

THE THRONE OF BROKEN GODS

GODS & MONSTERS
BOOK TWO

AMBER NICOLE

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The world once made sense. My sister got sick and Kaden saved her, giving her breath again when the world threatened to take it. He changed me, making me one of his own, gifting me with extraordinary powers that made even creatures of the night flinch. In return, I did what he said and cared for him in my own way. Sure, my work schedule wasn't the best, and things sometimes got messy. "Kill this person, Dianna. Maim him, Dianna. Bring me that, Dianna." He had a lot of demands, but it was easy. It made sense. Everything made sense until him.

A god king, they called him the World Ender. I didn't mean to bring him back, but when I slayed one of his celestials in battle, he returned with a vengeance, and the world stopped. The last living god walked this plane once more, and the Otherworld shuddered.

Kaden sought an ancient relic and set us to finding it. I snuck into the mortal council to see if the World Ender had brought it with him. My need to keep Gabby safe had been the driving force in my life for centuries, but there was something about the World Ender. Like a moth drawn to flame, I couldn't stay away from him. That was my first mistake. My second was being captured. He and his minions imprisoned me, trying and failing to get information from me. During a failed rescue attempt, I made a choice based on fear, love, and a deep desire to keep Gabby safe that changed everything.

So came the hard part. Another trade for Gabby's life, and a deal made with my enemy, the World Ender. His people would protect her while I helped him hunt for the artifact.

For her I would do it. I had no choice. They say that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, but the consequences of my betrayal would cut me deeply.

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I stayed with Liam, worked with him. Days turned to months as we searched for the relic. Angry glares transformed into heated stares, arguments transformed into laughs, and that spark between us turned into searing flames. Our hate for each other faded, replaced by something far deadlier and far sweeter.

After staying weeks with allies and navigating the growing tension between us, we finally had a solid lead and set out to finish our mission. We found the Book of Azrael in a long forgotten tomb and fell into a trap. In a desperate act to save Samkiel and the world, I risked my life. Samkiel saved me instead of claiming the book.

With the book in enemy hands, we went to Plan B and traveled to the remains of his world. We visited a fate that revealed a prophecy of what was to come and how the end of the world was in sight.

~~Unbeknownst to us, traitors lived in our midst. Individuals I had trusted with both my life and Gabby's belonged to Kaden. They took advantage of our absence, and for my betrayal, they took the one person I loved most and delivered her to Kaden.~~

We returned to Onuna immediately, searching for her to no avail, until a broadcast that reached around the world and through the realms. Kaden had a message for us, for me, and he wanted the world to hear it, too.

It was only a snap, a single crack, and the world that once made sense, made sense no more.

"This is how the world ends," the fate had whispered, and I was going to show them just how right fate was.

Dianna

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ONE

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SAMKIEL



It had been twenty thousand, one hundred and sixty minutes since she had left, and I had counted every single one. My eyes skittered toward the large clock on the other side of the room. Sixty-one now.

“So a giant, scaled-winged beast destroys half of Silver City and just disappears?” The anchorwoman shifts in her seat as she stares at me. Jill was her name, right? Or was it Jasmine?

Scorching hot metal bit at my skin as I pushed a large sheet off of me. The ground rumbled as I dug myself out of the hole my body had made when I crashed to the street. My ears rang, and when I touched them, my fingers came away wet. The silver shine on them told me everything I needed to know. Blood. She had screamed so loud it had burst my eardrums.

I threw my head back as another heart-shattering roar lit up the sky. It was pain and anger and utter heartbreak. It shook the nearby windows, and I wondered if it could be heard through the realms.

One mighty clap of wings, then another, and she was airborne. Thunder cracked the sky in her wake, the speed of her ascent displacing the air. Lights and sirens bellowed on the street as flames tickled the buildings all around me.

I couldn’t stop thinking about our time together, every second from the first to the last. Dianna’s words echoed as if we were back at that cursed mansion.

Her smile awoke something in me, and for the first time in a millennium, I felt the ice I’d encased my heart in crack. She gazed at me through those thick lashes, her hazel eyes filled with warmth as if I was worth something.

She held a single small finger out, and I held my breath. What was wrong with me?

“Pinky promise, I will never abandon you, Your Highness.”

More of those odd words of hers, but they meant something to me. Everyone I held dear had left me. I’d lost them and secluded myself, yet this creature... no, this woman, promised me something I had begged for. Such simple words, such a simple act, had fractured something in me and shifted my world.

I stared at the empty night sky, watching her dark wings beat across the sky, her sleek form disappearing into the roiling clouds. Away from me.

“You promised,” I whispered as the sirens continued to wail.

Noise flooded the newsroom, pulling me from the memory and slamming me back into the present. Hot lights blared down on us. I did not remember the name of the woman sitting across from me, even though several people had reminded me.

Disappeared? That’s what they were saying. She had ripped a hole through that building and my chest as she fled.

I plastered a smile onto my face, one made of falsehoods and despair. I leaned forward. *“Disappeared* is a misnomer, to say the least. As you know, it is very easy for powerful creatures to hide.”

A slight blush grazed her cheeks, and my stomach rolled. How easy mortals were to manipulate with a smile and kind words. They had no clue what was coming. The casualties I feared would happen soon.

“Yes, and speaking of which, what would you like the people to call you?” She shifted closer, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Since you have officially returned?”

I did not think or pause. I knew the answer and had denied it for far too long.

“Samkiel.” I forced another broken smile. Could they not see? “Samkiel is fine.”

Liam was a shield I hid behind as if I could pretend to be anything other than the World Ender. Liam was my attempt at a new start, even if it was a broken one. And Liam cost me everything. If I had been the king I was meant to be, been the protector the old gods built monuments to, maybe I could have saved her, helped her more. So, no, Samkiel was who I was, who I would forever be, and Liam died with whatever part of Dianna’s heart fractured that night.



BACK AT THE GUILD IN BOEL, I SPLAYED MY HANDS ON THE TABLE.

Vincent sighed beside me and folded his arms. "They had questions they were supposed to stick to. I apologize."

Vincent gave the thin man behind me a hard stare. He adjusted his glasses and flipped through the tablet he carried everywhere. "I swear they picked their own questions, my liege. I would never..." he paused, "I'll fix it."

I sighed and walked to the window before turning to face them. Gregory. That was his name. He was a member of the council sent as an advisor to help ease the growing animosity among the mortals. Vincent approved of him. It seemed everyone approved of Gregory. They all saw I needed extra assistance, but Gregory could not help me with my problem.

"What is your job title once more?" I asked Gregory, cutting a glare at Vincent again, knowing he had more of a hand in this than the shivering celestial.

Greg's throat bobbed. "Article 623 in the House of Dreadwell states all ruling monarchs must have an advisor. With all due respect, my liege, your parents had one, and you need one too. I should have been appointed to you the second you returned, but that did not happen. Since you have fully come back, the council feels it is past time that I assume my station. I am more than adept at dealing with the media. I have experience in political, legislative, and judicial matters as well. I am the qualified party."

"Ah." I nodded, the air in the room growing heavy. Vincent shifted and shuffled some papers on his desk. "As the qualified party, I can assume accidents like today will not happen again. Correct?"

Gregory looked at Vincent and then down, avoiding eye contact with me. "I will go handle this current situation."

"Fantastic," I said and turned to the window, looking out at the clear sky and the mortals below.

His footsteps receded, and I heard the door close a second later.

The power flickered, and I took a deep breath, steadying my nerves. Lights buzzed, and I took another breath, inhaling through my nose and

slowly exhaling through my mouth.

"You have to expel some of that." Vincent neared, slipping his hands into his pockets. "Another thunderstorm wouldn't hurt," he said, nodding toward the window.

I shook my head. "It's been raining for days."

"And it's dried. Do it. You need it."

My head lifted, feeling the familiar tingle beneath my skin as I summoned the energy. I felt every atom. They bounced off each other, building the storm. A tendril of power whipped out of me, and I took another breath. The sun disappeared, thick clouds rolling across the sky. Thunder rocked the world, the clouds broke open, and rain poured like someone had turned on a great faucet. I heard the curses of mortals down on the street as the wind howled.

"Feel better?"

"No."

My reflection glared back at me from the rain-spattered window. The suits they draped me in were supposed to make the mortals see me as more approachable, but I knew it was actually to show them I was not falling apart. My face was clean-shaven, and my hair trimmed short. They wanted me seen as whole and not the broken king they knew so little about.

Fake a smile. Look presentable, as if your entire world is not in shambles.

Pretend. Pretend. Pretend.

That's what Vincent said, what he preached. He wanted the mortals to feel secure and not as if the world was on the verge of yet another catastrophe.

Lightning streaked across the sky, and the door opened. My eyes searched the reflection in the window. I longed to see her burst through the door, carrying a plate of food for me, a smile blooming across her cheeks as she did at the Vanderkai's mansion.

"See, it's grumpy, just like you."

I spun as the image of her faded, and Logan rushed in, carrying a smaller tablet than Greg's.

"We found something."

I pushed away from the window and was at Logan's side in an instant.

Logan handed me the tablet, a graph displayed on the screen. Blue, yellow, and red lines all showed an upward trend. I scanned the screen,

noticing the small numbers along the bottom. Time was labeled over thirty minutes, yet it still made no sense.

“What am I looking at?” I sighed, rubbing my brow.

Vincent retreated behind his desk, watching Logan and me.

“The waves you see show electromagnetic interference, pretty much what TV and radio give off during a broadcast. They spiked right here when Kaden started talking and stayed that way until he—” He stopped, and I knew a part of him hurt for Gabby’s death, even if he never spoke of it. “Anyway, it stopped shortly after.”

“And?”

Vincent cleared his throat. “Logan thinks it was broadcasting not just to us but beyond Onuna.”

Logan sneered at Vincent. “I’m not wrong. It spiked, and to a degree that made it accessible to not only every TV and radio in this realm but farther.”

Vincent rolled his eyes. “Whatever you say. I think there is no possible way it could reach past this realm. They are closed, and even if it could be done, who would Kaden be reaching out to? Everyone is dead. You really think some cosmic entity survived this long and wants a special broadcast on Dianna?”

“Why am I just now hearing of this?” I asked with a frown, looking between the two.

Logan cleared his throat. “Vincent thought it was a pointless lead on yet another dead end, but once I saw the graph, I knew I was on the right track.”

Vincent cleared his throat. “We need to focus on making sure the mortals are comfortable and not chasing our tails on hints and guesses. The spikes could be from the energy both of them expelled when she—”

“You do not answer to Vincent,” I snapped. I did not mean to talk to him like that, but I knew I had done so often over the last two weeks. Logan scowled at Vincent as I leaned forward and took the device. Ignoring their stare down, I studied the screen. “If, by chance, Logan is not wrong, who would he speak to? More importantly, why would they be interested in Dianna and her sister?”

Logan shrugged. “I don’t know, but I do know there was an energy spike high enough that it not only affected every bit of technology but hit satellites as well. We may not be able to reach realms, but—”

“But nothing. It’s impossible,” Vincent said, cutting Logan off.

Their bickering faded into the background as I stared at the chart. Logan was not wrong about the spike, but it was the line that followed that made the noises, lights, and world fade away. It dropped immediately after Gabby died. A flat, steady line that dragged across the screen. Her echoing scream roared back into my head.

“Thank you, Logan,” I finally said, stopping them mid-argument. Still looking at the tablet, I turned and left.

“We still have one interview left!” Vincent called, but he did not follow.

“Cancel it.”

“I can’t,” I heard Vincent whisper.

“Well, you do it then,” Logan replied back to him.

Their voices faded away as I headed toward the main conference room. I took the elevator up several floors, my eyes scanning, memorizing that graph as a million and one possibilities ran through my head. If Logan was correct, who cared enough to want to witness such a thing?

I pushed open the mahogany double doors, the lights in the conference room already on. The dark leather chair spun toward me and stopped, facing me. Manicured nails tapped on the desktop, and she smiled at me.

“Is this new?”

Dianna.

TWO

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SAMKIEL



“D ianna.” Her name left my lips on a whisper, and I damn near crushed the tablet. She stood and walked around the desk. I took a large step toward her and engulfed her in my arms. Her body pressed flush against mine, and I nearly wept. Her warmth seeped through my clothes, the part of me that belonged to her screaming awake. I had missed her so damned much. She was here, whole and well. I could touch her, feel her. I lowered my lips to brush against hers, needing that connection, but she turned her head away. Then I realized I did not feel her arms around me. Her hands gripped my arms, and she pushed me back, forcing me to let her go.

“This is expensive. Do you mind?”

My heart lurched as she stepped back, adjusting the open suit jacket that clung to her. She ran her hands over her top as if brushing away the feel of me.

“I have been looking for you. Where have you been? It’s been weeks. Two, to be exact.”

She half turned, brushing a stray hair from her face. “You counted?”

“I count every second you’re gone.”

A soft chuckle left her lips, her brows ticking up as she trailed her fingers over the desk, rearranging some of the pens. “Coming on a bit strong, aren’t you?”

My heart stilled as another part of me suddenly set up on high alert. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing, actually.” She paused as if thinking. “Oh, you mean since my whole freak out?” She waved the pen in the air before tapping it against her

palm. "I'll admit that was a bit dramatic. Sorry about your building, but you fixed it, so that's good."

I shook my head. "I don't care about the building. You left after—"

"Oh, that." She shrugged. "Yeah, well, I have a lot to do and needed to clear my head, you know?"

"Dianna." Her name left my lips in an anguished plea. I had felt her pain, remembered it, and now she sought to bury it.

"Oh, don't make that face. I'm fine." She winked at me, extending her small finger and waving it in the air. "Pinky promise."

"Have I done something to wrong you?" I asked, my chest tightening. She was acting so dismissively.

"Wrong me?" She stifled a laugh. "Gods, I forget how ancient you are sometimes. What does that even mean?"

"I'm just trying to understand where you are coming from."

She twirled the pen between her fingers. "Which parts?"

"Us."

She snorted. "Us? There is no us." She waved her hand, her palm facing me. "The mark is gone. We don't work together anymore. Remember?"

"Is that all I was to you? Work?"

"Listen, it was fun. We messed around, but it doesn't have to be a thing. You know, I thought, given your history, you would understand?"

"My history?"

"You've had flings before. Remember? I've seen them." She tapped a finger against her temple, smiling slightly.

Blood thrummed in my ears, my heart pounding tenfold. This was wrong. She was... lying. This wasn't her. I knew it. I knew what we had, what we had both felt. The ache in my heart turned to blistering resolve. I had trained warriors to lock their emotions down and shut them off to prepare for battles that could cost them their very lives. That was what Dianna was doing, trying desperately to shove me away to prepare for war. Her war.

I folded my arms over my chest. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I know you. I know you'll worry and get in the way, but I'm really fine. I just have to kill a few people." She paused, a playful grin widening. "Or a few hundred."

I took a step toward her, closing the space between us. "You know I will not let that happen."

Dianna kept fiddling with the pen. "I know." She took a step closer to me, her hands caressing my chest. I flinched as she nipped my chin, her lips curving in a smile. "That's why I am here to warn you."

The corner of my lips ticked up in a half grin. "Warn me? Dianna, are we back to threatening each other after everything?"

"It's not a threat so much as a promise. So, you stay out of my way, I stay out of yours, and everyone goes home happy."

"A promise? You can't hurt me. You know this."

That was a lie. Her words had done nothing but rip me to shreds, one after the other. I felt gutted by the way she looked at me, as if not an ounce of her cared. That was pain.

She spun away from me, dragging the pen across the edge of the long desk.

"I like the cleanup you all are doing, by the way." She flashed another smile over her shoulder. This time, I noticed it didn't reach her eyes. It was a faded shadow of her true smile, and I ached to see it again. "Do you ever tire of looking so pretty in front of all those cameras? I mean, I like the new hair. So dashing."

"Dianna."

"Also, going back to Samkiel, huh? Giving up on the whole Liam thing? Makes sense, I guess. Eventually, we get tired of pretending to be something we aren't. I mean, I did." She flipped through a few pages on the desk.

"Dianna."

"Also, you won't find them with research. They are probably gathered in their estates, hiding like cowards."

I reached out and grabbed her arm, turning her toward me. "Listen, I know you are hurting, regardless of what you say. Let me help you."

"I just told you how."

"That's not..." My words trailed off, the rational part of my brain taking over. The shock of seeing her had eased, and I finally registered the heavy scent emanating from her. My stomach turned. "Why do you smell of mortal blood?"

Her smile was downright venomous.

One second, I was in front of her. The next, she had flipped me onto the desk, my back hitting hard enough that the wood groaned and cracked from the force of the impact.

Dianna gripped my throat and leaned over me. I tried to sit up, but she held me with surprising ease. Shock was an understatement. Even when Dianna and I had trained, she had never been stronger than me or able to pin and hold me down. She had been feeding on mortals and a lot of them.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I know you. You’re nice and good and all those things we are not. You will want to help me, but there is no help. The only thing you can do for me is to stay out of my way. I came here to ask nicely. I will not ask again. You get in my way, and you will pay in blood just like them, just like him. So how about you turn a blind eye like you did a thousand years ago, huh?”

“You know I do not respond well to threats.” My hand clasped her slender wrist, but I didn’t try to pull her grip from my throat. I could feign submission if I must. I would let her think she had the upper hand as long as it kept her talking.

“Fine. Just remember you may be immortal, but your friends, family, and those who look up to you,” she clicked her tongue, “aren’t. So how many do you want to lose because you won’t let me do what I need to?”

The pieces clicked together in my head, and a dark picture formed.

“You mean to slaughter all those responsible for her death?”

That was her plan? I remembered the cry, the scream when her sister died. It had been the center of my nightmares for weeks. I could still feel the pain of my body flying through walls, windows, and metal from the force of it. This wasn’t her. This emotionless empty shell was not my Dianna.

“This isn’t you, Dianna. No matter what, you’d never speak to me this way. Threaten me.”

She laughed and let go. “You really take this whole hero thing to heart, huh? Is this the part where you tell me you know the real me? Please, I’ll barf my entire lunch up.”

I rubbed at my throat, easing the slight ache, and pushed to my feet in one smooth motion. The desk beneath me groaned, the crack between us growing.

“I looked for her, for Gabby, and searched for you the second you left.”

Dianna paused, her false smile dropping, something festering behind her eyes. Whatever pseudo persona she wore fractured at my words. I saw the flicker of life behind those crimson eyes.

“I couldn’t find her, but I tried. I assumed you had, but your face tells me otherwise.”

