sending lines of gold cracking across his skin, around his irises, and around his face.

It was like looking through the eyes of heaven. And he was about to drag Solonar back to hell.

"No!" Solonar cried out, his voice full of rage and horror.

Blue fire sparked to life and ignited in the prince's palms, bathing his arms in flames. Then he exploded towards Eric, singeing the earth in his wake.

But Eric was so much more now, so much stronger. It was too easy to outmaneuver the crown prince with all the drugs coursing through him, fuelling him.

Eric stayed on the offensive, because he knew Solonar couldn't harm him, not really. Solonar was trying to subdue Eric long enough to break the oath that bound him to Eric, to keep him from escaping the Marking on Eric's arm.

Their fight was over before it began. Solonar didn't have a chance when Eric was like this. Eric's blackened and clawed hand snaked out and clamped down around Solonar's wrist. Then he squeezed.

Solonar's wrist snapped like a bird's wing and he cried in outrage. He struggled to free himself, to make space between them, but Eric wouldn't let go. Not when he had him in his grasp.

Thorns and vines converged on Solonar, their spikes and barbs sharp and hungry. They wanted to devour more pure-blooded Fae now that they had a taste for it. Eric could sense Krysos would be dead soon, and he wanted to see his face when the light left. He needed to see it. So he had to chain



Solonar back down so he would never escape again, and do it now.

“I’m sorry it’s come to this, Solonar,” Eric admitted, hazel eyes glazed over, uncaring.

“No, don’t,” the crown prince argued. “Don’t you dare. I am the crown prince and future emperor. Don’t you dare take that from me. I am nothing without it.”

He actually sounded afraid, for the first time in his life. It pricked at something in Eric, but he ignored it, energized by the intoxicating drug in his blood and the power flowing into him from his thorns as they consumed Krysos.

“You chose to let it be your all, your everything. You did this to yourself. If you had just protected me, if you treated me like a living being worth something, none of this would be happening.”

Solonar’s face crumpled, contorting with anguish. His head bowed as the grief swallowed him whole. “All I’ve done since that night in the woods was try to protect you. Even if it was from yourself.”

“I didn’t need protection from myself. I needed protection from everyone else.”

Then Eric reached out with his other hand and poured the contents of the final vial into Solonar’s mouth. Of course, he’d had Hinni make him multiple vials of the plant mixture. He had to be prepared for anything. And he was, especially for this.

“You made it easy for me, giving me this ring,” Eric continued as he prepared to speak the old Fae words once again and seal Solonar’s fate. “It was almost perfect on your part, having everything you needed to sever your connection to me on my finger at all times. No one would suspect anything. You just never considered that I was doing the same thing.”

Eric’s gold- and red-tinged irises focused on Solonar then, who was bent to Eric’s power, and he began speaking the ancient language once more. He wasn’t sure if it was the all-

consuming power within him, but he thought he saw real tears falling down Solonar's face as he stood there, frozen in this moment of his own hell.

Eric's words got faster and louder. The air felt thick and heavy, foreboding. It wasn't unlike a funeral. This was, after all, the death of a future ruler, the death of his freedom. But Solonar was trying to stop Eric, to kill him once he was free of his oath, and Eric couldn't let that happen. Not when he was seconds away from exacting his revenge.

When the final word fell from his lips, ominous silence hung. Solonar reacted to the oath differently than Vessa had. He'd been through the agony of it before so perhaps he was used to it, knew what to expect. Still, he hadn't moved, hadn't screamed once throughout the entire binding.

Eric watched, waiting, and saw the fresh oath settling into his skin. There were new lines extending from his old ones, different from what Nithroel had done to him because now it was what Eric wanted.

To trust someone implicitly.

"Look at me, Solonar," Eric said, his words gentle.

Without missing a beat, the crown prince looked up at Eric.

"Good." Eric turned to finish what he'd started months ago. "I want you to know, Solonar, I am sorry for what I've just done. Please remember that."

"I will, Eric."

Eric turned his back on the fallen prince and wandered into his thorns towards the dying king.

They parted for him, knowing their master well now, and it wasn't long before he stood over the remnants of the glorious and magnificent King of Belfir. His purple cape was torn to shreds, barely hanging from his shoulders now, and his entire body was covered in lacerations. Golden blood stained the ground around Krysos and the thorns that now drank from his wounds pinned him to the shattered stone and earth.

He looked up at Eric, with pure hatred and venom in his golden eyes. His breathing was labored, weakening by the second.

To Eric, he looked perfect now. Broken and dying at his feet.

It was what he deserved. He'd earned this from Eric.

"I showed you mercy once," Eric said, looking down at him. "And you spit on the chance I gave you. You tried to kill the family I had left, then you tried to kill me. There is no mercy this time, Krysos Therion."

"They're using you," he choked out in gasps. His voice was barely a strangled whisper. "You'll never be more than a weapon for them to wield. Look at yourself. Look what they've made you into. You'll regret this, and when that moment comes, I hope my face is the last thing you see."

No. No, that wasn't right. Eric had done this himself. He had chosen to do all of this.

But Eric couldn't correct him, because those golden irises dulled and froze. Krysos would no longer be able to hear him. The light in his eyes had gone out.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Gold blood spread out around Krysos as Eric stood over his body. His chest was heaving and his head was spinning. The aether in his blood withdrew back within him, satiated with the life that was taken. It didn't feel real; the decision was reflexive. The Fae king was dead. He finally had the revenge he'd craved for so long—longer than he realized. Gold blood flecked across his fingers and palms.

He tipped his head back and closed his eyes, absorbing the fact that it was done.

Krysos Therion, enemy of the Alonethan Empire, King of Belfir, was dead.

Then the king's words echoed in his mind like a garish chorus on loop.

*They're using you.*

*You're a weapon.*

*I hope my face is the last thing you see.*

The sound of hundreds of footsteps broke the silence as countless Fae soldiers flooded into the courtyard. Eric didn't look up at them because they didn't matter. But his moment of tortured solitude and fulfilment was shattered a second later when the cacophony of Fae soldiers chanting grew louder and louder until it couldn't be ignored. They were chanting for him.

*Marked One* echoed in the air over and over.

Looking down at himself, his clothing was in tatters and covered in red, black, and gold blood. His vision was tinged with gold as the effects of the aether dust he'd ingested began to slowly wear off.

Then a figure Eric would have known anywhere burst through the crowd of Fae crying out Eric's title. He looked stricken until their eyes met and it was like Cithrel was able to breathe again when he looked at Eric.