She said nothing and only stared at me. So I reached out, clasping her hands in mine. Her gaze fell, looking at them, but she didn’t move, didn’t flinch from me as she had before.

“I know you’re in pain, Dianna. No matter what you say or throw at me, I know where this comes from. I’ve been there. You also know that. You are hurting and alone, and I... just let me help you. Please. This isn’t you.”

Her eyes snapped up, our gazes clashing as she ripped her hands from mine. I knew what I’d said had hit a nerve that rattled her in some form.

“It is now.”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t believe you and never will. You showed me who you were months ago. I remember every second of every day. You helped me and cared for me when you didn’t have to. You risked your life for everyone. I may wear armor to war, but this is your version. You’re locking everything away to protect yourself, suppressing it, but I know without a doubt that *my Dianna* is still in there.”

The door opened. “I managed to address your recent concern...” Gregory’s words died as he glanced at me and then at Dianna.

One second, that was all it took. Dianna reached behind me, swiped a small object off the desk, and tossed it through the air. It flew at lightning speed, and I heard the sound as it hit its mark. My heart clenched as a thud followed, and Gregory hit the floor face-first with the pen sticking through the back of his skull. The blue light emerged from his body and hovered around him for a second before shooting through the ceiling.

“Believe me now?”

I said nothing. How could I? I’d barely processed the last few minutes, and now Dianna had slaughtered a celestial in front of me as if it meant nothing.

“There’s one dead body. You get in my way, and I have no problem adding another. I will have my vengeance. They knew the price of touching her, and if you get in my way, you will too. Turn a blind eye, Samkiel. This isn’t about you.”

An alarm blared, the power flicked off, and a swirl of silver beams lit up the area by the door. Smoke filtered into the room, laced with a chemical to make Otherworld creatures quake. It was a new defense mechanism Vincent

had installed after her last rampage through the guild, but it was already too late.

Dianna glanced toward the flickering lights, then back to me. “When I burn this world to embers, and you paint me as the villain, remember, I really did try to be good... once.”

Her form shifted, the dark mist engulfing her until I was alone in the room.

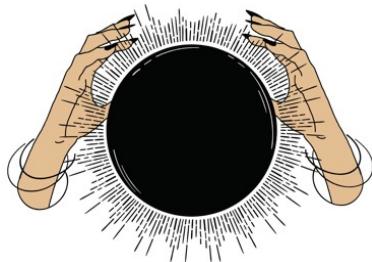
And the simple truth was I was terrified on so many levels I didn’t know where to start.

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THREE

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CAMILLA



“Camilla. We must gather what we have and flee. The island is not safe anymore.”

I tapped my finger on my glass. The soft glow of the overhead light illuminated Quincy and the other members of the coven in the doorway. All were packed and ready to leave, their bags littering the floor around them. I felt her eyes on me, the satchel she had slung across her chest full of the small skulls she collected. “Nowhere is safe, Quincy. Not anymore.”

“The Hand has already secured every other location, but they don’t know about the hideout off the coast. I mean, where else do we go?”

A soft chuckle left my lips. “Iassulyn probably.” Quincy approached the table, soft blonde curls framing her face. “Leave, take the rest of them. It won’t matter where you go. She won’t come for you.”

Quincy placed her hand on my arm, her grip light. “May the goddess watch over you.”

“All the old gods are dead, love,” I whispered. I forced a smile, and she nodded before turning away, the others picking up their bags and following her. I listened to the worried tone of their chatter, their footsteps fading as they moved toward the door.

The wind had stilled, the island the quietest it had been since I’d laid claim here. Cool glass touched my lips, the sweet, tangy flavor of the wine exploding in my mouth. I had been saving it for a special occasion that would never come. I savored the taste and stared into flames of emerald green as they danced beneath the mantle.

“What have you done?” I yanked Drake’s sleeve, making him turn toward me. Several Otherworld creatures filed out of the room, whispering amongst themselves. The corpses Tobias had used for Kaden’s little show dropped to the floor, no longer of service.

Drake glared at me, agony darkening the vampire prince’s golden eyes. “I did what Kaden commanded. What we had to do.”

“This was a mistake, and you know it. You know it. She was your friend.”

“And she was your ex-lover. You handed her over just as much as I,” he snapped, yanking his arm from my grasp. “I had no choice, Camilla. None of us do because of Kaden, because of The Order. Listen, Ethan is my brother, my only family. No matter how I feel, I couldn’t let him lose his mate.”

His eyes softened behind the monstrous mask he wore. I knew some part of him regretted what he had done, but he was family bound.

“She will come for us now. All of us. You heard the death cry and felt the world shake. Gabby was a leash that held a rabid beast, and now that tether is gone. There is no stopping her. I can feel it now. All of us can. Something shifted, something old and—” I didn’t have words to explain what I felt, but it sent terror skittering through me.

Drake only shrugged as if words failed him, too. “Maybe death will be a mercy after everything we have done.”

Before I could respond, Ethan’s voice cut through the departing crowd, calling for his brother. His face held no remorse as he clung to the wife that had condemned us all.

“Go home, Camilla. Spend time with your coven because she will come, and I don’t think Kaden or Samkiel can stop her now.”

An icy chill went through me as I watched him leave. I wrapped my arms tighter around myself and turned back to the room. I had one last thing I needed to do. Some would call it remorse or guilt, but either way, I refused to give Kaden another weapon.

I tilted my head back, folding one arm over the other, my hair spilling down my back. What had we done? Even if our relationship hadn’t ended on good terms, taking the only thing from Dianna she loved was unforgivable. Kaden and The Order were older and more powerful than all of us. They were unstoppable. My hands were just as dirty as Drake’s, as

everyone on Kaden's council. In her eyes, we were all responsible. And we were. Maybe Drake was right. Maybe death would be a mercy.

I swirled the shimmering red liquid in my glass. Thunder clapped above, but when I glanced out the window, I saw not a single cloud in the sky. I knew then it wasn't thunder that shattered the night. I didn't jump or move when the screaming started but only glanced at my glass, watching as ripples formed in the blood-red liquid. My heart didn't flutter or change its beat when I felt my home shake. I felt the song of magic along my skin as they tried to fight back, but there was no fighting—not against vengeance, not against ruin, not against death.

The double doors slammed open and crashed against the wall with enough force to crack the heavy wood. Cold air filled the room, and my exposed skin prickled, my dress a ridiculous attempt to protect me from the chill that ran through me. The candles along the walls and ceiling flared and died. A hush filled the mansion. No more screams or spells, not even the sound of a heartbeat in the house other than mine. I took another sip of my wine, not lifting my gaze from the green flames in the fireplace. Even they appeared to cringe from what had just entered.

"You know." Her heels clicked against the floor, slowly, deliberately. "I forgot all about Quincy."

I squared my shoulders, knowing she had not spared even one of them. "She was a young witch."

"Hmm, she was cute. Fragile but cute. I remember seeing her curls on the screen. They were always so shiny and bouncy. I need a good moisturizer."

I knew exactly what screen she meant and remembered how my stomach sank when Tobias had whirled that camera toward us. She'd memorized every face there, and now she wanted blood. I was wrong. No one in my coven was safe. I had damned them all.

"You redid the place since I was here last," she said, her voice hollow and devoid of emotion. "It's nice. Well, it was, at least."

I turned and nearly dropped my wine glass. The green flames leaped higher, my magic flaring as if to protect me from what walked toward me. Her nails scraped the table, chipping away at the smooth stone. The dark, archaic power emanating from her made my body tremble. I remembered her being a fraction of what I felt in this room, but then that was before, when Gabby was alive to drag her back from the brink. Now there was no

Gabby, and that sharpened edge she'd always teetered on was a thing of the past. She had dived head first off it, slicing herself to pieces on the way down.

Dianna's once hazel eyes now bled solid crimson, the Ig'Morruthen making its presence known, the beast no longer hiding. Her cheekbones were sharper. The pantsuit she wore clung to her deceptively lean and feminine muscles, showcasing the best of her curves. The hem of her coat waved in some unseen breeze behind her. She had been feeding. A lot.

"Yes, I had to get new furniture after you and Samkiel nearly destroyed the place." I swallowed the last of my wine and placed the empty glass on the table before the tremble in my hands made me drop it.

She paused, and I saw it then. The rage, anger, and hate disappeared for a mere second. My magic felt it too. The harmful power she held around her as a shield fractured, as if his name was a lover's song, coaxing a trembling beast. But my hope, along with that song, lasted only a second before she corrected herself. I didn't think even she realized the visceral reaction she displayed at the mention of him.

"Oh, Dianna, you can't hide your heart even when you are fully gone. Kaden knew that too. Why do you think he acted so rashly?" I was right. I had been right when I first saw them together. Kaden had seen it, and that was the true problem. Her reaction, while minuscule, was only further proof. "Where is Samkiel, by the way?"

Her eyes flared a shade darker, and she was in front of me. She grabbed me by my chin, lifting me and cutting off anything else I might have said. "You know I haven't had a taste for witch since..." Her smile was slight and devious as she scanned my face before her gaze dipped lower. "Well, you remember."

"Just do it," I bit out between clenched teeth, but she released me.

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. It's not you." I fell to the ground, catching myself on my hands. She stepped around me, pulling out a chair. Sitting, she placed her heels on the table, crossing her ankles. "I don't know if it's sheer cockiness or idiocy that would make you come back to the one place you knew I'd search for you."

"What can I say? I had no interest in delaying the inevitable." I pushed myself up, wiping my hands on the front of my dress.

She clicked her tongue, inspecting her nails. "I always knew you were the smartest witch. I never understood why he wanted Santiago so damn

bad."

"Santiago obeys orders better than I do."

She sighed. "I guess we'll see about that."

I shifted on my feet, confused. Dianna's words made it seem as if she wasn't here to rip me to pieces.

"You're not going to kill me?" I whispered in surprise. I hadn't even considered the possibility.

She shrugged as if she wasn't the threat in the room right now, but I knew what she was capable of when she truly fed. It made her damn near untouchable. I remembered the first time she'd slipped. It was so long ago, but I had never forgotten. Only Gabby could bring her back, and she was gone.

"Kill you? Camilla, let's be honest. If I wanted you dead, you would have been gone the second I got here. I'm here to talk."

"Talk?" I swallowed hard, somehow the prospect of that was even more terrifying.

She nodded. "Yes. Now sit."

I refused to obey. Dianna was behind me in a second, grabbing me by the back of my neck and forcing me to the table. How had she moved so fast? She hadn't even disturbed the air. Steely hands forced me down, and my ass hit the chair. She reappeared on the other side.

"There. That's better." She cocked her head, scanning me. "What's wrong, Cam Cam?"

Cam Cam. My nickname. Only she used it, and I hadn't heard it in ages. "Where is all that witchy badassery? The snark and magic. Where's the one who tricked me? The one who stood there while she died. Hmm?"

I swallowed. "I didn't think he would do it. No one did."

"Really?" She chuckled softly. "You know him as well as I. So, let's not play the *I'm Innocent* game. You know what happens now. You all do." She leaned back, plucking at a long gold chain necklace. "But it's okay because you have something I need."

I shook my head. "I don't know where he is. He left after it happened. He opened a portal when he heard... Tobias and him, they left."

She leaned forward, and the room went dark. The doors behind her closed slowly, the creak from the hinges sending a chill down my spine. Her eyes glowed, lighting up the room. They were nearly as bright as her smile. How much had she consumed to have that much control?

“Oh, I don’t need you to find him just yet.”

“Then what do you need?” My question hung in the air, and I regretted it almost immediately. Her smile grew, her canines on full display. It seemed she wasn’t trying to hide the Ig’Morruthen anymore. I remembered when she would religiously check the mirror to ensure her reflection still portrayed the mortal shell. Now it seemed she had lost that part of her, too.

“More power.”

My eyes scanned her face, and I squared my shoulders. “If we are going to skip the formalities and not lie, as you put it, your power far outweighs mine. You have Kaden’s power running through every part of you, plus you’re feeding again. With all due respect, you’re wrong. You don’t need me.”

She clicked her tongue, wagging a finger at me. “That’s where you’re wrong. I’m not dealing with just Kaden. I’m dealing with Samkiel and his legion of celestials who all believe in peace, love, and fuzzy feelings. Any of who would be more than happy to show up when I destroy everything.”

Now my heart thudded. “What do you mean?”

“I messed up.” She placed her head in her hands and shook it. “I assumed he was like Kaden, you know? He wouldn’t care what I did. There were times when Kaden wouldn’t talk to me for weeks. I was wrong about Samkiel, but I don’t understand why. We didn’t even have sex.”

I swallowed, saying something I hoped wouldn’t get my head chopped off. “You know people can care about you without having sex, right?”

Her eyes lifted, and any hint of humor was gone. She placed her hands flat on the table. I didn’t know what I’d said, but a flicker of emotion passed across her features. She quickly buried it. I would have missed it if I hadn’t been looking at her.

“All I’m saying is, he’ll try to stop you. He will stop at nothing to get you, and not like Kaden. We’ve all seen the way Samkiel looks at you and how he is around you. Kaden had people watching the minute you left. Kaden wants to possess you, but with Samkiel, it’s more than that, and a part of you knows it.”

I waited for her to snap, correct me, or maybe lift a hand and set me on fire, but her response was completely unexpected.

A forced smile curled her lips. “That’s lovely. Anyway, with that being said, I need you to make me something.”

I blinked. This wasn't Dianna. Whatever broke when her sister died changed her on some deep level. She really didn't care? I slid a tad bit of magic beneath the table. It hit a wall before ever reaching her and screamed. I hissed, yanking it back into me.

"Very well." I tossed my hair over my shoulder, trying to maintain the facade of being unbothered, but it was slipping.

Dianna's lips curved in a small smile, and she waved her hand at me. "Look at that. See, you're already helpful."

I lowered my gaze, eyeing my nails as I ran one thumb over the other. What choice did I have? Fight? Even if I did, I knew I couldn't stop her. I knew what Kaden truly was, and I had no chance. I'd hoped she would kill me quickly when she arrived, so I wouldn't have to speak the next part aloud. It would have been better for her to find it after she'd reduced me to ash, but if I kept it to myself now, it would be so much worse when she discovered what I'd done.

I took a deep breath and blurted, "I have her body."

The room stilled.

"I took it after it happened. They left as soon as they heard your cry. I think every Otherworld creature heard it. Even from miles away, we felt it. Power rippled through the world when you screamed, even if you didn't realize it."

I looked up. The small smirk she'd worn mere seconds ago had slipped from her face. Her jaw tightened, her expression reminding me so much of the World Ender. Did she not realize how deeply they were connected? Did she not feel it? And now she wanted my help to avoid him while she tore Onuna apart.

"I know in your culture there are rites that must be performed, and I didn't want Kaden to have... to have her body. I didn't want Tobias to raise her and attempt to hurt you even more. Besides, it was a simple spell to preserve her."

Darkness, thick and heavy, gathered in every corner, sucking the very air from the room. Dianna's eyes bore into mine, and I knew she had been looking for her sister and had come up short.

I met her stare as she whispered one word. "Where?"

I stood from the table, her eyes never leaving mine as I raised my hand. A wall shifted behind us, a door appearing in the far corner. I headed toward it, and she stood to follow. We walked down the narrow hall, the silence

between us oppressive. Emerald flames lit in the sconces on the walls as we passed. The hairs at the nape of my neck stayed up with her at my back. My body screamed *danger*, yet I kept going, one foot in front of the other.

The hall opened up into a large room. I twisted my wrist, and more magic hopped from one torch embedded in the wall to the next. Jars of bones and feathers rested on the shelves. A discarded, half-torn painting of my home covered the far back wall. Ancient art and relics I had collected littered the room.

I stopped at the entrance and moved to the side as she walked by. The flames on the walls bent away from her as she passed. There, in the center of the table made of stone, covered by a thin sheet, lay Gabby's body.

Dianna ripped the cloth back, and the world stopped.

I expected a yell, a wall of flame, violence and rapture. My breathing quickened. I expected my head to hit the floor, separated from my shoulders by one of her blades. I expected her rage and vengeance, but what I got seemed so much worse.

Dianna stood over her sister's body, her eyes never leaving her face. She raised a single hand and lovingly brushed Gabby's hair from her colorless face. I saw Dianna's nostrils flare and knew reality had slapped her hard. The spell I'd cast helped, but I could not stop death, even with all my magic.

"In my culture, they say only a shell remains when you die. The soul leaves, taking every part that makes you who you are with it. You are welcomed to a great paradise of light and love. There's no more pain or worry, just paradise." She ran a hand over the other side of Gabby's hair as if trying to put it back in place. "She's so cold."

Dianna's eyes never left her sister, not a breath or flicker of emotion marring her features. I clasped my hands together and pressed my knuckles against my lips, swallowing back tears at her pain. The room went deathly still, tendrils of darkness reaching from the shadows, drawn to her and her agony.

Dianna reached out again, brushing the hair away from Gabriella's face. "I thought at first that maybe I was wrong. Maybe it was a terrible dream, and I could still find her, you know? How stupid is that? Even after I felt that mark sear my palm, I had hope, but seeing her like this?" She placed a kiss on her forehead before straightening. "I really have no one left now."

"I—"

Roaring flames engulfed Gabriella's body, and I gasped, forgetting my words of comfort. Dianna stood silhouetted against the angry glow, both hands extended, fire pouring from her palms. I stumbled back, shock washing over me as the sister she loved so much burned between us.

She stared into the crackling flames, their tips reaching, seeking more fuel. I feared my home would burn with us in it, yet as I watched, they never once licked the ceiling. She controlled them, the heat and the intensity.

“I buried my father. I buried my mother. Now, I will bury her.”

Dianna didn't move. She just stood in front of the burning pyre. Phantom pains shivered over my sides, chest, and throat as I remembered the clawed beast that had attacked and nearly shredded me only a month ago. I tried to keep my spine straight, but every cell in my body screamed for me to strike out, defend myself, or run. She felt so much like Kaden now, every dark and sinister power she'd inherited from him etched into her skin.

“Fear isn't a good smell on you, Camilla.”

I swallowed and tried to regain my composure. “You're different. Everyone can feel it.”

Her eyes met mine through the flames, the stench from the burning body turning my stomach. “Good.”

“I'll make what you want.” The words came out a tad quicker than I meant them to.

“I know you will.”

The crackling of the fire and the smell were too much, even for me, and I turned to leave.

Dianna called after me, “I'll need an urn and one other thing from you before we begin.”

I turned toward her, my heart racing. “Begin what?”

She glanced at me, the flames illuminating her dark silhouette.

“Dismantling an empire.”