The look in Cithrel's eyes told him that there were innumerable questions he wanted to ask, but whatever expression he saw on Eric's face assured him they could wait. Eric's thoughtful monster.

The sounds of Fae, the beings that once looked at Eric with nothing but hatred, cheering his title pulled his attention back. His mouth hung open as he met the eyes of countless Fae celebrating him, celebrating that he was a psychopath and a murderer. The rush of his fight was fading, replaced with an alien sort of hollowness. The void inside him was still there, but he didn't understand why.

Dissatisfaction colored Eric's cheeks and suddenly he couldn't look at the beings cheering for him. He just wanted to leave. Why didn't he feel the same thrill as when he dismembered Lord Aimar? Why wasn't his final revenge as sweet as before? This was it; he'd done it.

"It's amazing." With tired eyes, Eric glanced sidelong at Cithrel who stood next to him. "All of them honor you, even the Fae of Belfir. You did it, Eric. You ended the war before it began."

Eric's chin fell. "Then why does it feel like I just lost something?"

It was the truth. He should have felt elation. It was over. But it was just, nothing.

Cithrel cupped Eric's cheek, his face softening. "You're amazing, Eric. There doesn't have to be any more bloodshed. Think of the innumerable lives you saved today with your actions. You risked yourself and you spared Lady Vessa's life."

Eric just nodded. He didn't have it in him to do anything else. He just wanted to sleep.

"Are we done here?" he asked.

Cithrel searched Eric's wearied expression. "Almost. Once my mother returns, we can leave."

Eric went still. "What? Why does she need to come here?"

“She’ll need to announce her official occupation of Belfir. The throne is empty with no heir. It will naturally be absorbed by Alonetha.”

Bile rose in Eric’s throat and he paled. Cithrel mistook the sickened expression on Eric’s face because he pressed his forehead to Eric’s. “It won’t take long. Her presence alone is enough for it be official. Then you’ll be able to rest.”

He gave Eric a reassuring smile.

Eric closed his eyes and let the heat of Cithrel’s body try to warm the hunk of ice now lodged in his chest.

Nithroel had used Eric as her puppet, parading him around as propaganda at every banquet and ball possible. And now, she let him do the fighting and killing, and she was going to take the credit. She was going to take all the power for herself.

Anger flared to life in him, bubbling to the surface and threatening to spill over. He was at his limit. All his planning, everything—he’d achieved it all, and kept Solonar bound to him. Still, he didn’t foresee Nithroel taking it all away from him.

Eric had failed.

The nymphs and slaves in Belfir were probably going to be worse off under the rule of the empire. If their nobles were any indicator, they were all bloated with power and wealth. The sound of these awful beings still shouting his title filled him with a newfound fury. It left him feeling so unsatisfied. Like a failure.

There was nothing he could do.

Solonar clapped the back of Eric’s shoulder, and the force of it shoved Eric forward. Before Cithrel could intervene, Solonar had either hand wrapped around Eric’s shoulders and leaned in close so only Eric could hear.

“Vessa has been taken back. She’ll remain in my wing of the palace and be taken care of, separately, away from the rest of my mother’s watching eyes. When will you inform her of what you did?”

“Now that I have a bastard’s blood on my hands.” He didn’t mean it literally, but it was true. Sticky liquid gold-stained Eric’s hands where the thorns that wrapped around his hands had taken Krysos’s life. In fact, he was covered in the Fae king’s blood.

“There’s always a price to be paid.”

“Right,” Eric bit out. “I’m just a tool for the empire. I pay the price and Nithroel claims the prize.”

Bitterness coated his tongue. None of this felt right, and anger twisted in his stomach. The more reality set in, the more he hated it, wished it wasn’t happening. He thought he’d quenched it, the vengeance in his heart. Still, he felt like he still wasn’t done. There was one final enemy Eric had ignored all this time, content to pretend it wasn’t the most important one. Now it refused to be ignored. It was all he could think about, as if it was being thrown in his face to spite him.

He couldn’t take it anymore.

“Fuck this.” He turned on his heels, ignoring the soldiers, and started walking away.

“Eric, where are you going?” Cithrel called after him.

But Eric didn’t answer or meet Cithrel’s eyes, which were probably full of concern for him. Or was he concerned for the Marked One? No, that wasn’t right. All his thoughts were a mess, his pulse thundered, and his ears rang. He was furious, and helpless, and on the edge of losing control. Something inside him was at war with itself. Something was *wrong* with him. Confronting that feeling only made things worse, so he did the only thing he could think of to feel like he could breathe again.

Eric cast open a Fae Path and stepped through it, not bothering to wait for “Her Imperial Majesty,” or to give Cithrel an answer. He simply left the empty throne behind.

Days passed and Eric still didn’t feel any better. Not even seeing the tears and look of gratitude on Sen’s face when he sent her back home through a Fae Path could lighten his dark mood. With Olaera gone and the traitors to the empire taken

care of, Eric had full control of the slave trade, so the first thing he did was dismiss all of the guards under Olaera's employ. Cithrel was more than willing to let them join the Imperial Army but Eric had a feeling the guards weren't going to enjoy their change in occupation. The slave trade was empty with no prospects of further income but Eric kept that fact to himself. No one would ask any questions for a little while, not after his actions brought about the end of Krysos.

Despite his disrespectful actions of leaving before Nithroel's arrival, the empress allowed him to return to the palace as a gesture of goodwill in gratitude for his hard-won victory. The thought of it darkened Eric's mood further.

He tried talking to Cithrel about other options with Belfir, but he wouldn't hear it. He just kept telling him the same thing over and over, like an incessant echo.

"If we don't claim the throne, another kingdom will."

It was just another twist of the truth, little more than an excuse. It was something a power-hungry empire would say, fearful that they might not be the biggest dog in the pack.

Eric pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed heavily.

He didn't want to go back to Belfir, especially not to watch Nithroel ascend to the throne and claim the kingdom and gain even more power. An emerald mantle hung from Eric's shoulders, and he was dressed in all-black finery, with the emblem of a black doe surrounded by bright green embroidered over his heart. The sight of the symbol he was once so accustomed to brought on a fresh wave of disgust.

He wasn't the property of Alonetha. He wasn't their *pet*.

"It's time, Eric," Hinni said.

She no doubt felt how he was feeling but she didn't address it, for which he was thankful. Reluctantly, Eric got to his feet and smoothed out his coat, straightening the lightweight and luxurious fabric.

"Are you alright, Eric?"