FOUR

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DIANNA. 182 DAYS



I swiped at the loose strands of hair that danced across my cheek as the ocean breeze passed, heralding in the night. Heels at the beach was a terrible idea, my feet sinking further into the sand. No birds or mortals murmured nearby. The only sound was the lapping of the waves. The sun, a fiery beast, cast the clouds in a pink and yellow glow as it set. I squinted behind the shades I wore, the sunlight already starting to give me a headache. Nightfall was on her way, the breeze growing a fraction cooler as I felt her call.

I closed my eyes, that voice whispering back to me as my grip tightened on the urn I carried.

What do you think about going back to Sandsun Isles? They have a secluded, unmarked part of the beach I found while I was in hiding. They have cliffs we can dive off of, and it's so beautiful. We haven't been to a beach together like that in at least thirty years. I won't even invite Rick. It will just be a nice, relaxing, fun sister trip. Let's make it our first vacation. Please, please, please.

My eyes snapped open as her voice faded, my fingers digging into the urn lid.

"Not the ideal vacation, but this is where you wanted to go. Better late than never," I said, glancing at the black and gold urn in my hands. Camilla had found it, and I had scooped every bit of her ashes into it. The Ritual of Havlousin had to be done. It was what our father and mother had taught us. Our culture demanded it to ensure a final resting place beyond the stars, although now I didn't know what I believed in. Paradise seemed like a joke, yet here I was, scattering her remains so every part could be reused. Our

parents taught us that the body was just a vessel. Only a shell remained when the soul, the most essential part, left. Maybe that was why I felt what I did. Was I just a shell now? My chest felt as if a thousand rocks were crushing it. There was no movement, no life, not anymore. I knew I should cry and scream, but nothing came.

“You needed me, and I wasn’t even there. I was so distracted with...” My throat closed as I pictured his face. Samkiel. Another emotion hit me, making my gut turn. I shoved it down, another lock forming in my head, on my heart. “I should have just left with you. We could have hidden, let them fight each other over that stupid book. I’m so sorry, Gabs.”

I paused, searching for words. My fingers brushed the lid, the relentless waves lapping at the shore, the steady beat filling the quiet.

“You know, I thought about it. Maybe it would have been better if we had died in Eoria. I should have just stayed with you there instead of begging whatever god that would listen to save you. Then, Drake wouldn’t have found us, and we wouldn’t have ended up before Kaden.”

My lip curled, remembering that very day. Mer-Ka was my birth name. Ain was Gabby’s, and Eoria was the home where we knew peace so long ago.

Shattered.

“Follow me this way.” He tipped his head toward the flap of cloth that acted as our door. He carried her in his arms like she weighed nothing. How strong was this strange man? I swallowed and nodded, following along. As long as he had Ain, I would do whatever he said and follow him anywhere.

I exited our home, my feet barely a whisper behind him. He didn’t check to see if I followed, moving silently and quickly as if he were walking on air. We passed empty stone homes left and right. Half of our village had left the second the pieces of the sky fell. They knew something bad was coming, but my parents didn’t listen. They didn’t believe the danger existed. Now, watching Ain cough, I wished I would have pestered them more.

“W-where are you taking us?” I asked, my voice sounding every bit as scared as I felt.

He turned slightly, offering me a small smile over his shoulder. “I have a friend who may be able to help.”

I nodded again to avoid his eyes. They seemed to dance with molten fire, and the gold edges were unnatural. He was beyond gorgeous, with

dark curls that framed his face. His skin was the same shade as Ain's and mine. I had never seen another that looked like him. Maybe he was from another world, too. I had begged for a savior. Maybe he was mine. He did look like the pictures my mom had shown me of the winged angels she believed in. She'd told me stories about how strong and powerful they were, and this man certainly seemed to be. He carried my sister without effort. Not that either of us had much weight on our bodies at this point. We had run out of real food weeks ago and had been living off what rations I could find. I gave her the most, even when she fought me, but I had promised my mom and dad I would take care of her. She was my baby sister. I wouldn't let her starve.

I watched the back of his dark curls as we walked, heading toward an abandoned part of the city. Unease shivered through me when he stopped before a broken and misshapen temple that was half collapsed. He started down a brown stone stairway, the statues on either side chipped and worn beyond recognition.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "We can't be here. These are closed off because they are unstable. They are not safe. We could get crushed."

He turned, looking at me as if I were insane. "Wait here. I need to speak to them. I'll return for you."

I gasped. "Them? How many are here?"

"Just wait." He smiled as if he could hear my thudding heartbeat and sought to calm my fears.

"You are not taking my sister, gods know where, without me." I stepped closer, looking between him and the empty, dark hole in the ground. I would fight him if I had to, even knowing I wouldn't win. His muscles were apparent through the thin garbs he wore. The unusual fabric crisscrossed over his entire frame, faithfully clinging to his physique. He must have read my expression because he smiled soothingly once more.

"Look, I appreciate you trying to help, but she," I pointed toward my sister as she leaned on him and coughed once more, "can't be alone in there. I don't know who you are, but she barely breathes as is."

"My name is Drake." He smirked. "Now you know who I am. Please wait here."

I started to protest, but his eyes shone a shade brighter. My mouth closed, and the anxiety left my body. Maybe it was a good idea. "Okay, I'll wait here."

He smiled once more, then turned, disappearing down the stone steps and out of my sight.

I paced despite my exhaustion, twisting my fingers as I waited.

And waited

And waited.

I stopped and stared at the stone staircase and sighed. Wait here, he'd said. I had to wait here, but why? My heart thudded. He had my sister, and he was going to help her. I needed to wait, but why again? I moved my foot, tapping it on the sand, my body resisting the order he'd given me. I flexed my hands once, twice, my stomach lurching. I needed to get to Ain. He'd taken her, and I didn't know him or who else was down there. What had I done? Wait here. No. I couldn't wait for her. I moved, my feet scraping on the sand. I didn't think about anything other than getting to Ain as I started down the steps.

I splayed my hands against the walls nearest to me, trailing my fingers along the dirty stone as I carefully started my descent. It was pitch black, and I couldn't see anything. This was a bad idea. I knew it, but what choice did I have? The walls ended as my feet made it to solid ground. I outstretched my hands in front of me, trying to grasp onto anything.

"Drake?" I whispered, trying to get the beautiful stranger's attention, but I heard nothing. "Drake?" I whispered once more.

I heard a rustling near me as if something slithered across the sand. I'd forgotten about the sand vipers that loved the dark, cool places. What was I thinking? Okay, okay, I could do this. I could do this. It was for my sister. I took a deep breath, making sure I avoided the area where I'd heard that little movement, and turned toward the opposite side. I kept my hands outstretched, not wanting to run into anything as I walked slowly but surely forward.

A solid wall finally met my fingertips, and I sighed in relief, tracing the uneven texture of the wall and the symbols carved into the stone. I kept walking, keeping my hands on the wall. Gods, I wished I could see. It was still so dark. How did he see anything? My rambling thoughts stopped as I heard voices. At first, they were soft murmurs, but the closer I got, the louder they grew. Someone was arguing.

"We don't want a carcass that's decaying from the inside out. I'm not going to eat that," I heard someone say, and I gulped.

"She is not to eat. I brought her for Kaden."

“You intend to feed me scraps then, vampire?” A deep voice replied.

Vampire? What was a vampire?

I shuffled closer, and their voices grew. I saw a dim light ahead and breathed a sigh of relief before dropping my hands from the wall and stalking forward. It wasn’t a lot of light, but enough to draw me to them. It spilled out at the end of the temple, casting dancing shadows across the far wall—lots of shadows.

“No,” the curly-haired angel said. “I intend for you to save her. I know you can.”

“And why would I do that?”

There was a slight pause as I drew closer. “Maybe another person to help you with your plans.”

I stopped in the doorway, afraid to interrupt their conversation. “Hmm, I don’t need anymore. Kill her.”

My heart dropped, and I didn’t think before running into the room. “No!” I screamed, skidding to a stop in front of Ain. I spread my arms wide, trying to protect her with my body. Ain clutched her arms around herself, frozen in fear.

Terror swept through me. I hadn’t just walked into a room with two men talking. I’d walked into a room with more than a dozen people. They were all dressed in various colored garbs, and they were all staring at me.

“You’re the travelers they spoke of. The ones who crossed the desert on foot and made it in one piece.”

“Is that what they call us?” The large man in front of me laughed, and a few others around the room joined him. I gulped, staring up at him. He was taller than me, and that was saying something. My eyes trailed from the thick black sandals he wore to his pleated skirt and over the wide expanse of his muscled chest. His skin was darker than mine, not like the sands of my home, but richer. The red garbs that covered his shoulders and part of his chest contrasted beautifully with the rich tones.

This had to be their leader. The power radiating from him was nearly physical. He’d woven his dreaded hair into a thick braid that disappeared down his back, the sides cut so close you could see his scalp. He was breathtakingly beautiful but deadly, like the colorful sand vipers that could strike at any moment. His hazel eyes met mine.

“Only those blessed by the gods could cross the great sands and survive,” I whispered, glancing around the room.

The others in the room looked between us as if just waiting for his command to kill Ain and me.

“Blessed by the gods?” He gave a sharp bark of laughter as he glanced at the others behind him. They either snickered or stared at me. He turned back around, shrugging slightly. “I guess it depends on who you pray to.”

Drake stepped forward. “Kaden, I apologize. I compelled her to wait outside. I don’t know how—”

Kaden, the scary, beautiful man, turned toward him and lifted a brow. Drake lowered his head and stepped back, stopping near another man that looked strikingly similar to him. The others in the room looked at each other, whispering together.

Kaden focused on me again. “Compelled, and yet here you stand in front of me,” he said. I moved closer to Ain and wrapped my arms around her. They spoke back and forth above our heads. I glanced toward the misshapen door. I could try to run with her. Maybe we could make it before

“Excellent.” Kaden clapped his hands, drawing my attention back. “She stays. She is mine now.”

His words hit my skin like acid, and something inside me snapped. Not caring that I was outnumbered and, in a room filled with people that could kill my sister and me, I reached down and unsheathed the small dagger hidden against my inner thigh. Kaden watched, seemingly unconcerned.

My father had given me the blade when he showed me how to defend myself. At the time, I didn’t understand why he was so insistent on the instructions. But once the sky fell, I wondered if my father was blessed with the sight the high priests always murmured about. Had he seen what was to come and wanted us safe? It didn’t matter. I thanked the old gods for those lessons because I needed them now.

“I belong to no one.”

I remembered my father’s words about where to hit and how to hurt even the biggest opponent. Groin, throat, or go for the eyes and gouge them out. I held the hilt sideways, the blade at an angle, keeping it in front of me. He looked at me, his smile growing wider before he erupted into laughter again.

“Oh, feisty. I love it. Tell me, do you keep all your weapons between your legs?”

His comment was crass and crude, but I didn't falter. My father taught me not to play into the tricks and words of an enemy.

"Come closer, and I'll show you."

His smile didn't fade as he took a step closer. "Like this?"

I lashed out, swiping the blade across his face. Eyes in a variety of colors lit the room. Several men raced forward faster than I could track. Kaden's eyes no longer gleamed hazel but had turned a pure blood red. The cut on his cheek stitched itself closed, and I gasped, dropping my blade and stumbling back to stand over my sister. Monsters. I was in a room full of monsters.

"Oh, feisty indeed," he said, wiping the blood from his cheek as if it meant nothing, but the murmurs behind me told me otherwise.

"What are you?" My voice was barely a whisper.

He crouched and reached one massive hand toward me. I scooted back, blocking Ain's body. He grabbed the dagger I had dropped, placing the tip against his finger. He twirled it, the blade shimmering in the dim light of the cavern. It had reminded me of glass when I'd received it, but now it shimmered like a gemstone.

"This is lovely. Where did you get this beautiful one?"

"My father," I said, unsure why I even answered.

He said something in that foreign language, and a woman with hair as red as blood shuffled on her feet. Another man, far too tall and thin, repeated the words, and then a hush fell. Kaden nodded and held the dagger over his shoulder. A man covered in garbs, his face and hair hidden, stepped forward to take it. Kaden folded his hands and studied me.

"What are you?" I asked again, my voice trembling.

"Something that can help your sister."

My heart thudded. "No, I heard you. You threatened to kill her."

"True." He didn't try to lie. "But I have since changed my mind. Now you have something I want."

"And what's that?"

His eyes roamed over me, and as innocent as I was, I had my answer.

"You."

"For what?" I gulped.

He smiled once more, glancing at the creatures behind him before looking back at me. "Drake was not wrong. I do need more people for what

I am building. Your sister is weak, dying. She is useless to me. But you? You are perfect.”

My chest hurt at how he spoke of her. I knew how close to death she was, which meant I had no time to waste.

“Can you save her?” I swallowed, knowing I would give myself up to these creatures, these monsters if I had to. For her, I wouldn’t even question it. How could I?

“Tobias,” he called, waving a hand but not looking away from me. “Alistair. Take her sister downstairs, please.”

A man emerged from the shadows. The bronze of his clothes cast a beautiful glow to his dark, rich skin. He wore his hair in a shorter version of Kaden’s. Red tinged his eyes as he focused on me, his face a mask of unreadable emotions. He prowled toward me, followed by a second creature. This second man’s complexion was as pale as moonlight, but the most striking thing about him was the color of his hair. It was the pure white of sugar, and he wore it in a mass atop his head. I had never seen a shade so pretty.

The one called Tobias stepped around me and reached for Ain. I shifted, moving to protect her. In the next breath, I was on my feet, held in a vice-like grip. Kaden lifted me high and turned me away from the two men as they picked my sister up by her arms. She groaned, trying to keep herself awake. She reached for me, and I her, our hands stretched toward each other. I struggled against Kaden as they took her away from me.

“Shh, it’s okay,” he whispered, trying to calm me, but all I saw was her leaving.

I looked up at Kaden, my panic a living thing inside of me. “What are they going to do to her?”

“Nothing,” he paused, “yet.”

I struggled harder in his grip but only managed to bruise my arms more. He was strong, too strong, but I should have known by the red glow of his eyes that I was dealing with something... else.

“You liar!” I snapped. “You said you’d help her.”

“And I will, but first, I must ensure this works. Otherwise, there is no point.”

I stopped struggling. “Make sure what works?”

“You will have to want it.”

Kaden smiled once more and shifted his hold. He held me easily with one hand and brought his wrist to his mouth. I watched in horror as fangs like a sand viper descended. The sharp tips pressed into his skin, and I grimaced. He held his hand above my face, blood, darker than I had ever seen, falling toward me. I turned away, but he grabbed the back of my head, keeping me still. I opened my mouth to scream, and he shoved his wrist against my lips. Warm liquid filled my mouth, my throat, and my lungs. It tasted like poison, burned like acid, and made me scream against his flesh. More and more spilled down my throat as I thrashed. The harder I struggled, the brighter his eyes glowed. He leaned closer, resting his head against mine as he fed me. My stomach rolled, the blood making me want to vomit.

“Shh, think of your sister. How much you want her to live. How much you need her to live.”

I stopped thrashing, stopped struggling, and he leaned back. He knew my weakness. He had already figured out what it would take to control me. I wanted Ain to live. How could I not?

My hands reached up, grabbing at his arm and pressing his wrist deeper into my mouth. I sucked hard, forcing more of that terrible liquid down my throat. I did want it. If it would save Ain, I wanted whatever he gave me, even if it felt like my insides were being ripped to pieces and remade. His eyes met mine, the taunting humor dying as I took more. My grip tightened, squeezing as much out as I could. He’d said if it worked, I’d have power, and power was what I needed. If I had enough, no one could ever hurt Ain or me again.

I felt something in me shift. A part of me cracked and died while something else awoke and crawled beneath my skin. The burn slowly eased, twisting and turning into something else, something darker. The candlelight in the room flickered, and the creatures watching us shifted restlessly. Kaden’s smile widened as if he realized something I did not.

He ripped his wrist away. I coughed and almost fell to my knees. I struggled to breathe, my lungs and chest feeling as if they were on fire. He grabbed my arm, pulling me to my feet and steadyng me.

I watched as the skin knitted together on his wrist and wiped my face.

“How do I know if it works?” I asked, my voice a raspy mess as if the blood he gave me had claws that ripped it apart.

“You will have the kind of power you have only ever dreamed of,” he answered, reaching up to stroke his fingers over my cheek and settling his hand against my neck. “But that’s only if you survive.”

That was the last thing I heard before he jerked my head to the side. It was merely a snap, and yet my world changed forever.

The memory faded, the harsh light of reality coming back as my hands began to heat. The sun dipped into the ocean slowly, sucking the light from the world.

“I was so selfish because I couldn’t imagine a world without you in it, and then Kaden gave me no choice. Just like I gave you none. Maybe I am just like him.” Flames flared around my hands, the jar cracking. “So be it then.”

The flames roared as I concentrated, the urn turning to fiery dust and releasing her. I stood there watching her ashes dancing and twirling around me before drifting into the starry night sky. The crescent moon reflected off the water, softening the unrelenting darkness. I stayed until the last bit of embers floated far enough away that I couldn’t tell them apart from the stars. One star seemed to glow a bit brighter, twinkling merrily at me as if it were waving.

A flash of emerald appeared behind me.

“It’s done,” Camilla said.

“Good.”

I could hear Camilla’s heartbeat quicken. I could hear a lot of things now. Far more than I used to. Every sense I had was heightened. I hadn’t realized how much I had been suppressing my true nature. I stayed silent, gazing intently at that twinkling star.

“And now?”

“I don’t remember you being this cowardly before.” I turned toward her and rolled my eyes. “Calm your stupid heart. I’m not going to kill you. You brought her back to me. As long as you do what I say, you’ve just earned yourself immunity.”

FIVE

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SAMKIEL. ONE WEEK LATER



My fingers danced across the clean silk bed sheet. Our scents lingered here no more, only the memory.

"This will be your room while you are here," the short, dark-haired vampire said as she shoved the large dark carved doors open. I stepped inside, the smell of cologne attacking my senses. My head swung to the massive dressers that I assumed held more items in them than I needed. A suit like the one Logan had provided for me lay in the center of a large canopied bed.

"My Lord Ethan has provided you with everything you should need, but if there is anything we can do for you... personally, please let us know." Her gaze trailed over me suggestively. I heard the snickers from the other vampires from where they lingered by the door.

The heat of her gaze should have stirred something inside me, but it did not. Not like the woman upstairs who had ignored me from the moment she met her friend. My lip turned up at the idea I would lower myself to care. He was nothing.

"That won't be necessary."

There were sighs of disappointment from the hall.

"Well," the small vampire in front of me said, "if you change your mind..." She stared at me a moment longer, her gaze lingering far too long for my liking before she left, closing the doors behind her.

Their inappropriate whispers fluttered down the hall as I turned back toward the room. I wondered if Dianna's was the same size or larger. Wait, no, no, I did not. Shaking my head, I glanced up, calming my nerves. Everything here was overly cumbersome, as if they compensated for the

power they knew they did not possess. I moved further into the room, passing furniture too small for me, and eventually made it to the washroom. After showering and dressing, I picked up the small device Logan had given me. I buttoned the last button on my shirt before calling him. The phone rang a few times before a small feminine voice filtered through.

“Ms. Martinez?” I asked, surprised that Dianna’s sister had answered.

“Oh, hey. If you’re calling for Logan, he is not here,” Gabby said. I heard her take a bite of something, the crunch loud in my ear as she chewed.

“And why has Logan abandoned his station?”

Her laugh echoed through the phone. “Dianna is right. You talk funny.”

Her comment made my chest react in a strange way. A small flutter, like a bird’s wings, spread warmth through me.

“Dianna speaks about me?”

Silence fell as if she realized she’d said something she shouldn’t have.

“Speaking of my sister. How is she?”

I swallowed. “She is... well.”

“Hmm, and you guys are getting along... well?”

The way she said that word, mimicking me, reminded me so much of Dianna that it brought a small smile to my lips. It seemed I was becoming attached to the feisty, dark-haired woman. I could feel her even now. The running water in her room shut off. I wondered if the Vanderkais had put me in the room beneath her as a way to taunt me. Would she take lovers above me? I shook my head. Why would that thought even cross my mind? I blamed weariness, travel, and being engulfed in her scent for too many nights. If we stayed here, would she stay away from me too? I glanced at the bed and knew I needed her to keep her distance, especially after the dream I had mere hours ago. I wanted her too much, and if I were honest, I had no resistance against her when she was near.

“Where is Logan?” I asked, my voice turning stern as my smile dropped. “You are not to be left alone.”

“Calm down,” Gabby said, just like her sister. “He is close by, or kind of. Neverra and he usually sneak off for about thirty minutes or so to do it. I guess they are trying to respect my space, although it wouldn’t bother me.”

“They left you alone to do what?”

“It! You know? Sex,” she said, speaking fast, her voice a hushed whisper.

I made an exasperated noise as I rubbed the bridge of my nose. Crass. Definitely her sister.

“Okay, please have him return my call as soon as Neverra and he return.”

“Do you plan to do that with my sister?”

I nearly dropped the phone. “Ms. Martinez, I can assure you that is not my intention,” I managed to choke out, even if the dream from last night told me otherwise.

Gabby said nothing as she chewed, the crunch coming through the phone. “Why? Do you think she’s ugly?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Too loud?”

“Never.”

“Is she mean to you? She was mean to me when we were little sometimes, but I stole her toys and then her clothes when we got older.”

“She is not mean to me.”

No more so than I deserved, and only when she was mad at me.

“Oh, so it’s because you think she’s a monster?”

“I never... Why are you questioning me on my intentions toward your sister so thoroughly?”

She chewed once more. “I’m just checking.”

“My intentions are clear. They always have been. We are to find this book and then secure it. No more.” I looked up, hearing her feet move across the floor. “No less.”

“Hmm, well, that sucks. My sister has been through a lot of bad things. Some of those things I had to help her crawl out of, and I wasn’t always sure she was going to make it. It would be nice to have someone with good intentions in her life.”

Dianna’s words from above drowned out whatever her sister said as she spoke to someone. My teeth ground as I realized who was in the room with her.

“Well, I would not worry about that. It seems the vampire with whom we are staying has plenty of intentions.”

Gabby snickered, and I realized exactly how I sounded. “Drake? Please. If they were going to have sex, it would have been when I first got her back from Novas. She was in a dark place then, very dark. I helped pull

her out, but it was a scary time. She and Drake became really close after, but it was always just a friendship, nothing more.”

“*You helped her?*” Curiosity got the best of me. “*What transpired?*”

“*That is top-secret sister information. Maybe one day, if your intentions change, she will tell you. Or maybe she won’t. All I’m saying is that anyone would be lucky to be cared for by my sister. I never gave up on her, and if you guys are going to be partners in this whole mission, maybe don’t give up on each other.*”

“*Okay.*” A small smile escaped me as I moved to sit on the bed. I reached down and put on one shoe and then the next as Gabby continued to speak.

“*Also, here’s a piece of top-secret information while you guys work together. She will never ask for help, trust me. She is headstrong and will go into things without thinking. Dianna thinks she is invincible, so please watch out for that too. She’s hard on herself and thinks she messes up when she doesn’t, which is annoying because I think she’s perfect, but whatever. Also, never tell her I said that. She has this face she makes where she scrunches her nose when someone tells her something sweet. It’s hilarious. Oh, and watch her if she gets quiet. Usually, that means she is planning something extreme. She likes to lock herself away in her head. She always has.*”

“*All of this is very valuable information,*” I said with a small smile and stood.

“*Listen, I’m just trying to make sure my sister returns to me in one piece.*”

“*I assure you she will.*”

“*Good.*” She took another bite. “*She’s not whatever you or anyone thinks. She’s nice, funny, smart, and kind... well, when she wants to be.*”

“*Yes, I am... learning.*”

“*Good.*” Another crunch. “*Also, don’t tell her we ever had this conversation.*”

“*I swear I will not.*”

“*Thanks. You’re not as terrible as she said.*”

I grinned and started to respond, but the words died on my lips when I heard what sounded like a sniffle or soft cry. My head snapped back, my gaze locking on the ceiling. I listened intently and heard the rumble of that annoying vampire’s voice. Drake.

“I apologize, but I must go.” I didn’t wait for her to respond before hanging up the phone and rushing upstairs. If he had hurt her, I would skin him alive.

“Samkiel,” Logan said, snapping me from the memory.

“What?”

“The vans are loaded, and everything is ready. We just need to escort them,” he said, gripping the doorjamb with one hand. Logan looked a bit worse for wear. He looked how I felt. His facial hair had grown thicker, along with the hair on his head. It had been three weeks since the destruction in Silver City. Three weeks since Neverra had been missing. Three weeks searching for those Dianna had sworn she would come for, leading me back to Zarall.

I nodded, my gaze straying to the bed again before I said, “I will be down in one moment.”

Logan left the room, his footsteps disappearing down the hall. I sighed and stared at the bed. I should have taken her from here, regardless of those stupid minuscule leads and her trust in the ones she assumed were her friends. We could have returned to the guild and spent more time researching my way. I could have kept her safe, kept her sister safe. Guilt threatened to devour me like a raging, flaming beast.

I turned away from the bed and headed out of the room. My feet were at the edge of the door when I caught her scent, the subtle spiciness of cinnamon. Between one breath and the next, I had portalled from one end of the room to the other, my powers more erratic than ever. My hand trembled slightly as I reached out, picking up the gray garment. I gripped it with both hands, lifting it to my nose and inhaling. With her scent came the memories, images flashing through my mind, one by one. Dianna smiling, laughing, and the sound of that god’s awful whimsical music playing as rides creaked in the background.

I lowered the jacket from my face. It was the one I’d given Dianna that day at the festival when she’d gotten cold. It was a gesture I had seen a mortal man do and one she’d laughed at.

As I lowered the jacket, I noticed a tiny white and gray strip poking from one of the pockets. My chest tightened as I pulled the narrow piece of paper out and gazed at the images. Dianna laughed in one, smiled in another, and scowled at me in the last. But the middle one was my favorite. She gripped my face, turning me toward the camera.

My heart ached. I was so afraid I would never see her laugh or smile again. I had not realized how deeply my feelings for her had grown over the months we spent together. How utterly attached I had become to my fiery temptress. I had not realized it until it was too late, and she had already left, taking a part of me with her. My head spun as thick, blinding rage swept over me, eclipsing the sadness. They did this. They took her happiness away, and they would pay greatly for it.

I slid the pictures into my pocket and strode from the room with the jacket gripped in my fist. Several celestials passed me in the halls as they went about removing every single thing from the Vanderkais estate. I stopped a young female who had several sample bags lined with red tape.

“Take this and load it into the van with the rest of the evidence,” I said, thrusting the jacket at her.

She nodded and placed it inside a plastic bag before disappearing down the stairs. I took the steps two at a time, voices filling the main floor, heads bowing as I passed. The front doors remained open, celestials passing through to place various items into the vans out front.

I came around the banister, moving fully into the main room. Logan stood with his arms folded across his chest, two celestial guards flanking him. More guards surrounded the vampires, watching them closely.

“Everything you own is mine now—every property, home, item, relic, and bank account. Mine,” I said. Drake looked at me before glancing at Ethan and his wife, Naomi. Ethan loved Naomi so dearly he’d doomed the world for her. “You own nothing any longer. You will own nothing in the future, assuming you have one once your trial is done.”

The rage that had risen within me upstairs bubbled in my blood as I prowled closer to Drake. “Was it worth it? Do you sleep well knowing what you destroyed?” I asked, my eyes boring into Drake’s as I stood over him. The sweater, slacks, and scuffed shoes he wore were not the overpriced items he usually sported. The once flamboyant, gleeful prince seemed a shell of the man who had flirted, laughed, and joked with my Dianna. No, he seemed almost broken. His eyes, bloodshot and empty, stared at me.

Ethan cut in, interjecting as I continued to stare at Drake. “I did what I had to for the one I love. For my family. I would think you’d understand?”

“She hid you and your family from Kaden, and in return, you took hers!” I bellowed, the lights in the room flickering in response. “You let him take Gabriella. You stood by and allowed him to murder the last living

member of her family, and you think I would understand that? Do you really think you can justify what you have done? I hope you enjoyed your short time together because, by my power, none of you will see the other again.”

I saw Drake’s head drop from the corner of my eye as Ethan inhaled sharply. The wife, the short, dark-haired woman at his side, gripped his arm tighter. “That was not part of the plan, I assure you. Kaden wanted to lure Dianna out. That was it. He has always wanted Dianna, and he always will. He is willing to do drastic things to get her back. I’m sure you understand that, too.”

My jaw clenched. He did not know the lengths I would risk to get Dianna back. I needed her. I needed her happy and whole and with me.

“You will all be taken to the Council of Hadrameil to stand trial. You and Drake have committed treason. Not only did you kidnap Gabriella, but you also took a member of The Hand, a crime punishable by death. All of that, and we haven’t even touched on accomplices to murder. You will be lucky if I do not send you all to Oblivion by the time this is done.” I glanced at Ethan, then at Drake. “Have I made myself clear?”

Ethan looked at his wife and reached up, squeezing the hand she had tightened on his shoulder. The matching marks on their fingers caught my eye before he turned back toward me. “We are very aware of the consequences, but I cannot say I regret it. I love my wife, and I knew the risks. We did not feel there was another way—”

“There was!” I snapped, my resolve slipping. Several lights burst, raining shards of glass onto the floor. I felt the room condense a thousand or more atoms vibrating with a power I barely had control over these last few weeks. Charged. That’s the word Logan used. Everything around me felt charged. I felt Logan move next to me. A slight shift as if he was on guard, protecting not them but me. Thunder cracked on the horizon before I reined in my temper. “We spent how many weeks in your home? You could have told me, told her. I could have helped you, all of you, and yet you did nothing. You’ve damned your family not saved them. Had you told us, maybe the outcome would have been different.”

“He is not what you think he is.”

I scoffed, my fingers grazing the bridge of my nose, my headache growing. “Besides an arrogant megalomaniac. I know what *he* is.” Drake and Ethan looked at me as if I were a fool. “He is one of the Kings of

Yejedin. It does not matter. I have fought kings, beasts, and gods and won. You all knew that, yet you expect me to feel sorry that you aligned yourself with a psychopath? Pity is not what I feel for you.”

Ethan spoke, but I did not hear what he said. I did not care for any more excuses. My eyes shut, and I rubbed a hand over my forehead. The headaches were returning. I hadn’t slept since it happened, since she left, and neither had Logan.

“You know we have a name in our world for what you are,” I said, speaking over Ethan, my eyes opening. “There is no translation in your language, but it means the lowest of men. You are cowards. Traitors. I’ve met skinless grizzly beasts who fight harder than you two have. You’re even less than the shit rodents leave behind. You claim to love and care for her, yet you let him have and take the one person she loved.” I paused, trying to rein in the thundering in my chest and the clouds growing outside. I took a breath, shaking my head as I studied them. “You have taken someone from me with your actions—someone *very* precious to me. And now you have helped a lunatic corrupt her already damaged heart, shattering it into a million pieces. They are pieces I will pick up and fix, but what you have done is unforgivable. I plan to make you suffer for that transgression. Death would be a kindness, and you deserve none.”

I turned toward Logan, disgust eating away at me. “Get them out of my sight. I want separate cars and prison cells for them. They will not speak to one another until the trial, and they will be lucky if I even let them eat.”

Drake nodded and glanced at his brother as Logan’s celestials moved toward them. The guards took out cuffs and securely locked them around the three vampire’s wrists. Ethan and his wife were compliant until the celestials pulled them apart.

“You can’t do this!” Ethan shouted as they took Naomi from the room. The guards escorted Drake out next, his head hung low. Ethan continued to shout. “Please, Samkiel! I just got her back. Just let me rot in a cell with her. I don’t care what happens afterward. Please!”

I did not respond as Logan nodded toward the celestial standing beside Ethan.

“Look, I know how you feel. I get it. I know you love her. Kaden knows it too. Why do you think he did what he did?” Ethan said, his voice filled with desperation.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Every word he spoke just added fuel to my rage.

“He will keep her away from you if it’s the last thing he does. You’re too strong together, too powerful for what he has planned, what *they* have planned. If she’d stayed with you, it would have messed up everything. You two were never supposed to meet,” Ethan said, struggling against the grip of the celestials.

The blistering rage that threatened to consume me went cold at his words.

“What?” I raised my hand. The two guards stopped just inside the door. “What do you know?”

“We knew we couldn’t fight him, couldn’t kill him, but you two together? The two of you are enough to shatter worlds, and he and everyone else know it. You are a threat to him and to others, and so is she. Why do you think we pushed so hard while you two were here? Even Camilla tried. Regardless of us being bound to Kaden, we had to try,” Ethan said.

Had to try. Had to see.

The words played over in my head. Similar to the ones Roccurem had spoken in his realm.

“I’ll tell you nothing more unless you promise I can at least stay with my wife while you have us.” Ethan’s demand shook me from my thoughts.

Energy burst from me, shattering the remaining lights in the mansion. I clenched my fists, cloaking the entire house in darkness. The guards let go as I hefted Ethan off his feet. I held him high, his arrogant demeanor long gone. He was no longer a king but a broken man. I wondered what Kaden had done or said to make even Ethan cower into himself.

“Deals are done. There are no more. I will make no more bargains, no more alliances. You will tell me what you know—”

My skin prickled, and my words stopped, the hairs rising on the back of my neck. The world went still with fear. I heard the wings of several birds flutter into the sky and the retreating footsteps of small and large animals moving swiftly away from the area. Then I felt it.

Her.

My heart thudded rapidly against my chest, the sound competing with the noise of weapons firing outside. A savage howl ripped through the night air, followed by ear-splitting screams. Celestials yelled orders to one another, and light flashed every time a trigger was pulled. I dropped Ethan

to his feet, not bothering to see if he would run or follow. I rounded the corner, taking the stone steps three at a time. Logan raised his ablaze weapon, turning from side to side, instructing his men to stay in line. They were yanked into the thick forest one by one, followed by any vampire not detained in one of the vans.

Drake's hands pressed against the window of the van. He stared through the glass at the darkened forest, fear lurking in the depths of his eyes.

Headlights spotlighted sections of the forest, but an unnatural stillness had consumed it. Not a single living thing remained in the surrounding trees. Only the heartbeats of my celestials echoed here. Every living creature in a fifty-mile radius had fled for their lives.

I stopped beside Logan. "Werewolves?"

Logan shook his head, keeping his eyes on the forest's edge. "Not werewolves. Only one wolf."

I shook my head. The scent I caught was not of a beast. "Not a wolf. An Ig'Morruthen."

"She's here," Logan whispered.

I heard footsteps behind me.

"Where's my wife?" Ethan asked.

His answer came a second later. Dianna emerged from the darkness, her crimson gaze sweeping over the celestials and holding on me. I felt Ethan shift behind me, and her eyes flickered to him, her expression twisting. I knew two things with absolute certainty. First, when she came out to fight, she wore her hair back from her face as she did now, her long ponytail swinging behind her. Second, this cruel creature wasn't my Dianna.

Years of war had steeled my stomach to gruesome atrocities, but seeing her so casually holding the head of Ethan's wife in her palm had my gut twisting.

Everyone stopped and held their breath. My body pulsed, the power inside me rushing to the surface. It wasn't in lust, but in fear of her, my body preparing to act, to protect. Power swirled around her, her magic so much more than when we first met. It bent and coiled, encasing her entire being, the strength of it multilayered and rich. I felt my power coalesce in my hands, light bursting to life on my palms. I snuffed it out almost immediately, but I could tell by the grin that tugged at the corner of her mouth that she had caught it.

She was different. We all sensed it. Even the forest acted as if it wanted to retreat. Her energy rubbed against mine, almost abrasive. Logan shifted next to me as if he were willing his own power to calm down and not react because this was Dianna. She wasn't dangerous. She wasn't deadly or a threat to us. I knew it in my soul. She was Dianna. My Dianna.

Dianna cleared the edge of the forest, moving with the easy grace of a predator. She was on the hunt, the vampires her prey. She tossed the fleshy mass from one hand to the other, and I heard Ethan's knees crash to the ground beside me.

"Was this all my sister was worth?" she asked, her gaze flicking between Ethan and Drake where he still sat in the van. "A pound of flesh?" She stopped, holding the severed head on one palm. The skin cracked, red embers showing through the fractures before it burst into flames. It burned, true death taking what had once been Ethan's wife. Dianna leaned forward, blowing the ashes from her palm. The act was as cruel and sadistic as I had ever seen.

Ethan's cry of anguish cut through the pounding of my heart. Feet shuffled as the vampires attempted to flee.

"You don't listen." Dianna wiped her hands together and turned toward me. "I told you to stay out of it."

She took another step, and the celestials closest to her took one back.

"And you know how I respond to threats."

"Well, like I said." She stopped, her eyes scanning me from head to toe. A smile tipped up the corner of her mouth, a single fang making its appearance. "It was a warning."