He gave her a pained smile. “I think you already know the answer to that question, Hinni.”

Hinni nodded.

Then Cithrel arrived and he was dressed even more magnificently than Eric was. He was in full armor, the silver freshly polished and glinting in the day’s light. His hair was pulled back in exceptionally intricate braids, wrapping around his skull in swirls before hanging past his shoulders.

“You look stunning, Eric.” Cithrel smiled.

God, the way Cithrel looked at him should have made his heart soar, but it only made the knots in Eric’s stomach twist harder. He couldn’t fight back the feeling that he had to do something. But he shoved down the sensation and forced a smile back at Cithrel, letting it crinkle his eyes.

His old friend guilt roused in him, reminding him of the lies that drenched his relationship with Cithrel. His prince believed everything was as it should be. That he had it all. They were both villains together and they were happy.

It was all a compound of lies. His guilt was so strong lately that it filled his stomach, claiming his energy and appetite. Eric couldn’t find it in himself to bother with anything. The gnawing emotions and confusion of what to do next plagued him.

“Thanks.” Eric gave Cithrel a pleased once-over. “Though it’s hard to compete with you.”

“Come. The sooner we go, the sooner we can come back and be alone.”

Eric ignored the sting in his chest. “Then let’s go.”

As they stepped through the Fae Path to the city-center of Belfir, it took Eric a moment to adjust. It looked completely different than the last time he was here.

The broken and war-torn rubble of the stone-paved streets were all replaced and in impeccable condition, bearing a strong resemblance to Alonetha’s streets. The rock gardens that made up the front grounds of the castle were gone and in

their place were sprawling gardens and beds of flowers in all colors. All the warmth, what little Belfir had, was eradicated.

Eric scented traces of Princess Lyari's magic. She had been the one to do this, to spread her aether's gifts throughout the castle grounds and cement the empire's presence. He wondered what the inside of the castle would look like now that he saw just how changed the outside was. He wouldn't miss the cold and destitute décor Krysos had chosen, but it wasn't about that. It was the fact that Nithroel was already exerting her will without lifting a finger herself.

*Take. Take. Take.*

The front courtyard sickened Eric, and he felt like he'd rather vomit all over himself than be forced to stand there a minute longer. He didn't want to listen to another word or hear any poorly spun bullshit that would barely pass as truth.

Nithroel stood at the center of the courtyard, in front of the castle like she owned it all already. Her hair was spun into whimsical circles around her face and the rest curled down her back and shoulders. The dress she wore was the culmination of ethereal perfection. It was plunging and silver and magnificent. Instead of a mantle, antlers crested along her shoulders before they arched and curled around her head in a demonic halo. Her crown of twisting plants and black metallic prongs sat perched atop her head and an equally intricate cape hung from her antlers. All down her back the plants that grew around her crown continued down into her emerald, silver and black cape. Flowers and plants with sharp barbs grew out around her. In that moment, standing before everyone, she was the embodiment of the Lady in the Woods.

She was Empress Nithroel Aloneth.

Eric swallowed and a feeling of unease slunk down his spine. He sensed it before he saw it. There was a shift in the air, a heartbeat before magic lit up the center of the courtyard, right next to where Nithroel stood.

Eric's mouth felt dry, and he thought his heart might beat out of his chest as the pressure of this unknown magic just got stronger and stronger. Some Fae had already dropped to their

knees under the force of the aether and even Eric felt his limbs struggling. He bit down on his lip to keep himself standing, so hard that he tasted iron as warm blood hit his tongue.

He saw the magic then, and Eric froze, unable to look away.

The Fae Path snapped and sizzled like lightning crashing into bottomless waves. Eric stood, stunned, the blood from his split lip staining his chin. A lone figure stepped out first, followed by two others.

The figures were towering, if towering could even cover how much they dwarfed Eric, taller still than Cithrel. Eric saw the crown first, then the rest of the figure came into focus.

A crown of pure crystallized coral sat atop the Fae's head, his hair spilling around him. No, not hair, *tentacles*. They moved and squirmed around the Fae's face like they had a life of their own. The Fae's skin gleamed with moisture, making the alabaster sheen shine brighter in the day. He cast a shadow on his guards, all three of them clad in fish scale armor, hugging their bodies like a second skin.

The same sinking feeling that plummeted and knotted itself at the bottom of Eric's stomach when he first met King Krysos was happening now. His blood sang and his bones ached. He knew he was standing before another Fae king. Only this king did not feel the need to flash a confident smile. No, that was for those who needed everyone to know their power. The Fae before Eric had a hard angry slash for a mouth, and an unbending energy radiated from him. A king like this didn't need to show his dominance when everyone felt it just from being in his presence.

"King Maldrayath Daphnos." Nithroel strode forward, her own back-breaking aura spilling from her with every step, a smile on her blood-red lips. "Welcome to Belfir. I assume you're here to collect what you believe to be yours."

King Maldrayath's unblinking hard gray eyes shifted to Nithroel, the empress drawing every ounce of his ire. "I am. Where is she?"

“Unfortunately, she’s no longer yours to claim. She’s a murderer of my people, among other transgressions. I took her in under good will and this is how I was repaid.” The empress flicked her wrist, a single motion that every Alonethan Fae soldier understood. *Don’t move a fucking muscle.*

Eric’s blood frosted in his veins, turning to poisonous sludge. A sickening understanding rose in his mind. He was wrong before when he spoke with Vessa. He’d just assumed, and she never bothered to correct him. She was just as capable of lying as he was, but he was too incensed in his craze to finish his revenge to realize he’d been blinded to the truth.

“You will give her to me, vile forest witch.” The oceanic Fae king snarled, bearing razor-sharp shark teeth. “She is mine by *birthright*.”

Eric felt his stomach’s contents writhe and threaten to come up. No, it couldn’t be possible. And yet, it explained everything.

Eric thought Krysos was Vessa’s father, thought that a pure-blooded Fae was the only one who could make such a powerful Impure. He was right about Vessa’s father being royalty, but he guessed the wrong king.

Nithroel stood her ground, maintaining her poise and hardened exterior. She oozed confidence and Eric didn’t know who was more frightening between the two royals. Krysos suddenly felt like such an insignificant Fae compared to these two.

“Be that as it may, King Maldrayath, by the laws that bind us through the aether, neither you nor I, the empress, have a right to her life anymore.”

Eric’s legs shook, unsteady. What did he just do? What the fuck did he just do? He didn’t know anything about this terrifying Fae before him and he was only just then understanding how wrong he’d been. Then the world came to a haunting pause as the king spoke again.