My body reacted almost violently as she stopped near me. Her power, how she smelled of blood, the scent radiating from her told me one horrid truth. She had been feeding glutonously. Every cell screamed danger even as my soul whispered what a lie it was. My heart skipped a beat, and I'm sure they all heard, but I couldn't help it. No matter what, Dianna stole the very breath from my lungs without even trying. I was a fool to have denied what I had felt for her. A complete and utter fool. I could never lie about that again, nor did I plan on it, and right now, regardless of the bloodshed, one simple truth rang true. I missed her so goddamn much.

"Where have you been?" Not the question I had originally wanted to ask, but my concern and worry for her bubbled up, overriding the rational part of my brain.

"Sorry, I took a few days off. I had a funeral to deal with." She shrugged, and my heart sank, a cold realization hitting me like a tidal wave.

"You found Gabriella."

She lifted a single finger as if it was nonconsequential. "Actually, Camilla did."

"You're with Camilla?" I nearly recoiled.

"Aw, don't look so hurt, lover. Or should I say ex-lover? I'm not *with* her. She is only alive because she proved herself useful, and I slaughtered her entire coven, so I guess we're kind of even for now. Besides, she did a nice little spell that told me I had to wait so you all would come out of hiding." She glanced at the still kneeling Ethan and then at Drake locked in the van. "I mean, I know a pussy when I see one."

Dianna wasn't stalling. She was calculating her odds and making a plan on how to get through me to them.

"Where is Neverra?" Logan's voice broke, his tone pleading and his question hanging in the air.

Her eyes jerked toward Logan as if his voice alone was an insult. Her head tilted slightly, venom filling her smile. All traces of the woman who had joked and laughed with me were gone. "I don't know. Maybe check the morgue." She paused and smiled cruelly. "But I guess that wouldn't help either since you all burst into a thousand particles of light when you die."

I caught Logan glancing at the mark of Dhihsin on his finger. He knew that if she were truly dead, the mark tying them together would be gone, too. I could see that he clung to that hope.

"You know, this was smart," Dianna said, her eyes cutting back to mine. As our gazes clashed, something small and brief flashed beneath the glowing red embers of her irises, but just as quickly, anger replaced it. Her lips pulled back in a silent snarl, revealing the sharp elongated canines. "Getting to them before I could. Do you plan to save everyone involved in her death?"

"No. I'm here to save you."

"Me? That's so sweet, but you're a thousand years too late on that one," she said, regret flashing in her eyes.

"They will pay for what they did, Dianna. They will face justice for—"

"Justice?" A sick laugh escaped her as she clicked her teeth. "Oh, you really are noble. We both know there is no justice in our world. Blood must be paid with blood."

“No.”

“There it is again. Your favorite word.” Her face turned to granite. “You really are a knight in shining armor, are you not? Or at least you pretend to be. So kind to help those who maim and slaughter. But then, I guess you can relate since you maim and slaughter. Just like your father and every king and monarch before him. Isn’t that how empires work?”

“Don’t.” The word was clipped, short, and had enough power behind it, Logan stepped forward. She knew what could hurt me and was using the knowledge as a weapon against me.

“Did I hit a nerve?” Dianna’s smile widened a fraction. “How about another? The great and powerful king, except you’re not. You’re not powerful. I know what scares you, makes you weak, makes you hurt. They don’t call you World Ender for the fun of it. So, what? You believe in fairness now?” She scoffed before placing her hands on her hips, her bloody fingers tapping restlessly. “Fine. I can be fair, too. For protecting *her*, for giving her a home, I will grant you a boon. Leave. Take Logan and your men and leave.”

“Dianna.”

“Just go home. Go back to your castles and towers of silver. Go home and let the monsters handle their business.”

My heart sank because I knew what I had feared was coming. I knew it with every cell in my body. I did not have the words to describe the ache I felt. What was about to happen would change everything for her, for us, and for them.

“Dianna. I can’t. There has to be order in any realm. There has to be.”

“Since when?” She threw the words at me, lacing them with venom. “You were gone a thousand years. Go another.”

“You know I can’t. There has to be a line. You know that, and you know that’s me. Otherwise, there would be nothing but utter chaos. Slaughtering them isn’t justice or getting even. It’s eradication and vengeance. Once that vengeance is done, you’ll have nothing. You only make more enemies that way, not less. Trust me. I know you are hurting.”

A small smile danced across her features before her brows drew together. I knew that look. It was one of many I had memorized, and I knew what she was thinking.

“Don’t mistake my words.” I took a small step toward her, the dirt beneath my boot crunching. “I want to help you. You don’t have to be

alone. You don't have to go through this tremendous grief and loss alone. This, killing them, isn't the way to heal any of it, and once all that anger and grief wears off, you'll be left with nothing but an empty void. Trust me. Please."

Dianna paused. It was a slight one, but it ignited the ember of hope I carried within my chest, hope that she was still in there.

"I trusted you once. When we were on Novas, I trusted you when you said that Kaden wouldn't harm her. You said she was a tether, so I listened. I stayed and waited with you, and I..." Her eyes closed tightly as if willing some deep part of her closed. She took a deep breath, and her eyes snapped open the next second. "There is no version of this where anyone involved stays alive, but you know that already. You know that I'm going after Kaden."

I nodded. "I also know what you have to do for the strength you need to do so. What you must consume and how long it's been since you last partook. I know what that will do to you. What it's already done."

She smiled again, the crimson of her eyes flaring a shade brighter. "Yes, because you know your enemies, right? The treacherous Ig'Morruthens. They are the one thing the gods feared. The one thing designed to hurt them."

"There can be another way. I know it. I'll help you as you helped me."

"Okay." She shrugged a single shoulder, the curve of her lip lifting. "Kill them."

"What?"

"You want to help? Help. Kill them. Right now. Start with Ethan. Make sure Drake sees and then kill every member of his coven. Save him for last, so he knows how it feels to lose everyone."

"Dianna."

"Do it." She lifted her hand toward them, waving it. "You want to help? Help me."

I didn't speak.

"That's what I thought." She took a step forward, her voice barely a whisper. "Because when it comes down to it, there will always be a line, just like you said. You on one side, me on the other."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Doesn't it? Doesn't this remind you of the first time we met? When I snuck into the guild. Did you know I wasn't even supposed to be at that

meeting? I was supposed to look for the book with Alistair and Tobias while you all attended downstairs. But I couldn't help it. I wanted to protect her so badly that I strapped a dagger to my thigh and went in. As soon as I stepped foot in that building, I was overwhelmed. I didn't even have to look for you. I could feel you through the walls."

She closed her eyes, swaying slightly on her feet as if tasting the air between us. I clenched my hands, trying to stop their trembling as her eyes snapped open, their depths a swirling blood-red mass that centered my very world.

"You are pure, blinding energy. You make my entire being tingle. Do you feel it too? Do you feel me?"

I cocked my head, staring at her. Come to think of it, I didn't, and she knew it. The pull I felt toward her led into the forest.

"You're distracting me."

Her lips spread into a slow smile. "You know me so well."

The trees behind her shook, and her form in front of me vanished in a swirl of green magic. A mighty scaled head rose above the trees, several horns jutting back, protecting the massive skull. Its jaws gaped wide, an orange glow blooming deep in its throat. I had a second to react, a second to decide who to save, and a second to succeed. A roar of flame shot from its mouth, decimating everything in its path.

I grabbed Logan and portalled, reappearing several miles deeper in the forest. The explosion erupted behind us. Heat licked at my skin, flames engulfing the jacket I wore. I stood and tossed it off. The mansion burned, a smoke plume reaching for the sky. The deep glow of flames peeked through the canopy of trees. Coughing sounded from the other celestials. I had used just a portion of the incantation my father had taught me eons ago to force them away from the mansion.

"Get the others out of here," I ordered.

I started back toward the burning mansion. The forest around it screamed as the trees broke and burned.

"You're insane." Logan grabbed my arm. "I can't leave you."

"I will be fine, Logan."

"You saw her? Do you feel that heat? It's hotter than before. She's stronger, Samkiel, and I can't lose you, too." I knew he was coming from a place of fear and lack of sleep, the logical part of his brain in survival mode.

“Have you forgotten that I am truly immortal and also fireproof? Her flames do not harm me. You are in danger, not me.”

Logan looked at me and then glanced at the mansion, a glint sparkling in his eyes. “Do you remember Shangulion?”

My brows furrowed before realization clicked in. “Yes.”
“I have a plan.”

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SIX

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DIANNA



A nother kick to the gut had Drake coughing. Flames licked the walls, climbing higher as they ate every curtain, framed picture, and painting. Rubble fell as another part of the mansion crumbled into ruin.

“You know,” I groaned, tipping my head back and lifting my arms, “I have to be honest with myself here. I really am a selfish fucking bitch.”

Another kick and his body lurched up before slamming back to the ground.

“I hate when people touch what’s mine.”

Another kick had Drake skidding across the floor, slamming into the far wall hard enough to crack the stone. He groaned and spat blood onto the ground.

“Also,” I snickered, stepping forward, “you want to know what’s so funny? I honestly believed it was another fucking illusion. How stupid is that?”

I picked him up by the front of his shirt. One punch and his cheek split open. “Imagine how I felt when that blood deal broke.”

Another punch.

“The searing pain as I watched her fall to the floor.”

Another punch

“And my stupid self, realizing that the one person I thought was my friend had betrayed me.”

Blood dribbled from the corner of Drake’s split lip as it slowly healed, but the cut on his cheek tried and failed to seal.

"We didn't know he was going to kill Gabby," Drake said, his voice choked and filled with pain as he tried to right himself in my grip. "We were only told to bring her to him. That's it. I swear."

"You don't get to say her name. You don't ever get to say her name." I hissed the words from between gritted teeth and kneed him in the gut. He crumpled forward, not even fighting back, not like before. "Can you believe I risked everything to hide your family from him while you sold out mine?"

"I'm sorry. I really am, Dianna." Drake winced.

"Yeah?" I wrenched his head back, forcing him to look at me. "I'm sorry too. Sorry I ever trusted you, believed you, helped you. I'm sorry I ever followed you in that damn desert. I am sorry for my gullibility in thinking you were an angel sent to save us. Most of all, I'm sorry I ever thought I had a real friend."

My voice slipped, emotion nearly overcoming me. My eyes burned, and my vision blurred, tears threatening to spill over. It was the same every time I talked to Samkiel. I closed my eyes, imagining another lock on a chain on a door in a faraway house. I swallowed and opened my eyes to glare at Drake, shoving those emotions away. Relief flooded me when the new lock formed and snapped closed, leaving only cold hard hate.

"You betrayed me in the worst way imaginable. I hope when I reduce you to ash, you don't get to see your family in the afterlife, the same way I will never see her again."

Drake only nodded, defeat settling over him. "Do it."

I gripped the back of his head, pulling until his neck was exposed. He didn't fight, didn't move. My gaze danced across his throat. "I will, but first, I want to see how it happened."

The muscles in his neck flexed, the vein below his jaw pounding. I lowered my mouth to the rapid pulse. My fangs slowly extended, piercing his flesh. Blood poured into my mouth, sending me away from this room.

I stood at the large framed window of the mansion, watching Samkiel and Dianna walk further into the garden. Dinner was less of a disaster than I'd thought it would be. Which was great, considering Ethan hadn't exactly played nice like we'd agreed he would.

Ethan sighed behind me. "You really think what Camilla saw is true?"

"Camilla's ancestors go too far back for us to even date. If some magical force suddenly gives her visions, then yes, I do."

I snorted. “Some magical force? You sound like Father. What, do you think fate is intervening?”

Ethan took another long draw from his cigar. “I don’t believe in fate.”

“Why antagonize him so much?” I turned away from the window as they disappeared into the garden.

“Says the antagonist.” Ethan took a pull from his cigar, the orange ember flaring at the end.

“I thought the dress was a good idea. I just wanted to see if he looks at her like Kaden does?”

“And how is that?”

“Like a prize to be won, a slab of meat.”

Ethan exhaled a stream of smoke before tapping his cigar on the ashtray in front of him. “And how does the World Ender look at her, Brother?”

“Like I looked at Seraphine all those years ago, and how you look at Naomi.” Ethan met my stare. “As if the world doesn’t exist without her.”

Ethan’s eyes darted from mine. “I hope for the sake of the world you are right.”

I nodded, and Ethan huffed. He took another drag from his cigar but stopped mid-draw. His gaze caught on the mirror across the room. It was humming, and the reflection wavered.

“He’s calling. Turn some music on to drown out the sound and make sure they stay in the garden.”

I gave him a salute.

The vision shimmered, and the setting changed.

Sunlight danced across Silver City, and I adjusted the sunglasses on my face.

“How do you even know about this coffee shop, Drake? You haven’t been to Silver City, have you?” Gabriella joked and laughed, poking my side with a single finger.

My head reared back from his throat. I gasped, blood slipping from my lip and coating my chin. Crackling flames danced behind me, the burning, crumbling mansion coming back into view. Gabby. Her voice had been so clear, crisp, and happy. Had I forgotten it? Already? Had the blood I’d consumed already stolen my memories of her? I held Drake’s head as he sagged against me. My breathing became erratic as her smile danced across my subconscious. More. I needed more.

I lowered my head again, sinking my fangs deeper. Drake groaned, and I could feel the vibration of the sound against my lips. My hand cupped the back of his neck, forcing him closer.

Silver City came back, only this time we were in the shop, standing in line.

“Get whatever you want. My treat.”

I smiled at her, hoping to be convincing. If vampires could sweat, I’d be shedding bullets. She smiled up at me, and I hated it. Don’t smile at me, Gabby. I am afraid we are not here for fun.

The dark-haired celestial with her caught my gaze, her eyes narrowing slightly. She hovered next to Gabby protectively, keeping her within reach. Dianna would love it. I shook my head, trying to dislodge the thought before plastering on my best fake face.

“And anything you want as well, Mrs. Neverra.”

That was her name. She was Logan’s mate. Luckily, he was away. The only problem was Rick. The mortal male had been glaring at me from the beginning.

“So, how do you know Gabriella?” Rick asked, a hint of jealousy wafting off him as he clung to her side. I pitied him for loving her, knowing what was to come.

Gabriella popped him, knowing why he asked. The interaction reminded me so much of Dianna.

“I work with her sister. We go way back.” I smirked at Gabriella.

Gabriella smiled. “So, Samkiel sent you here?”

“Yes.” I winked back as the line moved forward. “He is so nice. The stories are completely wrong.”

Gabriella giggled and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “How is Dianna?”

Of course, her only concern would be for her sister. They had that in common, too.

“Sassy as ever.”

She smiled up at me and nudged me playfully, just as her sister always did. “I’ve missed you. You should visit more after this is over.”

“Don’t say that, and don’t smile at me, please.”

“Of course,” I said, forcing a tight smile.

The barista smiled at us as we reached the counter. “Welcome, what—” His words died, his eyes glazing, a puppet no longer in service. The entire

cafe stilled as the cord controlling it all snapped. Kaden stepped from behind the wall separating the cafe from the kitchen, Tobias flanking him on his right. Kaden took a sip of his coffee and lowered the beige plastic cup.

“You know, for a highly respected city, you would think they wouldn’t let just anyone walk in.” Kaden swirled the coffee in his cup.

My stomach sank as he smiled at me, and I saw the exact moment fear suffused Gabriella.

“Drake. We have to leave.”

I took a step away from her, away from them all, the space a final divide in so many damned ways.

“I’m sorry, Gabriella. For what it’s worth, I truly did care for you both.”

Her eyes gleamed, and she gripped Rick’s arm. “What did you do?”

My stomach clenched at the accusation in her voice and the betrayal in her eyes. “What they told me to do. Get you far enough away from the Guild so backup had no time to arrive.”

Neverra didn’t hesitate, two blades appearing in her hands, power rippling off them as she stepped in front of Gabriella. “Both of you will die here,” she said, her voice cold.

She was such a powerful and fearless celestial.

“Oh, I do so love it when you all try to fight,” Kaden said and grinned at Tobias, who only smiled in return.

Kaden’s smile turned deadly. Tobias lifted his hand, and the people in the shop bent and broke, the corpses returning to what they were in death. Then, they circled us one by one, preparing to help their master. Neverra stopped, watching in horror. Gabriella raised her hands to cover her mouth, her terror obvious.

“You won’t win here, little celestial, but I do want to see you try,” Kaden taunted.

The room shook, and the images became distorted.

Neverra spun toward Kaden, her swords singing through the air. It didn’t matter how many bodies she dropped. They were outnumbered. With one hand, Kaden caught Neverra by the throat, a flaming portal opening in the floor. She fought, but he was stronger. Her blades fell, and he laughed before tossing her into the gaping darkness.

The coffeehouse shook, reality distorting as if time was on fast forward.

Tobias held a limp Rick by his neck, bruises covering his face as if he'd tried to fight and lost.

The world trembled again.

Gabby kicked and screamed in Kaden's grip, tears streaming down her cheeks. He jumped with her into the portal and disappeared.

Darkness consumed me as I followed them.

I leaned my head back, the memory fading. I had drained almost all the blood from Drake, and I didn't care. He'd led her to Kaden. To see it, to feel what he felt, and to know he didn't even try to stop it. He hadn't hesitated or even thought about changing his mind, and it broke any connection or care that might have remained. The sliver of my heart I had left was in tatters. I had no real friends. I never did, and because of him, I had no family either. The final connection snapped, and every emotion inside me seemed to die.

“I’m-I’m sorry,” Drake managed to gasp out as I cradled him.

My fangs retracted. “No, but you will be,” I said, my voice cracking. Her memory floated away from me. “You all will be.”

SEVEN

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SAMKIEL



The forest broke apart, trees snapping and blazing as the wildfire spread, thick smoke choking the air, casting the world into the darkness that ate at her now. Fire danced in every direction, the force of the power she sent out scarring Onuna and blanketing everything in thick, black ash. Nothing survived in its wake, nothing. The trees sparked and exploded, releasing embers into the air. Heat came at me in waves, blistering in its intensity. This fire was born of rage and grief, and she was burning too hot and fast.

Opaque ashes lay near the front steps of the half-engulfed mansion, and I knew Ethan was no more. I moved toward the charred van that had held Drake. The door had been ripped off, but there were no ashes inside. I wondered if he had escaped to avoid the flames or if she had pulled him out.