“You will give me Vessa. You will give me my daughter.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Everything shifted into horrific place at Maldrayath's words. How Vessa was so strong, so driven to prove her life's worth. Only now, he'd spared her life and chained her to him, forced her to put Eric's life before her own. She'd failed her father miserably and Eric was the one responsible.

It felt like a death sentence, but Eric stepped forward anyways. He met the oceanic Fae king's ire with a hardened jaw. "Her life belongs to me now, Your Majesty."

He didn't have so much of a death wish to ignore honorifics. But from the look the sea kraken abomination gave him, Eric was sure it didn't matter.

"What?" the king hissed through brine-covered teeth.

"I spared her life, so her debt is mine to collect," Eric clarified, though he knew Maldrayath had understood well enough the first time. "She is oath-bound to me."

He looked at Eric like he was little more than a stain on the ground. It seemed the Daphnosian Kingdom thought even less of humans than Belfir and Alonetha combined. The piece of shit. It sent a lick of flame through Eric's chest. The fight in him was sparking, slowly coming back to life.

Maldrayath stood at least a full foot taller than Eric, so when he turned his full attention on him, it was hard not to feel like an insect. His skin shone with the glimmer of sea foam as the light hit it and his unnervingly sinuous arms strained as he flexed.

"How dare this filth even stand in my presence. Remove this disrespectful thing from my sight, witch, or I will cleave his insolent head from his body myself."

The malevolence and the murderous hunger that Eric had forced back into dormancy roared to life and his aether burst into an inferno in his blood. From one breath to the next, a wraith's crown hung over Eric's head and his vision was tinted with red.

Not enough.

Eric was going to become a king-killer.

Nithroel smiled, and it was more hideous than all the Fae king's loathing because it contained a bottomless sick pleasure to it, the way a sociopath grins as they revel in their victim's pain.

"Insult Her Imperial Majesty once more," Saelihn's voice said, "and I will eat your tongue after I cut it from your mouth." Sir Saelihn blinked into existence, a gleaming deep crimson blade in each of his hands—one pressed to the Fae king's throat, the other to his spine.

"That will be the least of your worries, King Maldrayath," Nithroel said, "because make one more step against the Marked One and I'll have your water-logged innards hung on my bed posts. I will say this one more time in a way that you *will* understand."

Nithroel clasped her hands in front of her with an idle comfort and she looked at total ease. Eric didn't think there could be any bigger disrespect amongst the most powerful Fae, and the look on Maldrayath's face told Eric he was right.

"Your daughter is a criminal and is lucky to still be breathing and not torn to shreds before being fed to the Wilder Woods. Her aether belongs to the Marked One now, and you will obey this law. Or you will die."

Maldrayath was silent for a beat too long, and Nithroel's eyes flashed. Saelihn's blades pressed closer and the Fae king growled.

Eric's hands had curled into claws, begging for the ocean king to make a move so he had an excuse to tear him apart and swallow his aether whole. He wanted to feed his vampiric thorns, let them feast on the blood of another king. Not for Nithroel or for the empire, but for himself. He wanted to feel the exhilaration of death again.

It wasn't enough. He wanted more power.

"Do you understand now, King Maldrayath?" The empress asked.

“Yes,” he spat.

“Excellent. Now, perhaps we may address why you’ve chosen this moment to attempt to collect your ill-bred child. I do hope it’s not to try and claim Belfir as your own. It belongs to the Alonethan Empire now.”

The Fae king’s eyes lit with fury and contempt as he shook off Saelihn. The empress’s elite guard disappeared, but Eric knew that Saelihn only allowed Maldrayath to free himself. Nithroel’s guard was perhaps the deadliest being in this room, next to Nithroel herself.

That female, no matter how much power she held in her grasp, still held the throne hostage from Solonar and pitted her own children against each other, all to fulfil her own ambitions under the guise of following her husband’s wishes. It made Eric’s stomach churn again, his hunger growing more and more voracious. She shouldn’t have the entire Kingdom of Belfir.

He couldn’t let her have it.

*Take it.*

Eric glanced around what just days ago had been the blood-spattered and battle-torn courtyard of the castle. Pure, smooth white stones that were coated in inky black Fae blood with sparse flecks of gold were all gone. Now it was flowers and sunshine as far as the eye could see. Except where Krysos’s body fell. They left the cracked stone where Eric had slain the Fae king, and there were still traces of his spilled golden blood across the ground. All they did was have the body removed, but everything else remained.

Eric did this. For all his careful plotting and his vow to take revenge on this world, on the beings who stole his past, present, and future, here he was standing in the wreckage of his own doing. By his own hand, he was about to make the Alonethan Empire stronger, more unbreakable.

*No.*

The unforgettable words of Volodar cried out in his mind again, louder, a demand to be heard.

*Vessel.*

Eric had become the host to the emperor's aether. His power lived within him like a parasite. He'd mastered the power, claimed it for himself and now wielded it as one of his greatest weapons.

*Wish.*

How long did he want there to be something better for those who suffered like him in this world? Olaera and Aimar were little more than stains on his boots now, the slave trade was claimed as his own to manipulate and destroy.

The final word rang out through his skull, and with it birthed a new meaning for Eric, a new and final purpose for him to carry out with the dead emperor's power.

*Crown.*

That was the problem and the solution. The crown.

The otherworldly power of the aether flowing through Eric's body thrummed, surging in him to a new rhythm, a new purpose. Something shattered inside him then, splintered into a thousand pieces that would never be able to be what it once was. He'd felt that before years ago when he was first brought here. But that was different than this. It was more than just him shedding the skin of his old self; this was something much more essential. It was more than Eric accepting his role as a villain, selfish and power-hungry. There was a precious form within Eric that had been fractured against his will when he was taken as a slave, and it took everything Eric had to try and put it back to a semblance of what it once was. Now, though, Eric had taken it in his hands and broken the final shard himself.

His humanity.

Eric looked down at his forearm, at the blackened and burned Marking forcibly bestowed on him. Nithroel and Maldrayath spoke about something, their voices agitated, but Eric didn't hear. He didn't care because what they had to say didn't matter, not one fucking bit. He now knew what he needed to do.



“Crown Prince.” Eric swiveled his head until he found the raven-haired prince. He wasn’t surprised to find Solonar’s amber gaze already on him. The feline gaze was charged like a deep burning fire, ready to consume every living thing in its wake.

“Do you have something to say? It’s quite rude to interrupt, Eric.”

Solonar held Eric’s attention with a newfound intensity that had Eric wondering if he knew what he was about to say next. The small, shattered shard that remained of Eric’s humanity sobbed in anguish within him, pled with him not to utter his next words, but Eric shut the door to that fragile piece of himself, locking it away in the pitch dark.

“Anything, Eric,” Solonar breathed, sounding almost eager.

The amber in his eyes had gone dull though, resigned. It was like some of the fire in the crown prince was snuffed out when Eric personally bound Solonar to him. Eric held Solonar’s feline gaze a second longer. Then he strode towards Maldrayath and Nithroel until he stood between the two of them, effectively cutting off their argument.

“Apologies, Your Majesties, but I’m afraid that what I have to say must be heard.”

“Silence your tongue,” Maldrayath snapped.

Eric ignored his words and turned his gaze to Nithroel. The empress had a look about her that spoke volumes. It was altogether inhuman and bottomless, as if looking at it could swallow Eric whole.

She knew. The empress understood that for all her power and exploitation of her lineage, she couldn’t stop Eric.

“You can stop arguing over Belfir. I’ve made the decision for you. The Kingdom of Belfir belongs to *me*.”

Solonar’s intensity fizzled and guttered into one of resignation. Eric supposed the crown prince had already done the mental math of it all, and whether he liked it or not, they were bound to each other. His fate was sealed. He had no

choice but to side with Eric. The tattoos all over his body would remind him of that fact every day.

“Do not play at something so treasonous, Eric!”

It was Cithrel. He’d stepped forward, his eyes full of what Eric realized was fear. Fear of what Eric’s words meant\_for himself, but more than anything, fear for Eric.

Cithrel was still as striking as the first time Eric set eyes on him. His blonde braids hung past his shoulders, framing his intense and piercing blue eyes. The hard planes of his face and jaw accented the cold air about him. Finally, the brilliance of his silver armor and emerald mantle were what completed his overwhelming presence. The Fae Eric loved looked exactly like what he always imagined a prince would look like. It seemed like they might always be in pursuit of one another, left only to steal flickering moments of brightness.

“I keep telling you,” Eric said and the hazel in his eyes glazed over, withdrawn. “I don’t belong to you, to any of you. I’m not your weapon, or your tool. I took the king’s life. His power is *mine!* I’m taking what I’ve earned instead of willingly handing it over to let your empire gorge and bloat itself with power. I am no traitor, Cithrel Aloneth, fourth prince of Alonetha, Prince Commander of the Imperial Army, and Prince of Blades.”

Cithrel moved closer. To his shock, the mask that Cithrel kept in place around his family, around everyone, fell. He looked at Eric with pinched brows, his eyes wounded and pleading.

“Don’t,” Cithrel breathed. “Please don’t do this. You can’t come back from this.”

Eric didn’t flinch. “Now, I am a king.”

That was it. Those little words were enough to put them once again in an impossible impasse. Eric couldn’t go back now. He didn’t want to. As much as it crushed his heart to see Cithrel vulnerable, Eric knew he had to do this. He was given this power and thrown into this world. This was the right

choice. If he didn't do something now, they would always keep coming back for him.

His prince's eyes widened in agony as Eric's words struck him. Their precious little time together fragmented and tore apart Cithrel's insides. Eric knew it, because he watched the spark of his cerulean eyes snuff out and harden into slate. His prince was gone, then. In his place stood the empress's faithful soldier son, the prince commander. If this was the Cithrel Eric faced now, it made things easier for him. Or rather, for his corroded heart and soul.

At least, that's what he told himself when he turned his back on Cithrel, his protector, and the rest of the Imperial Family.

The promise Cithrel made to Eric all those months ago when he returned to this world came to the forefront of his mind. He was glad Cithrel had made that promise back then, so that he would keep it whether he wanted to or not. The promise to protect Bryce.

The air shifted and he felt Cithrel coming before he saw him. The fourth prince moved like lightning slamming into the earth with the force of a heavenly hammer, sending the ground quaking with the force of his charge. It hurt to know that even after everything, Cithrel would still turn on him so fast. Yet, Eric knew Cithrel would.

They were both villains.

He also knew Solonar had no choice but to protect Eric. They were twice oath-bound. It should have eaten away at Eric to pit brothers against one another, but it did little to his conscience. The old Eric wouldn't have been strong enough to make such a choice. The thought alone would have gutted him. But he made sure to kill off that weakness inside him. That version of himself was gone. All that remained was the weapon the Fae made him into, only they would never control him. He had power and vengeance to give him strength now. It was all he needed.

Solonar ripped through the air, raven hair loose in the wind, fists blazing with crackling blue fire as he met Cithrel's

razor-sharp blades with his infernal heat. What sounded like an explosion went off when their power met, clashing just behind Eric's back. The wind whipped at his back, furious as a tempest. Dirt and pebbles crashed against his clothes, biting into the exposed parts of his skin from the force of their power meeting.

With a hand shielding his eyes, Eric turned to peer through his fingers and the swirling dust at the warring brothers. They'd fought countless times before because of Eric, or on his behalf. This was by far the worst out of them all. Golden blood sizzled under the heat of Solonar's fire and sprayed into the air on Cithrel's obsidian sword. The wind kicked up, gusting harder in the air from the sheer force of two high-blood Fae fighting to kill. They had to—the honor of the empire and Eric's life were at stake.

Heat beat down on Eric's face, burning his cheeks with each gust from Solonar and Cithrel's blows. The scent of smoke and citrus assaulted Eric's senses. His eyes watered and his nostrils stung.

They exchanged blows at first, both of them slicing and tearing and burning one another. But then Solonar's flames grew hotter and there was only so much faster Cithrel could move before speed didn't matter against the Prince of Light.

Cithrel cried out in pain and rage as another of Solonar's blazing fists connected, searing Cithrel's cheek. Eric's chest tightened, resigned. This fight was over\_the Kingdom of Belfir was Eric's.

"Yield," Solonar hissed, an unmovable wall. "We both know I can't let you hurt him. If you keep trying, then I'll have no choice but to *make* you stop."

Cithrel grunted and shoved Solonar back, his muscles straining, and he smashed against Solonar's burning fists again and again, an unstoppable force. "My allegiance is to Her Imperial Majesty. I can't stop. No matter how much it engulfs my soul to destroy what's mine."

Eric watched in a state of disassociation, like he wasn't quite there. Probably some kind of self-defense mechanism

Eric's brain had; otherwise he wasn't sure he would have survived watching Cithrel's heart shear in two as he fought to hurt him.