One of the upstairs windows in the mansion burst, flames rushing out, seeking the air. The stone side had crumbled from Dianna's assault while the frame creaked, holding on for dear life. The place would collapse soon. I swallowed the growing lump in my throat and took the blackened steps up to the destroyed home. The front door was no more, and I stepped through cautiously. The once prestigious and cumbersome interior reeked of charred wood and stone. Smoke rolled from the far right corridor, so that's where I headed. I strode around one corner and then the next, hoping to find her before she killed him. I couldn't let her, but not for the reasons she thought. A part of me worried that if she did, I'd lose her forever.

It was dark and quiet, this part of the mansion still untouched by the chaos that reigned outside. I took one step and then another, my steps light.

The pretentious chandelier above me swung slowly from side to side, the only thing moving besides me. Darkness built in every corner, and I felt eyes on me as I moved deeper into the house. I opened my senses and listened, trying to track them down, but I heard nothing.

“I saw it.”

Her voice whispered into my ear, startling me. I spun, expecting to see her right behind me, but no one was there. Impossible.

“I saw how he tricked her.”

I turned slowly, searching the room for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. Her voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, but it was still an intimate caress against my ear.

“When I fed from him, I saw how he lured her, what he said. Drake was always so elegant with his words, you know? She was happy to see him. She believed him because I had told her he was safe. I told her a lot of things.”

I walked further into the mansion, the air growing heavier with every step. I stepped into another room, the large doors slamming behind me. The rings on my hands vibrated, sensing a growing threat. But it wasn’t a threat. It was Dianna. My Dianna.

“It is not your fault,” I called out.

A voice of velvet and ice caressed me, raising goosebumps on my skin and flooding my subconscious, engaging my flight or fight instincts. “Isn’t it?”

I spun toward her voice, now solid and whole, and froze. She stood in the arched doorway to the hall, holding a bloody and bruised Drake by his collar. The large gash across his neck bled, soaking his mangled clothes. I stepped closer with my hands outstretched at my sides.

“Always the hero.” Her eyes roamed over me before she met my gaze. “I always thought of myself as a monster, and I suppose now it’s true. You have no idea what I have done. All I will do. I used to hate that part of me. I didn’t realize how freeing it would be just not to care and fully embrace it.” A slow smile crept across her face, her fangs glistening as she gripped Drake’s throat so tightly blood spilled over her knuckles. “I don’t hate it anymore.”

“Dianna.” I kept my hands open, showing her that I meant no harm.

“You know, that’s not even my real name.”

“What?” I shook my head, lowering one hand.

“It’s Mer-Ka. Ain made us change them when we first ended up in Onuna. A fresh start, she preached. They are from another stupid show she foolishly idolized. Dianna and Gabby, sisters in some small town, with lives, jobs, and everything she thought we could have too.” Vengeance burned in the depths of her gaze, so strong and pure it caught me off guard. “But you and I know the truth. There is no normalcy in our world. There are no happy endings. We can’t even save the people that we love.”

That look was back, that harrowing, brutal look.

“I never told you I spoke to Gabby.”

She stopped and cocked her head, the movement alien.

“In this mansion, months ago. It was when we first arrived here.” I glanced behind her as Logan approached. His hands moved, runes appearing beneath her feet. I needed her eyes to stay on me, focus on me. “I called to check in on the others, but Gabby answered. She spoke of a time similar to this. How when you first changed, it was easy to pretend you were something you were not because of the guilt you felt. She also told me she never gave up on you. I will not give up on you either.”

“You’re not her,” she growled, holding Drake a fraction tighter.

I held that brutal, chaotic gaze steadily. “Of course not. The way I care for you is vastly different. The lengths I will go to for you are unfathomable. I refuse to let you hurt yourself, no matter how vile or mean you are to me. I know you’re in pain. You are mourning, and someone like you will grieve just as hard and deeply as you love.”

“You’re wrong.” Her nails dug deeper into Drake’s neck. “I’m beyond that now. Now? I just want blood.”

Her hands blazed, flames licking at Drake. He screamed so loud it blocked the sound of Logan’s approaching footsteps. He snuck up behind Dianna and wrestled Drake from her arms, dropping him at my side. Drake slumped to the floor, and Logan came to my other side, murmuring under his breath.

“Do not flee,” I barked the order at Drake, but he didn’t so much as lift his head.

Dianna cursed and stalked forward, her hands engulfed in flames. Her body hit an invisible wall as the last rune formed under her feet. She glanced down and back at us, sneering. Using an ablazed dagger, Logan cut his palm, speaking our old language. The light of her prison lit up, the column containing her rising to the ceiling. It encased her in a cylinder of

silver meant to hold. The ring sealed, fully locking her in, her scream making me wince. Her fists slammed and beat against it, her rage searing to her surface. She kicked and spat, every bit a wild animal caught in a snare. She had consumed too much, and the prison would not just contain her but torture her while she was in it. The realization made my gut churn.

“She can’t stay like that.” I glared at Logan as he wiped his brow, trying to catch his breath. She was already in enough pain. I wouldn’t cause her more.

“I didn’t use an incinerating rune. It’s basic and only meant to hold.” He looked at the engravings on the floor, then back at her. “I don’t think she is in pain. I think she is pissed.”

The fire had reached us here, but at her glare, the flames scattered. They drew back, smoldering in the dark corner, waiting impatiently for her command. Clouds formed outside, rolling across the sky. No thunder, no lightning, only encroaching darkness.

“Samkiel. I swear I am not hurting her,” Logan hissed, assuming I had caused the sudden change in weather. It wasn’t me, and I realized it might have never been me. The rings on my fingers began to vibrate.

Danger! Danger!

I glanced at Logan, who looked at the rings on his hand, then back at me. He felt it too. Dianna went still in the center of the rune containment, her eyes meeting mine as her hands opened at her sides.

“You cannot contain me anymore. No one can.”

As soon as the last word left her lips, she slammed her palms into the floor beneath her. Fire bellowed from her, filling the circle with orange and red flames. It rose toward the ceiling, a column of destruction seeking a way out. I couldn’t see her anymore because the flames were so thick and heavy. Logan and I took a step back. We watched the runes on the floor burn out, one by one. They sizzled, smoke puffing from each mark as her power overwhelmed and extinguished it. The ring of containment faltered briefly, then reformed, but barely.

“Dianna, stop. I know this hurts, but think. Please. You go after him *alone*, and he will kill you. Look at what Tobias did to us. They are the Kings of Yejedin. It took gods to defeat one. Gods, Dianna. Plural.”

She didn’t listen, unleashing another thunderous roar. Wings whipped free as the circle burst, followed by that massive, deadly tail.

My heart stopped, and I didn't think, acting on pure instinct. One minute we were in the ruined mansion; the next, we were half a mile away in the dense forest. Logan coughed behind me as I watched her massive form launch into the sky. She swooped down, breathing fire onto the trees before passing over the burning mansion to head toward the garden. My heart broke further at her determination to erase every memory she had of this place, even us. One last horrible roar split the air. Those thick, powerful wings beat against the wind, launching her into the sky and away from here. I swallowed back the rush of sorrow and turned away.

Logan leaned over a crumpled form, flames crackling behind him. In the distance, the destroyed mansion imploded. Ashes billowed in a thick cloud, blocking the moon and stars.

I gripped the collar of Drake's burned shirt and lifted him. "Do you see now? Do you see what your betrayal has cost me and the world?"

Logan grabbed my sleeve, stopping my tirade. I finally looked at Drake. He was not fighting at all, burns marring his neck, the side of his face, and his torso. He wasn't healing. I placed him on his feet, my anger subsiding and dread taking its place. His legs gave out when his feet touched the soil, his back hitting the tree next to him. He coughed and groaned, holding his chest.

"We have to move," I said, the ash, smoke, and embers making it nearly impossible to see or breathe. Memories of Rashearin on fire flooded me. I knew the true power of an Ig'Morruthen, and the damage they could cause. They could reduce even the strongest worlds to ash and ruin. I just never thought I'd see my Dianna succumb to the destructive urges. My aching heart reached out to her, hoping for an answer, but none came. I felt hollow and overwhelmed at the same time, unsure if it was me or if I was feeling her.

"I can't." Drake coughed, trying and failing to sit up.

"You have to," I snapped, hauling him back up. "I don't have time for this." The alternative was Drake dying, and I did not want that. He was her last hope, the last flicker of life in her, and I needed him alive for her.

He pushed off my arm, catching me by surprise, sliding down the tree until he sat with a thump.

My hands went to my hips, my frustration growing. Logan stepped around me and leaned down to grab Drake, but he swatted him away. "We can rest when we get to Silver City. Now, get up."

Drake gave me a bloody grin and removed his hand from his bleeding chest. “No, I really can’t.”

I saw it then, and my hope died. A half-broken forsaken blade protruded from the middle of his chest, wedged deep. Dianna’s last-ditch effort because she knew I would try to save him, so she’d ensured he would die, regardless. I was on my knees in an instant. One hand splayed on his chest while I tried to dig the piece out.

No, no, no!

“Dianna likes to keep tiny daggers on her.” Drake smiled, blood bubbling with every breath. His hand caught mine. “It’s too late, World Ender. I can feel it. The final death is what we call it. Not as bad as I thought, really.”

“No!” I bellowed, the silver lines running up my arm. If I could concentrate, I could remove it and repair as I went. I just needed to focus.

“I knew you liked me,” Drake said, his smile followed by a wet cough that only lodged the blade deeper. Fuck.

“I cannot lose you. You are my last hope.” My voice cracked as I lowered my head.

“Trust me. I’m not.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, my fingers slick from his blood and ash. Something in me snapped, tears stinging my eyes. “How am I supposed to get her back?”

“You don’t need me for that. I betrayed and lost my truest friend.” He shook his head, the effort causing him pain.

“I can’t lose her.” My voice broke this time.

“You won’t.”

I glanced up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I saw it when she first stepped out of the forest, a flicker in her eyes as if a part of her tried to crawl to the surface for you. I thought Gabby was the last tether, but you are. You are her only link to whatever mortality she has left. So don’t let Kaden win, no matter what she says or does. Trust me. You are the only thing she cares about now.”

He tried to sit up and winced in pain. The light from the flames behind us played shadows across his bloody and charred face as he looked at his ruined home. “I should’ve tried harder. You’re right. I wanted to help my family, but she was my family too. It sucks that I realized that too late.”

Drake's yellow eyes gleamed with tears, one after the other, spilling down his cheeks. I knew he felt some remorse for what he'd done. Logan kneeled beside Drake, his face seeming to soften.

Drake turned back to me. "Dianna is stronger now. Every Otherworld creature felt it when Gabby died. The world shifted, but she is still Dianna. She is still the girl I saved in the desert who cared so much about others that she followed a stranger into a terrible world. She is still the girl who likes flowers and pretty gifts from overbearing god kings. She is sweet, kind, funny, and loves with her entire being. That's why she is like this. She's hurt. She's in pain. If you love her, truly love her, don't give up. True love is worth it. It's worth fighting for. Remember that."

I nodded, hearing the rhythmic beat of his heart stop for a moment too long. His amber eyes dimmed slightly. He was no longer the prankster vampire prince but a man who knew his actions were wrong.

He smiled, the tears running down his cheeks sizzling as lines of orange and gold cracked through the skin of his face. Pain twisted his features, the flesh of his arms splitting.

"Just don't give up on her." His voice was a broken wound now. "Gabby wouldn't."

"I won't. I swear it."

Drake struggled to turn his head and look at Logan. "I'm sorry about Neverra, but she is alive." Something eased in Logan's expression, and I realized he'd needed to hear it said out loud, even if the mark on his hand remained. "Kaden has her. You just have to find him. Look where the world opens."

The words left his lips wrapped in a cracked whisper. It was the last thing he said before his body crumbled to ash, his remains joining those of his family and home on the wind.



"WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED?" VINCENT'S VOICE WAS THE FIRST WE HEARD amongst the chaos when the doors opened on the top floor of the guild.

Logan and I stepped out, covered from head to toe in soot and blood. We headed toward the main conference room. There was something I needed there. Celestials ran around in circles with phones held to their ears. A red banner flashed across the many screens hung throughout the room, a distorted image of Dianna's Ig'Morruthen form flying away from the devastation of a burning Zarall plastered on each one.

"Hey, I'm talking to both of you," Vincent said, falling into step with Logan and me.

"I had to extinguish a forest fire," I said.

"I don't see what the problem is," Logan said, jerking his head toward a screen as we passed. "You would be lying if you said you would protect them over someone you care about."

"What?" Vincent practically yelled over the chaos of everyone talking at once. "What happened?"

"It's insane to be upset with her. I'd do the same thing. I'd kill anyone who hurt Neverra. So why do we care if they live?"

I pushed the large doors open with a little more force than I meant to. "We don't."

"Who are we talking about? Why was all of Zarall on fire?" Vincent demanded.

I tuned them out as Logan filled Vincent in on the last few hours. We reached the main conference room, and I headed straight to the pile of books and scrolls on the table. I sighed and began digging for the one I wanted.

Vincent hovered at my side. "Samkiel, if she is killing—"

"I know."

"Know what?" Logan said. "As I said, she is killing the bad guys. That's what we want, right?"

My heart ached as I found the one text I wanted. *Cadros: The History of Many Wars*. I opened it and flipped through, looking for what I needed. "I do care about her, not them. But killing them will not be enough. You and I both know that. She will need more power, especially if she is going after Kaden. In our time together, she never fed on mortals or blood. She is now, and that will make her spiral even further. What happens when an Ig'Morruthen consumes too much?"

They went quiet as the text suddenly flipped open, the pages expanding out in a diagonal line, exposing the words across the top. *The First Rule of*

Pharthar. Created when the Ig'Morruthens first appeared, it depicted exactly what I feared may happen.

“Pure and absolute desolation. That’s what I fear. I may be the World Ender, but they were the first destroyers of worlds.”

I took a step back, my hand running over my eyes. My head throbbed, flashing back over the last hour, seeing her but not her, feeling her but not her.

“Okay, but this is Dianna, not a ravenous beast,” Logan said from behind me. Vincent made a low noise in his throat.

“I know, but there is a myth. One I remember from when my father and I first besieged Jurnagun. He told me I had the ability to feel Ig'Morruthens. Although we may have our differences, we are all made from the same floating chaos of the universe. When gods experience traumatic events, they petrify and turn to stone. Every molecule hardens as if it wishes not to exist any further. Ig'Morruthens are different. Blood lust can consume the cognitive function of the Ig'Morruthen brain. They consume in more ways than one. Overindulgence in blood can lead to massacres, mood swings, and erratic behavior.”

I ran my hand through my hair as I tried to remember every single bit of my training.

“It’s as if a switch gets flipped, anything mortal in them snuffed out like a flame, only the beast remaining. My father said the truly nasty ones are starved of light and love, reeking of absolute havoc. He said some of the oldest and most powerful even feared the sun. There are stories of Ig'Morruthens being burned by sunlight as if the dark power used to create them despises it. Dianna follows no one, but she is on the path Kaden set out for her. I will not lose her because of a tyrant. I refuse.”

The room grew silent.

“From now on, you are completely with me, or you are not. And if you are not...” I said, holding their gazes.

“I am,” they both said without hesitation.

“The Council of Hadrameil remains oblivious to this subject. Blame Zarall on a rapid thunderstorm and terrible lightning. A slip of my power,” I said.

“Okay.” Vincent stood a fraction taller. “I’ll get all the guilds and ambassadors on the same page.”

I nodded.

Vincent left, his mission clear, and I knew he would accomplish it. Logan stayed, as always. He glanced down at the mark on his finger.

“He released them.”

“What?” Logan asked

“Kaden released the ones responsible with no protection. He wants her to kill, to feed until she is no more, and then I feel his hope is she will have no one to turn to but him—another sick way to have her back. He is hoping I will be the king of legends. The slayer of monsters and beasts, protector of realms and worlds, but she is my...” I stopped, unable to say the words.

“I know.”

Of course, Logan knew. He knew me better than most and was the closest thing I would ever have to a brother.

“If you knew there was even a slim chance of saving the one you cared for, you’d take it too, correct? Any means necessary? Regardless of title?”

Logan glanced at me as if what I’d said was absurd. “Of course. No second thought.”

“Vincent may agree now, but... No matter what happens, what I dictate, you have my back, correct?”

“You never have to ask. Never.”

I nodded once more.

“If there were even a fraction of a chance to save Neverra, I would take it.”

I swallowed, placing my hand on my forehead, a headache growing behind my eyes. “We will. We can do both. Save Neverra, Dianna, and the world.”

Logan managed to force a smile, even if I could not.

EIGHT

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DIANNA. ONE MONTH LATER.



*M*y thumb ran over the cold metal of the lock as it solidified in my hand. I glanced up as another row of chains scraped across the wood. The door bulged, loud thumps coming from the other side. I snapped the lock closed, wiped my hands on my pants, and turned away, heading down the hall. The murmurs behind the door grew quiet as I rounded the corner.

“You’re running out of time.” Gabby’s voice filtered through the living room.

I reached down and grabbed a brush from the rectangular bin on the floor. I dipped it into the paint before stepping up next to her.

“What?” I asked, sliding the brush against the wall, the thick white coat erasing the thin, torn wallpaper.

This house was older and definitely needed work, but it was ours. Our first real place since Eoria, and the first thing I spent money on after killing a syndicate Kaden needed gone.

“We don’t have long left to decorate.” She glanced at me with streaks of white paint on her face, hands, and clothes. She lowered her brush and smiled at me, her loose pigtails dancing around her shoulders, pieces of hair sticking out around the edge of her face. “You know those months when Onuna is farthest from the sun? It’s always been my favorite. I love the Celebration of the Fall.”

I snorted, rolling my eyes as I leaned down to add paint to my brush. We had already replaced the flooring and kitchen. Now, the last task was to paint the walls. The living room was the largest and the room we’d saved for last. “You would like the bitter cold.”

“Not just the cold, but I love the lights and the music.”

“Mm-hmm and it has nothing to do with the gifts?” I looked at her, raising a single brow.

Her grin reached her eyes as she shook her head, shrugging. “Okay, fine, I mean, I like that too, but it’s just the months of happiness for me.”

I bumped my shoulder against hers. “I know, I know. You know I just like giving you a hard time.”

She reached down and grabbed the paintbrush, preparing to paint the other end of the wall. “I can’t believe it. After this, we will be done. I feel like we have been working on this house forever, but at least it’s ours. Our first real home since... everything.” She shrugged, her eyes darting away.

“It’s ours.” I smiled back. “And I will make sure no one finds it or can take it away.”

She smiled, setting her brush down as I did mine. She placed her hands on her hips, staring at the part of the wall we had completed. I leaned closer to her and reached out to trace the letters into the wet paint.