He could have sworn he saw Solonar's shoulders slump at Cithrel's words. Almost like he didn't want to actually hurt his little brother. But Eric knew Solonar wasn't capable of that kind of empathy.

"Then endure the consequences of your choice." Solonar's amber gaze darkened to a volcanic cataclysm.

"I hope you can survive yours." Cithrel glowered. "Eric, you will take no throne today."

Eric drank in Cithrel's wounded appearance. He memorized the lines of his face once more, committing them to his memory before he spoke. "That's not your decision to make, Cithrel."

Cithrel charged at Eric again, fiercer and madder than before, his dash a thunderclap. The trees in Belfir shook, leaves torn from their branches as they were swept up in a hurricane of power. Cithrel didn't slow as he aimed his twin jet black blades at the person he loved. The black doe insignia engraved into them glared at Eric, and Cithrel didn't slow as his brother stood in front of him, blackened fires hissing like hurricanes in his palms.

The aether charged the air with an unholy amount of power, and their auras forced the Fae in the castle's courtyard to their knees. All except Eric, Nithroel, and Maldrayath.

Nithroel hadn't taken her eyes off Eric and she still hadn't blinked once, either. Eric's muscles tensed when their gazes met across the courtyard. She foresaw all this happening and that's why she remained where she stood, as still as a marble statue, except for her eyes. They followed Eric wherever he moved. They hounded him. Those blood-ringed eyes bore into him, through his flesh and into his soul, and what she saw repulsed her. Or amused her. It was impossible to tell from the otherworldly way her very being was.

A sharp cry of agony tore Eric's attention away from the empress and he turned to see Cithrel on the ground, his blades thrown from his hands. His face was bathed in a flame as black as decay as he cried out again. Solonar stood over him with hooded eyes and then the flames snuffed out in his hands.

Something fragile and now buried deep inside Eric lamented, tearing at the darkness inside him, begging him to go to Cithrel. His monster was in pain, suffering and wailing, and Eric didn't flinch. He forced the urges back down and stood statuesque as the courtyard filled with the roars of pain coming from Cithrel.

The entire courtyard watched, silent, as Cithrel's face burned. The resplendent and cold fourth prince was reduced to this level of humiliation and public suffering.

There was no fresh citrus that hung in the air, no fresh soothing breeze. Eric swallowed back bile as the scent of charred flesh and hair filled his nostrils. Cithrel clawed at his face, his hair, his armor, desperate to snuff out the infernal flames that devoured his flesh.

"Help!" Cithrel roared, piercing through Eric's indifference and goring his heart.

Eric watched as Cithrel begged for someone to help him. But Solonar stood over him and no one dared come to the prince commander's aid.

"Don't beg, brother." Solonar spoke softly, his words like honeyed poison. "Endure it."

The flawless skin of Cithrel's face and the hard planes of his cheekbones and jaw line began to bubble, frying like slabs of meat. Eric clapped a hand over his own mouth, his face contorting at the sight of Cithrel's face cooking. Of flesh peeled from bone. The crackle and spit of golden blood bursting through Cithrel's skin was more than Eric could bear and he averted his gaze.

After what felt like hours but was probably seconds, Cithrel passed out from the pain. Only then did Solonar turn and walk away from his mangled brother's form in the dirt.

All eyes followed the crown prince as he walked over to stand at Eric's side, chin held high. Solonar may have been little more than a prisoner to his oaths, but he was still heir to the Alonethan throne. Solonar would be damned if he didn't still carry himself like it.

Feline eyes raked over flattened hazel ones. They exchanged a loaded but wordless look. Then Solonar lowered his gaze and Eric realized he was waiting.

Everyone was. All the Fae, high-blood and low-blood, waited to hear Eric speak. He spotted Luthais standing among the crowd, his silver hair pulled back into a harsh ponytail and his purple eyes were filled with sorrow. Luthais had been the only one Eric felt like was a real friend and now he looked at Eric like he had just lost something precious forever. It was too much for Eric and he looked away first.

Eric's lips parted and he blocked out the images of Cithrel's charred face, twisted with misery, which were now burned on the backs of his eyelids. He knew this day would stay with him forever, that every night when he closed his eyes he would see Cithrel like that. Relive it. Another price he had to pay.

Eric cleared his throat and stepped forward. What came next didn't even feel like his own words. He was a demon possessed. "Too long has the Alonethan Empire wielded their strength over the weaker. What once was harmony has become tyranny and an abuse of their power."

He turned to meet the eyes of the Belfiran soldiers, to look at the Fae who were now lost and cast adrift. So many beings were at the mercy of the empire. Fae who were susceptible and easy for Eric to manipulate, to get them to join him.

"They cannot have any more. I will not let them take the Kingdom of Belfir. I am king, but you do not have to follow me if you do not wish it. If you remain in this kingdom and fight against the Aloneth family, then you do so by your choice."

Hundreds of eyes fell on Eric and there was a rustling wave of unease. He knew the look in their eyes. It was the

same look he had had time and time again. Fear. Doubt. A want for courage to fight for something, but struck by helplessness.

Then, Solonar let out a long sigh. “This is the path we must suffer along,” he murmured. Louder, so that others could hear, he said, “My King.”

The crown prince, heir to the Alonethan Empire, was loyal to Eric. Eric didn’t look at the raven-haired prince. He wasn’t ready to see the expression on his face.

That action was the final push so many Fae needed to make their decision. Dozens of soldiers kneeled to Eric.

Then dozens more.

More and more kneeled to him, more than he imagined would, until it was clear who had won the Belfiran throne.

It was then Nithroel finally blinked. She sensed the outcome of this event and still she seemed surprised. Then, she did something that made Eric tremble.

She smirked at Eric.

It was full of confidence and amusement, and something unspeakable lurked behind the quirk of her full rouged lips.

“I hope you understand what you’re doing, lovely.”

Eric watched as Luthais crouched at his unconscious brother’s side. He heaved Cithrel’s body over his shoulder, obscuring Cithrel’s gruesome form so that Eric couldn’t see. The second prince was somber, but he turned, cast a Fae Path before him, and stepped through with his younger brother.

The words stung Eric, but there was a price to be paid. Another one. Each payment cost a piece of who he was. Soon there would be nothing left.

*Fine.*

Eric felt eyes on him and glared when he saw it was Maldrayath watching him. The oceanic king seemed caught between frustration and disgust as he appraised Eric. It was plain to see Maldrayath wasn’t pleased to see Solonar under



Eric's control and he was probably coming to the conclusion that his daughter had met the same fate as the crown prince. His daughter belonged to Eric now too. She was weaker than him, a human. He cast Eric one last scornful look before he turned and left, his guards behind him.

As the Imperial Family and their soldiers departed, Eric stood motionless, watching them. Instead of clamping down on the guilt, heartbreak, and other overwhelming emotions, he let his aether's power fuel him. The victory washed away his inner turmoil and quieted his aching heart.

Finally, the last Fae Path dissipated and the Belfir courtyard held a loaded silence. Solonar didn't go with his family. He was still at Eric's side.

"Will you be able to withstand this?" Eric's question was quiet.

"It doesn't matter anymore, Your Majesty."

"I guess not." Eric cast his eyes down, mulling over the prince's answer. "And don't call me that."

Eric looked at his Marking once more, at the blackened prongs that resembled a crown more than ever before. What reason did the emperor have for choosing Eric? Was this what Volodar really wanted Eric to do?

He banished the doubtful thoughts. They were no longer a luxury he could afford or cared about.

Instead, he reveled in the aether humming in his blood, singing a melody of power that drowned out all else. He turned to the gates of the castle with his chin held high and a crooked smile.

Eric strode through his new home with all the poise of a king.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

It rained sideways; the droplets hammered against the windows of the Throne Room with a relentless fervor. Eric looked out the window at nothing, lost in thought. He didn't sleep well these days, not in the year that had passed since he'd taken Belfir. Since he'd betrayed Cithrel and left his broken body and heart behind.

It had been a year of loss, but more than that, it was a time of metamorphoses. In the time since he'd taken Belfir, Creusa had reappeared, swearing her fealty to Eric and bringing with her hundreds of other nymphs loyal to her. He knew she was a well-respected merchant, but he didn't realize just how much renown she carried amongst her own kind. Evidently, she liked what she saw in Eric because she'd chosen him. A friendly face that wasn't chained to him was a welcome addition.

The black and twisting crown of black metal prongs and sharp thorns lay heavy on Eric's head, though it was a welcome weight. He'd decided to keep the purple livery Krysos had worn, as it served as a reminder of what Eric had taken for himself, of the power he claimed as his own. He liked the loose clothing that seemed inspired by ancient Grecians, probably because it reminded him of Luthais.

At the thought of his only friend, Eric's bare feet suddenly grew cold along the gleaming purple and gold marble flooring. He'd requested that Creusa change the floors supposedly because he'd wanted to liven up the gloomy-looking castle. But in truth, there were some things he missed about Alonetha.

"Your Majesty The King," said a voice like two rocks grinding against one another.

Eric followed the voice, his mind still in a haze, and found Creusa addressing him. The nymph merchant looked as wild and untamable as the last time he'd seen her. With eyes like stone and a body as if she'd been carved from a mountain, the nymph was hard to miss. Even with the way her words grated like rocks grinding together, there was a demand to hear every word from her mouth. Her head cocked to the side in question.

“What is it?” Eric asked, monotone.

*I see your choices still haunt you, Marked One.*

Eric bit down, working to keep his face neutral.

“A missive has been sent for you.”

It was then that Eric belatedly noticed the letter in Creusa’s stone hands. Eric’s heart fluttered and he sat straight in his seat. His eyes sharpened, alight with a renewed focus he had so rarely felt in the last year. He’d been waiting so long for this letter. Too long. The shadow at Eric’s back shifted and he felt a spike of heat run across his back. He ignored it and nodded for Creusa.

“Is it....” He let himself trail off.

“It is, Your Majesty,” Creusa supplied.

“Thank you, Creusa. I know it must be difficult traversing through the territories like this. Especially during this time of unrest.”

The nymph’s eyes sparked like a piece of struck flint. “It’s the least I can do for you, Your Majesty. You’ve given everything for my kind.”

*Even the last grain of your humanity.*

“Shut up,” Eric mumbled under his breath.

“Pardon, Your Majesty?”

“Nothing, Creusa.” Eric blinked. “I asked you not to address me that way. There’s no need to be official. We’re at home.”

Creusa’s mouth crooked up at the corner and she dipped her head. “Of course.”

Eric sighed in resignation as he got to his feet and made his way down the dais to Creusa, his violet mantle dragging behind him. He despised wearing it, but he had to play the part to please all the Fae and nymphs who followed him so fervently.

When his fingers closed around the missive and he felt how thin it was, he frowned. "Is this it?"

"That's all I was given."

Eric nodded and took the letter back to his seat. This letter was different than the others. His heart thundered in his chest, adding a tang of fear to his quickening pulse.

This wasn't the end of it, was it?

No. He wouldn't do that to Eric, not like this. There had to be another reason for the change in letter.

He slouched into the ebony wood throne that was carved to look just like hundreds of black twisted thorns burst around it. The crown and throne were the only things he asked to be kept black in the castle. It was his power, after all. He couldn't bring himself to hide what he was, inside and out.

His fingers shook as he removed the wax seal of a black doe and opened the missive. There were two lines written. No signature, as usual.

*I'm coming for you.*

*I miss you.*

A death note and a love letter in one. Eric's heart soared and ached simultaneously reading those words. He read the lines over and over again, analyzing every stroke of magic on the page. The pads of his fingers traced the words, as if he could feel the being who had written them.

Cithrel.

His angel-faced prince. Still his. How often did Cithrel think of him? Was it as much as Eric did? Was it more?

When he'd received the first missive, he'd thought his heart was going to stop. It was terrifying and exhilarating and impossible for Eric to resist. His prince was still so devoted to the empire that he kept himself chained to its gates. Yet, he was now chained to Eric as well, even if they were enemies. Eric clung to that piece of himself that was also tied to Cithrel.

So Eric wrote Cithrel back.

*You'll never succeed in capturing me by doing Nithroel's bidding.*

*I'm already yours.*

They'd been communicating by letter through Creusa since he took the throne. At this point in his life, it was the only thing Eric looked forward to. There were a million things Eric wanted to say to Cithrel. But he said none of them.

Every other day was hollow. He'd ripped a sharp, jagged hole through his chest the day he took Belfir for his own. Everything he'd done was supposed to be for vengeance, to fill the emptiness in his chest. This was what he wanted. What he needed.

*There's no room for love and revenge in you. How much further will you take this? End it now.*

"Be quiet," Eric hissed, glaring at the brightly marbled floors.