“What are you doing?” Gabby asked.

“Making it ours.”

When I finished, I stepped back, the letters QRMA written on the wall. Gabby smiled and stared at the first letters of hers, our parents, and my names.

“I think Mom and Dad would like it here too. Especially given the seasons.”

“And the celebration you like so much,” I teased.

She laughed, going back to the wall with her brush. “Yes, that too. We should decorate this year. If you are around.”

“I’ll be around. I want to spend time with you before you go to university.”

She was quiet for a moment. “But only If Kaden allows it.”

I huffed. “Well, if Kaden says no, I’ll just sneak away. You know I am good at escaping.” I winked, trying to make her smile once more. She was not a fan of my current terms, but we were here, alive and whole. That was all that mattered to me.

“I guess.”

“Hey, you know I’d do anything for you.” I stepped closer, forcing her to look at me. This time, her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

"I know. Now get back to work because I am not finishing this by myself, slacker," she said, trying to swat me with her brush.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Pathetic attempt, Gabs. You gotta do better."

She stuck her tongue out at me, and I grinned. "We need more paint. Wait here." In the kitchen, I grabbed several cans from the stack. She had overbought again. I laughed and headed back to the living room. "Did you really think we needed twenty of these, Gabs?" A small hum came from behind me, and I paused, my grip tightening on the can I held. I slowly turned. The front door rattled, the knob vibrated, and a red light shone from around the edges. It flooded underneath the door, the tendrils slithering toward me, illuminating the room.

I dropped the can of paint, the lid popping off and skidding across the floor. I backed up as the light grew and the door shook.

"Beware the blood-red moon."

"What?" I spun to face a dull, fractured version of my sister. She stared back at me, a faded shadow of her former self. Her pale, lifeless eyes looked through me. A thick band of bruises formed on her neck, and the sound of that horrible crack flooded my ears once more.

She looked at me again, her skin gray and sickly. My chest heaved as she stepped forward. The house shook, a crack forming on the ceiling, and debris raining around her. She lurched forward and grabbed my shoulders.

I opened my eyes and sat up. Gabby's voice echoed in my ears, but she no longer haunted me. Sunlight drifted through the open curtains, revealing the high-end hotel suite.

A warm body nestled against my naked side, reminding me why I was here. I sat up and stretched. The arm around me fell to the floor with a soft thud, no longer attached to the guy who had taken me back to his lovely room. I turned to look at the mess on the bed.

Webster Malone was one of Kaden's lackeys. Now he was an arms dealer with no arms. Webster wasn't terrible to look at, handsome until I had gotten ahold of him. He had blonde hair, his green eyes staring off to some far-away place. Just like hers had.

I wanted to cry, to scream, to do something, but nothing came. I felt it in those rare moments when I would sleep. The pain would clench my chest, the force of it raging up my throat, but then it would just stop. I hadn't cried or shed a single tear since the accident. I felt numb. Maybe I was broken.

A shimmering emerald green light manifested in the room.

“You are being careless.”

I half turned, seeing the hollow image of Camilla standing near the bed. She glanced at the wreckage and body parts all over the room. All of them had aligned themselves with Malone. That had been a mistake.

“I don’t care.”

I threw the sheet to the side and stood. Camilla’s eyes darted away, and she sighed. “You should. Leaving a trail when you want us to stay off the grid will only make Samkiel find you faster.”

I wiped the side of my face with the back of my hand. “I know. That’s why I am leaving him a little present this time.”

I staggered, passing through the hollow image she projected.

“Is this retaliation for the worldwide curfew?”

I smiled wickedly. “Maybe.”

Camilla sighed. “I swear, this is just another prolonged version of flirting for you two.”

“I am not flirting.” I glared at her, a low growl emitting from my throat. “This will be a clear sign to him that the girl he is looking for is long gone.”

“A clear sign to who?”

I ignored her but stopped when she snapped her fingers, and the large screen on the wall flicked on. It was muted, but the banner at the bottom flashed the highlights of the current news. Even as far away as Camilla was, she could still wield power here. I never understood why Kaden chose Santiago over her when she was clearly more powerful. His loss, my gain.

Camilla pointed at the screen. “You kill, and he hunts you. Dianna, he shut the world down looking for you. No one is allowed out past nightfall. Every place he thinks you might be is being watched. He is looking for any sign of you, and this,” she waved to the room, “is a fucking beacon, Dianna.”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared.” I scoffed.

Camilla shook her head. “No, but I can’t cover this up, look for the others, and hide a temple in the middle of Eoria.”

I waved a hand at her and headed toward the shower. “I don’t want you to clean this up.”

“Why?”

I paused, one hand on the doorframe as I turned toward her with a half-smile playing on my lips. “I told you. I want to send a message.”

"Well, this is one way to do it. I think they will get the message." She swallowed, trying to avoid looking at the gore-filled room.

"While you're here, can you magic me some new clothes without all the blood? Thanks."

I didn't wait for her to answer before stepping into the bathroom. Camilla wasn't wrong. Samkiel shutting the world down put a damper on how quickly everyone moved. Finding even one of Kaden's informants had been a struggle, and this shutdown only made things more challenging. Who knew kidnapping a witch, slaughtering a coven, and destroying a vampire line would put Samkiel on such high alert?

I turned on the shower, and waited until steam rose before getting in. The water slid across my skin, but I didn't feel a flicker of the heat. It wasn't hot enough. It never was. I couldn't feel anything. Not the water against my skin nor the lips, teeth, or hands that had touched me last night. I felt nothing but that now familiar painful emptiness. A void had ripped open the second she died, and I didn't know how to heal it. I thought about it as I grabbed the soft sponge and scrubbed at my flesh, unsure if I wanted to go back to feeling. My skin gleamed clean, slick, and unmarred. The only wounds I carried were within me.

I stepped out of the shower, steam curling and playing around my body. I slipped the robe off the back of the door and stepped in front of the mirror. My hand swiped across the cool glass, the haze melting beneath my touch. The reflection that stared back was me, but not quite me. My skin glowed, my eyes were brighter, and my features sharper and more enticing. An alluring, captivating creature stared back at me, a perk of being what I was always meant to be.

A predator. A monster.

I spun away, heading back into the main room. Camilla's astral self remained. She bit at her nail, watching whatever played on the screen. I walked around the room, moving past the plush couches and chairs, looking for the briefcase I had spotted last night. A small smile curved my lips when I spotted the case tucked into the corner. I grabbed it and dumped the files and two guns onto the table.

Camilla's form appeared next to the table. "Is that what I think it is?"

I nodded and scanned a couple of pages. "Come on, Webster. Where is the shipment?" I'd tasted it last night, a flash of memory when I had fed. I'd seen some underground places, a few ships near a dock, and a meeting

room of some sort. The vision had been fuzzy, which was new for me, but I remembered him sitting around a table. Maybe Kaden suspected some of his men might be on my hit list, and he had found a way to block even my blooddreams. I wouldn't be surprised.

A word stuck out to me on the receipts. "Iron?"

Camilla leaned closer. "Why iron?"

"I don't know, but I intend to find out," I said, lowering the pages to the table. My fingers slid over the numbers and the names beside them. I paused on Donvirr Edge. I knew that place. It was an old docking site in the Banisle Sea.

"You think he is shipping stuff to Novas?"

I shook my head. "No, the island is practically gone." I leaned forward, thinking. If he were using the docks, he was shipping something, but to where? Novas was nothing but rubble and ash after I had finished with it, so not there.

"I'll go to the meeting Malone was supposed to attend tonight and—"

"You keep killing with no leads, Dianna," Camilla said.

"Fine, I'll torture them until they talk, then kill them." I pushed away from the table and reached for the clothes Camilla had created for me.

"We are well aware of the growing threat, but I promise it is not what it seems."

I stopped mid-motion, my chest clenching at that voice. My hands curled into the fabric of the robe as I clutched at my chest, the steady beat of my heart stuttering as if trying to find a new rhythm.

Samkiel.

My head whipped toward the screen, Samkiel's face taking up the screen.

Camilla folded her arms, and I knew she had been waiting for this before unmuting the television. "They made him look so... normal with those suits and ties they tossed on him, or tried to, at least. He's too handsome for that. He still looks too godly to me." She paused. "I wonder how often they make him do these interviews to make everyone feel safe."

I said nothing.

"I know it's been quiet for about a month with the new rules and regulations, but how can you confidently say that after everything that's happened? We all saw the threat, and now, with you being back here, I think we are all a little nervous." A feminine laugh filled the air after she spoke,

and the camera panned out. I watched as he leaned forward in his overly-priced suit and folded his hands. Camilla was right. He was far too godsdamn handsome. My heart fluttered at the sight of him. He smiled, making that stupid, perfect jawline stand out. The anchorwoman ate it up like cake.

“Well, with the new curfew and more celestials per city, I think—”

My head went silent as his voice flooded the hotel room. The screen showed every fucking perfect line of his features, but it wasn’t his beauty that made my heart ache so badly it felt like it would explode. Ice pricked my skin, a wave of cold threatening to consume me as my mind served up the memory of another room and another screen glaring me in the face. My chest heaved, my breathing becoming erratic. The hotel melted away, static invading my ears. The only thing I could hear were those damned words.

What were your intentions with this failed relationship?

You are nothing to him, and you never will be.

Do you really think he will choose you after all of this is over?

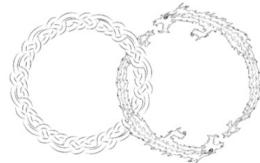
Be realistic.

Even if I don’t win, you will still lose.

Remember that I love you...

My hand whipped out. A tunnel of flames ripped forward, burning through Camilla’s shadowy form, creating a hole through Samkiel’s damned face and that screen. Camilla disappeared, the room going up in a blistering inferno. Sparks sizzled, and flames climbed the wall, smoke filling the room. Alarms pierced the air, accompanied by screams and running feet out in the halls.

I walked out, leaving the room burning.



“YOU’RE LATE, MALONE,” A BRUTISH MAN SAID, SPITTING A STREAM OF tobacco juice to the side. His bald head shone in the moonlight, tattoos decorating the side of his neck. Mortal, he smelled mortal, and I could hear eighty-four others nearby. That included those within the small dive bar. As

long as Tobias didn't show up, I would be fine. These were low-level criminals of the mortal variety.

"The message I got said ten tonight," I argued as he kicked the side door. A small metal window slid back, and someone peered out before closing it tight.

"Boss moved it up. He is getting nervous. Look, dude, I don't make the rules. Just get your ass inside."

Donte was his name, hired muscle and one of Webster's bodyguards. His size would intimidate most, but he stood no chance unless he was secretly Otherworld.

The door swung open, and music blared, the sound coming from beyond the adjacent wall. Donte and I strode past the scrawny door guy. I heard the voices of two men grow louder as we moved down the red-tinted hall.

"Fucking cheater."

"I don't have extra cards, you dipshit. You're just a sore loser."

Donte pushed the door open, revealing a small storage-type room. Someone slammed a fist against the table, and chips rained to the floor. I counted only five men here. Well, six if you included me. Their heartbeats told me they weren't Otherworldly, and my stomach growled.

"Hungry, boss?" Donte asked. That got the room's attention. Several heads swiveled toward us as the door closed.

"About fucking time you showed up, Malone," a man said around the cigar hanging from his mouth. I recognized him from Malone's memories. His hairline had receded until it curved around the sides of his head, the gray hair revealing his age. His voice crackled, and his lungs rattled with every breath, indicating years and years of smoking.

Edgar. Yes, that was his name.

The other men listened, one shuffling and dealing out a new hand.

"Care for a game while we wait?" Edgar asked, taking the cigar from his lips and knocking the ashes off to the side.

My fists clenched at my sides, my gaze narrowing. The scent wafted through the air, arousing painful memories of friends I thought were true but had betrayed me in the worst way. Traitors. They were all traitors. You would think I would have learned by now. No one truly cared about me or had my back. No one but her, and now she was gone because of them.

I hated cigars.

“You think we have time for fucking games?” My voice, deep and masculine, echoed through the room. They all stopped and looked at me. The two men on either side of Edgar gawked at me, a shade of pink darkening their fair skin. My comment only got a grunt from the tanned man studying his cards.

Edgar shifted in his seat. “In a hurry, Malone?” he asked, giving me a hard stare over the top of his cards. “You know damn well we don’t move until he calls.”

I nodded slowly. They were all just fucking pawns.

“Fine.”

Donte stayed by the door, watching quietly. I grabbed an empty chair, its legs scraping against the floor. I adjusted the jacket I wore and sat down gingerly. Webster wasn’t the smallest guy, that was for sure.

The man reshuffled and dealt the cards. I leaned back, blowing out a breath as I glanced at the hand I had been dealt—two kings, an ace, a three, and a five. My memory was shit when it came to this game. I’d only played a few times, and even then, it was out of boredom more than anything. It was something Alistair made Tobias and me do when we were waiting for Kaden.

It seemed I was always waiting for Kaden.

“*You suck at this.*” Alistair laughed, taking my cards back from me while we sat at the table in Novas.

“*I’m sorry. It is not my strong suit. It makes no sense to me.*”

Tobias grumbled under his breath, earning himself a glance from Alistair. I shook my head as Alistair grabbed the cards and shifted closer to show me.

“*Look at this.*” Alistair flipped the cards over, placing them in front of me. “Which one do you think is the strongest?”

I rolled my eyes and pointed. “Obviously, the king and queen.”

Tobias made a strangled noise that sounded like a laugh as Alistair rubbed his chin. “In chess, yes, but in this game, no. The ace is the deciding card on who wins the main battle, so to say.”

“The ace?”

“It is the one that looks completely unassuming next to these pricks.” He pointed to the king and queen. “But when you have it in your hand, you could rule the world. Well, I guess the table, so to speak.”

“Can we play now?” Tobias snapped, holding his cards under his chin.

Alistair grabbed the cards and shuffled them as he looked at me. “There are a shit ton of other rules and tricks, but let’s just get the basics down so Tobias doesn’t cry all night.”

He shuffled once more and handed out cards. “Just remember, Dianna. The ace is what matters, and if you can put an ace with a king?” He whistled under his breath. “Unstoppable.”

“If he makes us wait any longer, I’m going to be pissed,” another man grumbled, pulling me from my thoughts.

“You’re already pissed.”

“Everything is being watched. We’re lucky we can move as much as we can.”

A few grumbled their agreement, cursing about the curfew.

“I’ve sat and supplied these damn materials for weeks now, and he still hasn’t paid yet,” Edgar snapped. Each man threw a card down. Weeks? My brows furrowed as I tried to sort through what Malone knew, but I’d eaten too much. All the memories were either blurry or weren’t there at all, but it still didn’t make sense. Kaden always paid. Usually, he paid in blood if you messed up, but he didn’t lie about business. That, amongst other reasons, was why he had such a heavy following. Kaden supplied them with whatever they needed, and they followed like whipped dogs.

I inhaled deeply, and that’s when I smelled it. The scent emanating from the man on the other side of the table was brief but unmistakable. I glanced at him. He was maybe just out of his twenties, but the fucking overpriced leather and thick gold chain around his neck with the crisscrossed godsdamn symbol screamed Santiago and his fucking coven. My jaw clenched. That’s the boss they were speaking of, not Kaden.

I tossed out a card, losing on purpose. I needed more information.

“So, we’re waiting on Santiago? Typical.” I didn’t hide my snark. I didn’t care to.

Edgar snorted, and someone else laughed. “Yeah, well, he has the ship we need, and I am not having my men or anyone else carry that much fucking iron.”

Iron. Perfect.

“Malone. Did you bring the transcripts with you? You seem a little empty-handed.” Edgar pointed his cigar at me. Every movement of that damn cigar sent the beast inside me whipping and lashing against my skin, begging to get out. I wanted to rip it out of his hand and shove it in his eye.

"I'm not bringing anything in here right now. Don't trust you all." I shrugged and folded my cards once more.

Silence fell before the room erupted in laughter.

"That's fair. Kaden's fire-wielding bitch has been fucking up a lot of our routes and efforts."

The guy across from me hissed, "Don't speak her name."

The man next to him laughed. "Why? Are you afraid of summoning her? Don't be such a superstitious coward."

"Coward? Or smart? Look what's left of the Vanderkais and Camilla's coven. They are nothing more than ashes and ruin. They say you hear a clap of thunder before she arrives, but it's not thunder. It is its wings. Winged death. Then all that's left is fire, fire hotter than the sun—"

"Blow me, Emmett," the man across from him snapped. "Stop listening to everything someone whispers to you."

The man next to me scoffed. "Please, she got what she deserved." He leaned back, folding his arms. "I don't know what she expected after betraying Kaden, killing Alistair, teaming up with the World Ender, and then fucking him. It's her own damn fault. She is the reason the world is fucking shut down, and we have to meet in rat-infested dive bars."

Silence fell once more, and I stared at the cards in my hands.

"You know," the man closest to Edgar scratched his uneven beard, "I wonder if they were screwing while Kaden murdered her sister."

A chorus of laughter and crude jokes followed, but I heard nothing, my blood boiling. The pounding crescendo filled my ears like drums on a battlefield. Darkness whipped in every corner of the room as an ache, deep and primal, grew in my belly. He had voiced the one thought that plagued me, the one thing that haunted me more than anything.

The truth.

It's her own damn fault.

A lock on a door in a house rattled.

"For the record," my voice cut through their laughter as I gazed at the cards in my hand, "I never fucked the World Ender, and I've fingered myself more times than he ever did."

The room fell silent, and every eye turned to me. By the way the color drained from their faces and their heartbeats stuttered, I knew the piercing red glow of my eyes shone beneath Malone's disguise. I felt the

Ig'Morruthen in me stir, all fangs, teeth, and impenetrable scaled armor. Unbreakable, primal, and pissed.

I didn't see anything, my vision blurring with bloodlust. They laughed over her death as if she deserved it when she was the kindest, most loving person in the world, and now she was gone because of me.

I gripped the edge of the table and pushed so hard it severed the man sitting across from me when it collided with the wall. The remaining men jumped to their feet, reaching into their waistbands for weapons. I turned to the low-life next to me and ripped his head off his shoulders, his body slumping forward, painting everyone nearby in red.

Donte grabbed the gun from the far corner, and I heard several shots echo in the room. I didn't feel any pain, only that roaring, vengeful wrath pumping through my blood. First, I needed to secure the leader. I would worry about the others in a second. Edgar's eyes fixed on me, and I could see the moment he figured it out. He knew why I was here. I stalked forward, and he took a few steps back.