The emotions were beginning to get too intense, threatening to tear him to shreds, so he let the aether in him soar in his blood until the rush of power quieted the noise of his aching heart.

"How long are you going to keep this up, dear Eric?" Solonar said from Eric's right, his voice taut.

The once shining beacon of Alonetha stood at Eric's side, his glowing amber eyes hardened to stone. His long black hair fell all around him, a dark contrast to the gold studs that lined his elongated ears. The former crown prince of Alonetha, with no future in sight, had abandoned his old appearance. The familiar black and red was gone, replaced by a bright gold with touches of black. Eric's color. The different fashion left almost all of Solonar's tattoo binding him to Eric in full view. The black markings seared into his skin wrapped around his neck and all down in his chest in a myriad of thorns—or shackles.

Eric exhaled through his nose, exasperated.

*Yes, how long are you going to keep this up? You don't really think you can have him and this castle, this kingdom, do*

*you? Olaera was right. You're a fool.*

"Stop. Talking," Eric said through gritted teeth.

Solonar's face was streaked with ire. He knew about the voices that plagued him. "You're consumed by it, Eric. What is so special about *him*?"

"You keep your secrets, Solonar." Eric looked up over his shoulder at the raven-haired prince. "Let me keep mine."

He didn't want to have to rip his heart out for Solonar. The messy and hideous relationship Eric had with Cithrel was his and no one else's. He wouldn't share it. Cithrel was his and Eric belonged to Cithrel.

"I never should have helped you escape that day." Solonar huffed and real mourning flashed in his amber eyes. "Look at yourself. The aether's eating away at you. You're not sleeping, you're barely eating. I am loathe to admit that I suffer alongside you, watching you decompose with each passing sun and moon."

Eric crumpled the letter in his fist. "But you did help me get away, Your Highness. You disfigured your own brother, nearly killed him with your own hands, for my sake. The throne you coveted more than everything else around you. You threw it all away in a single moment. If you suffer, then it's by your own hand. We have all made our choices and must endure the consequences. I'm living with mine. So should you. Besides, now we're here, all three of us. Bound by chains of ink. Aren't we, Vessa?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Vessa spoke up from Eric's left. "I spoke my oath, binding myself to you. I understood the repercussions that would bring me here."

Maldrayath's daughter stepped forward from behind Eric's throne. Her body was wrapped in matching dark purple finery, with slits to expose her shoulders where her branches grew. Gold rope hung around her neck like a choker and wrapped around her wrists, looking like priceless bangles. Her mismatched irises looked even more brilliant in the deep wine colors. After meeting her father, Eric knew he'd made the right

choice binding Vessa to him. Maldrayath had made her what she was today, distorting her mind from birth to believe she was lesser.

Eric was going to make sure the world of the Fae knew that beings like her—and him—were so much more. Their precious hierarchy of power would be their downfall when the Fae lay underneath Eric's boot.

Eric told himself daily that what he did to Vessa was the best thing for her. Some days he even believed it.

*She's your prisoner. Your slave. Stop lying to yourself. You've become a monster.*

Eric's face fell in his hands and he clawed at his own temples to stop the voice in his head. He stayed hunched over as his aether burned through his blood, until it silenced the echoes in his mind.

"See, Solonar?" Eric exhaled. "Do you understand now?"

Those amber eyes guttered, withdrawn in what looked like resignation, or sadness. Though Eric supposed it didn't matter. "I'm not the one who doesn't understand, dear Eric."

Eric sucked his teeth, blocking out the truth that threatened to burrow under his skin and torment him in his dreams later that night.

Lightning flashed, drawing Eric's attention. The rain continued to beat down on the windows of the Throne Room as the three of them perched atop the dais. How long had it been since Eric had seen the sun? It seemed to rain almost every day at the mountainous castle. He missed the sun, the wisteria trees, the Imperial Gardens.

*There's only revenge. That's all you need. Stop thinking of anything else.*

"Was this journey any more fruitful than the last, Lady Vessa?" Eric asked.

Good. The voices quieted when he focused on what was important. He just needed to stay focused. Eric shoved away

his other thoughts, letting them sink to the bottom of the abyss in his mind.

“No,” she said, her face pinched with pain. “My father refused me upon entry once again.”

“Then it sounds like we’re out of time,” Eric said. “Nithroel will be making her move on Maldrayath, despite their differences. If the empress gains his allegiance, then it will all be for nothing. I will not allow it. He’s your father, so I tried to give you as much time as possible, Vessa. However, I can’t delay any longer.”

He’d known what the King of Daphnos would do when Eric sent his daughter, Vessa, to negotiate. But he’d had to let her try. The otherworldly ocean king would recoil at the sight of his own blood chained and submissive to a human. Eric didn’t know if Maldrayath hated Eric more for binding his daughter, or his daughter for allowing herself to be bound. It ate away at him, gnawing on his insides every time she returned a little more beaten down and rejected by her father. But after a year with no success, they were out of time. If he waited any longer, there was too much an opportunity for Nithroel to secure an alliance. That couldn’t be allowed to happen, so he’d go himself to the ocean king. He would have Maldrayath’s loyalty, even if he had to take it by force.

He hoped it would come to that. It had been far too long since he felt the rush of another’s aether, of their power. Solonar was the only one remotely capable of drawing any excitement from Eric when they sparred, but even then, the prince held back because of his oath. Without Eric’s humanity to keep him tethered to his morals, he was adrift in the urges of his aether, trapped by the hunger for power. Even now, the thought sent a thrill down his spine, and the magic in his veins lit up with thirst. The hunger was near insatiable.

Vessa’s voice cracked as she spoke again. “I know, Eric. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright, Vessa. You tried.” Eric gave Vessa a sympathetic look, though it was empty. “Solonar, I know how



much you hate playing nice, but I'll need you on your best behavior tomorrow."

"Finally, something to ease the gnawing in my brain."

The crown prince was a changed Fae ever since Eric solidified the oath with his own power. Or was it something more that made Solonar different? No, that wasn't likely.

It didn't serve him to dwell on the crown prince's thoughts. His time of waiting was over. Now he could finally focus on what he had worked so hard for. If he had Maldrayath on his side of this war, then Eric might have his final revenge. He needed to ruin the place responsible for destroying his old life—needed it as badly as he needed air. It suffocated him.

The Alonethan Empire had to be crushed.

"Then send word to announce our impending arrival." Eric's lips curled into an inhuman grin full of anticipation. "Tomorrow, we go to Daphnos."

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