I kicked out, slamming the side of my foot against his knee. It shattered, and he fell into a heap, his mouth opened on a silent scream. "Stay here. We need to talk."

Santiago's man with the gold chain tried to run, but I ripped the leg off the overturned table and threw it so hard it went through his chest. His knees hit the floor hard as he dropped.

The *pop, pop, pop* sound behind me told me Donte was still emptying his gun into me. When I spun, I saw the flash of his next round.

"Where's Webster, you bitch?"

I looked down at my suit and stuck a finger into a hole in my shirt, feeling my skin knitting back together. I raised my hand, licking the blood from my fingers as Donte watched, his eyes widening.

"Webster is in pieces. Do you want to know what he tasted like?" My form melted, the black smoke drifting away as the cloak of Webster disappeared, leaving only me.

"*Devil*," he whispered, and to him, maybe I did look like the demons from his legends. I wore a red pantsuit with a matching jacket and heels, my hands covered in my own blood.

"Actually, it's Dianna." I pushed him against the wall, his gun clattering to the floor. I reared my head back before I sank my fangs deep. His body shook as he tried and failed to fight me off. His screams turned to

whimpers, then to silence as I drank deep. The ever-present hunger roared, demanding more, never sated, never full, never... complete.

Memories flashed quickly through my brain, moving at a blurring speed. I pulled away when I heard movement behind me. I turned, allowing Donte's body to slide to the floor with a thud.

Edgar's head whipped toward me, his face scrunching in pain as he tried and failed to stand. He held onto his leg, scooting back and away from me.

"You know, I have been feeding more than I ever have, thanks to my dead sister. You know, the one you all love to taunt," I said, walking toward him, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "It's unlocked this whole new world of power in me. It is pretty fun. Want to see a trick I learned?"

I raised my hand, and the growing darkness in the room crawled toward me. It whipped and curled as if it understood every thought and feeling I had.

"I don't think it's mine. I think it's Kaden's, but he made me and created this, so here we are." The darkness whipped up, grabbing the hanging lightbulb in the center of the room. It burst, leaving the room in pitch blackness.

I drew closer, and he whimpered in the darkness, hearing my heels against the cement floor. He scanned the room for me, but his mortal eyes failed him. As I passed, I leaned down and broke another leg off the table, fear twisting his face as he tried to scoot further away. I stepped over two dead men, victims of Donte's terrible aim with the gun, and stopped in front of Edgar.

"Kind of cool, right?" I whispered, leaning down and grabbing him by the back of his shirt.

He yelled, startled, as I lifted him with one hand. I tossed him toward the wall and drove the table leg through his center, a scream and then blood exploding from his mouth. He scabbled at the wood.

"Don't worry. I missed the vital organs. Gabby taught me all about mortal anatomy. I would help her study for tests over ice cream and notecards when I was home. Those moments were few and far between, but I cherished every one." I twisted my wrist on the last word, causing him to cry out in pain. "I know if I take this out, you'll bleed to death in minutes."

He gritted his teeth harder. "You know, they often wondered what would happen to you if you finally snapped that leash. I guess now we know."

I twisted the broken table leg a little harder. "Where's Kaden?"

"I don't know," he grunted, trying to get a hold on the wood holding him to the wall.

Pity. I actually believed him.

"Fine." I lifted a single shoulder. "Santiago. Tell me where to find that fucking weasel."

He panted for air, his face ashen. "Santiago doesn't tell us anything other than when to make the drop and what dock he will be at, that's all. He's too busy hiding from you."

"Good, he's being smart for once." I didn't twist this time. "What time is his next drop?"

"I don't know. He texts us the day of. That's it, I swear."

I paused to search through his pockets. I threw a wallet onto the floor. It hit with a thud, my hands roaming over him. I dug deeper, fishing out his cell phone. The screen lit up as I looked at it, revealing a picture of Edgar and a woman. Laugh lines crinkled around her eyes, matching his, and against my better judgment, I paused.

"Who is this?" I turned the phone to him, the screen illuminating his features. Fear, plain and simple, flared in his eyes.

"My wife."

"Ah. So, you do have someone you love? Great. Tell me where Santiago is, or I'll find her. She can join Ethan's wife."

He snickered at my threat. "You're too late. Death took her from me years ago. She died in a hospital bed while I was trying to get the money for her cancer treatments."

Edgar bared his teeth in a blood-red smile at whatever he saw on my face. He nodded, a snort escaping his lips. "Surprised? You shouldn't be. You, above all, should know that even monsters love something."

I looked into his eyes, and we shared a moment of brief understanding before I changed the subject. "What's the code?"

He choked out the numbers, and I stepped back. I let him hang there as I unlocked the phone. The screen lit up, several boxes glaring back at me, containing a few unknown numbers and a new message about the docks.

"Looks like he did give a drop date."

I turned, taking the phone with me as I headed for the door. I heard Edgar groan behind me, still pinned to the wall.

He laughed, blood gurgling in his throat. "You know, your reactions make sense now."

I don't know why I indulged him, but I stopped, my foot resting at the door's entrance. "What?"

"I lost someone. We all have. Grief is mourning, but you're not grieving. You skipped straight to anger and revenge, and it's because you feel guilty."

Guilty.

The word rang in my head as it charged toward a door wrapped in chains.

I felt my fangs extend, the tips pressing against my lips.

"You hesitated, girl. I saw it during the card game, even through your disguise, and I saw it when you looked at my phone. I know that look. All monsters love something." He let out a wet laugh. "You and the World Ender. That's what hurts the most, isn't it? You fell in love with him while Kaden took your sister. I've been there. You guys might not have been fucking when he took her, but you weren't there when she needed you. You weren't there because you—"

A sound left my lips, more animal than mortal. I moved so quickly that he only registered it once he was on the floor, clutching his midsection with blood pooling around him.

"You saw nothing," I hissed, tossing the wooden leg across the room.
"Now, say hi to your dead wife."

His weak laugh turned to a wet groan. I turned and left that damned place.

NINE

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SAMKIEL



I yanked at my tie the second we were in the newsroom hallway. Vincent and Logan flanked me as we strode past the mortals. Several tried to stop us, wanting to speak to me or have me sign something. I refused to pause, avoiding everyone. With a final jerk, I managed to rip the tie off.

“I detest these. I detest the suits, the meetings, interviews, all of it.”

“Sorry, boss. I have to make you look professional and all for the rest of the world.”

“Why does everything in this world have to be so constricting?” I groaned and popped the top two buttons of my shirt. The jacket was the next to come undone. It wasn’t just the clothes. It was the spaces, the rooms, the whole damned world. I felt caged.

Vincent moved in front of me and held the door open. The sun cast a golden glow over the world, the day too beautiful in the face of the slowly building war.

“It’s just how mortals are. They need to trust and believe in you. We have to let them know that everything Kaden said is a lie. They need to feel safe.”

I only nodded. “How many more appearances?”

Logan made a face, and I knew I wouldn’t like the answer.

“About eight,” Vincent replied.

No, I did not like it. I did not want to do interviews. I wanted to find her. It had been a month since she’d killed the Vanderkais and burned their mansion. A month of silence with no answers. A month since I’d locked the world and set up new regulations for all living beings on Onuna. The world

knew of monsters and gods now, and the mortals more than happily obliged.

Vincent had made several new advancements regarding the alert systems for the mortals, devices and tools to make them feel protected, but my rules still applied. No one out after nightfall, strict policies on where they went, what they did, identification for traveling, you name it. I wanted no more blood spilled in this world over my mistakes.

I needed to find her, but I had no leads. I'd hoped it would have happened sooner rather than later, yet days turned to weeks. It seemed the more I tried to restrict the world, the easier it was for her to hide. All I could do was hope that she would slip up.

The very few Otherworld creatures that remained locked below Silver City had stopped talking after a few questions. Considering the charred remains we had to dispose of, my hold on my powers was slipping. That was just one reason I had decided to leave the questioning to the others. I sighed, frustration wearing on me. I had no other Otherworld creatures to ask. She had killed those closest to her, and the ones she hadn't gotten to had gone into hiding.

"If we leave here now, we can make it to—"

A sharp ring cut me off, and Vincent lifted his phone to his ear. His eyes met mine, then Logan's. He nodded and told whoever was on the other end we would be there. I didn't need to ask what they said. I heard it.

A burned hotel.



CELESTIALS SIFTED THROUGH THE RUBBLE, GATHERING ANYTHING THAT might be evidence to take back to the guild. Some carried bags, while others had small devices that glowed with celestial energy, looking for anything Otherworldly.

I stepped over another charred piece of wood in the blacked hotel room. The smell of blood, ash, and death hung heavy in the air, plummeting me into memories of battlefields, war drums, and destructive flames. Cities burned to metal skeletons, buildings melted and twisted, and the same damn

smell. I crouched, turning over the remains of a broken chair. What looked like pages crumbled to ash. I knew a handful of celestials and gods that could bend flame, but nothing like this.

No one like her.

“We have to call the council, Samkiel. We can’t sweep this under the rug. There are bodies here,” Vincent said, his voice harsh. I stood and wiped my hands on my pants. The room, or what was left of it, was a complete and utter disaster. The hallway and neighboring rooms seemed fine and clean. This looked as if she had lost control, anger spewing from her in a fit of rage.

“Not yet.”

Vincent scoffed, shaking his head. “Why? Because you don’t want Imogen here?”

“Vincent,” Logan said, not looking up from his search of the ash, a warning in his tone.

“The council wants to make her your advisor once more.”

“We’re not talking about this right now,” I said.

“They said that?” Logan asked.

“Yes, and you know Cameron and Xavier will follow.”

While Dianna knew of my previous history with Imogen, her presence might still ignite Dianna’s jealousy, making her even more volatile. I did not wish to test that theory just yet. If I summoned the rest of The Hand, it might push her further over the edge. It would also solidify the one thing I did not wish to be true. If The Hand were here, then I’d lost her forever.

“I do not summon The Hand lightly. You know that, and I do not need all of you here yet. If I summon you, all of you, it’s not for capture. It’s for war. Kaden will see it as such, and we do not have even the slightest hold on Dianna yet.”

“And you don’t want to fight two Ig’Morruthens?” Vincent asked.

“Tobias makes three,” Logan added.

“Nevertheless, we are not talking about this at the moment.”

Vincent raised a single brow. “I wouldn’t jump to war, but judging by this room, we could use the help. We have no leads, and we’re a step behind her and Kaden. Again. We need more people.”

“Not. Yet.” The words hissed out of me, clipped and short, and Vincent didn’t fight me this time.

My gaze caught on the dark smudge on the far wall, and I stared, transfixed. It blossomed in the telltale splatter of arterial spray, and I wondered just how hot the fire had to burn to brand the blood so deeply into the wood.

A young celestial came through the door, tripping over the rubble as he approached.

"We collected data from the owner as you requested," he said. He focused on Vincent, seeming unable to hold my gaze.

"This was the only footage we found of anyone coming in and out of this room." He spun the tablet toward us, pressing a few concave buttons. Blue lights sparked above it before the screen came to life. A video of the hallway showed a few mortals entering and leaving. I moved closer, Logan and Vincent flanking me, towering over the celestial. He remained in place even as his hands shook, causing the tablet to wobble.

My heart stopped as a handful of women appeared, giggling and dancing. One that stuck out amongst the crowd. There. I saw her. Only it wasn't her. She wore another mortal disguise, but I recognized Dianna no matter what form she assumed. It was the way she moved, her every gesture inherently Dianna. She could not hide behind cloaks and gimmicks. Not with me. Her skin was shades paler than her natural golden bronzed in this form, and a pink that matched her minuscule dress tipped her short blonde curls. She squealed and laughed with the others as the crowd approached the door. My head lifted, and I glanced around the room. Now I knew why the reek of blood and death was so pervasive. They were all still here.

"At first," the young celestial started, "we didn't think it was even her. Not until... Well, you'll see."

I looked at the tablet and recognized her body language. She always used the same tactics in her seduction—a sway of her hips, a flip of her hair, and the slight touches to her upper torso. Dianna reminded me of a serpent, slowly, deliberately drawing in its prey before she snapped. It hurt to watch, but I couldn't tear my gaze away. I rubbed my hand over the smooth line of my jaw, hungry for the sight of her, even if she wasn't in her natural form. The outfits she favored always showed a little too much, but she didn't need them to garner attention. Her smile lit up the entire room, drawing men and women alike to her. Her laugh was like music to my soul.

A man ran up behind her, grabbing her around the waist with one arm and swinging her to the side. They laughed, and my stomach turned. He

handed the suitcase he carried off to another man and opened the door. The women ran inside, but Dianna hung back, leaning against the wall. She beckoned him closer with a slim finger and an invitation in her eyes, a temptress baiting a trap. He fell into it eagerly, his hands running down her sides and over her hips to cup her ass so tightly she grunted and jumped. My teeth ground and my jaw clenched as he pushed his body against hers before claiming her mouth.

I knew what it felt like to kiss those lips. It was pure bliss, and I hated him for tasting what was mine. Pain twisted my gut, the agony enough to make my breath hitch. I had been nearly cut open in my youth learning how to wield a blade in battle, and this felt worse. It was pure, intense agony, and I wanted to summon Oblivion and rip into him. How dare he touch her, caress her? He did not know her or care for her. She was just another body to him. The lights flickered in the room, and the tablet's screen went black for a brief second. Everyone stopped and looked at me. I needed to get myself under control. What was wrong with me? I took a breath, trying to calm myself and settle my emotions.

My fists clenched behind my back, and the screen came back on. No one said anything and for a good reason. The primitive part of their brain in charge of their survival told them to stay very still and quiet. I was not a hundred percent certain I would not incinerate them by mistake. I have not wanted nor craved anyone for over a thousand years, but Dianna woke some long-dead part of me. The emptiness and loneliness that had become a reality of my existence faded when I was in her presence. Now she was gone. She had shown me what it meant to feel at peace and then ripped it away.

On the screen, the man lifted Dianna. She wrapped her legs around his waist before they disappeared behind the door. "Why are we playing this?" Logan asked, coming to my defense after a quick glance at me.

"I-I'm sorry." The celestial pressed another button, the small white numbers on the edge of the screen fast-forwarding through hours. They had been in there for hours. Anger rippled off me as I struggled not to imagine all the things they could have done. Had he taken her in every part of this place? Had she liked it? Had she made the same noises she'd once made for me? I bit back a groan, feeling as if I were being eviscerated.

"See, this part?" the celestial said, thankfully pulling me from my thoughts. He slowed the video, the seconds clicking by. The door opened,

and an orange glow lit the dark hall. Dianna stepped out in her true form, her beautiful dark hair cascading down her back in waves. She turned and strode down the hall without a backward glance, ignoring the flames that followed her from the room. “She left without the suitcase. The man she came with had a suitcase, and she left without it, which means it is still here.”

“You made me watch that for a suitcase you could have merely mentioned?” I asked, barely keeping the snarl from my voice.

The celestial swallowed, glancing toward Vincent before he stammered, “I-I...”

“Your position is terminated,” I said. Vincent plucked the tablet from his hands, and the celestial hurried away. I turned, fighting the urge to go after him and strangle him.

“Samkiel, think clearly.” Logan stepped closer, his voice barely above a whisper. “Why would she allow herself to be caught on camera? She knew it was there. That whole display. This? She wants to send a message. She is unhappy with your decision to close Onuna. Think reasonably, and with all due respect, don’t fire anyone else.”

I ignored Logan, unable to process what he was saying, even as he tried to make sense of the situation. The other celestials avoided my gaze, returning to work. I moved further into the room, aiming for the center. Logan and Vincent followed me but stopped short when I rolled up my sleeves. They reversed direction, waving the celestials back to the edges of the room. Focusing on the growing knot of pain in my chest, I pulled on my power. The skin along my arms lit with the intricate design of my people, the tattoos burning with molten silver. I knew they matched the lines on my face and the irises of my eyes.

The room vibrated as items, charred and damaged, began to mend. Celestials clung to the walls, trying to stay upright. I lifted my hands, returning the room to what had been only hours prior. Chairs, tables, and couches reformed from the destruction. Several celestials jumped back and out of the way as the room became what it had been before the fire.

“Oh, gods.”

I didn’t need to look to know what was there. I could smell the blood and death. It was no longer a lingering scent but fresh and without the underlying stench of burnt meat.

“Samkiel.” I saw Logan’s face, terror and pain filling his eyes. It wasn’t compassion for what remained of the man on the bed, nor the other bodies that littered the room, but fear for his missing wife. If Dianna could do this, what could Kaden do?

“We will find her. I promise.” I reached out, placing a hand on his shoulder and squeezing lightly. He nodded and forced a brief smile. I looked past him. A young woman who worked for Vincent leaned down and picked up a pair of lacy red underwear.

My heart froze.

I lifted a handful of thin fabric held together by crisscrossing strings. If these were restraints, they didn’t look suitable. Maybe they were a weapon I wasn’t familiar with.

“What is this?” I asked, turning toward Dianna. She had left some drawers open in her room, and curiosity had gotten the best of me.

Dianna left the large closet wearing a baggy shirt and loose-fitting gray pants. She’d showered and changed out of the gown I had made for her after we’d returned from the garden. Her eyes widened when she saw what I held, and she rushed over to me.

“Oh, my gods, Liam, give me those,” Dianna hissed, grabbing the bundle of material from my hand and pushing me away. She closed the drawer and scowled at me. “Stay out of my dresser, please, and thanks.”

I shrugged as nonchalantly as I could. “You are the one that left it open. I was just curious about what your friend had bought for you.”

She shook her head and smirked at me before padding to the bed.

“What is that? Is that something you wear?” I asked, my curiosity still roused.

She hopped on the bed and crawled to the center. I would be a liar if I said the sight didn’t affect me. She was pleasing in a lot of areas.

She yanked the covers down. “They’re panties, Liam.”

That word seemed foreign to me, or maybe I had not been paying attention to the videos Logan had supplied.

My brows furrowed as I walked to the other side of the bed. “What’s that?”

A smile curved her lips. “You’re joking, right?”

I sat on my side of the bed and shook my head. I didn’t understand why she would assume I would joke about a question.

“Rule number one of our friendship is that you won’t lie to me. I have literally, and against my will, seen you take them off of women with your teeth.”

Realization hit me like a meteor. I felt my face go slack and my body run hot.

“Those are undergarments?” I pointed toward the drawer.

She laughed, genuinely laughed. “Yes. What did you think they were? Torture devices?”

I didn’t respond.

“Oh, my gods, you really did.” She laughed harder, nestling into the bed and grabbing the thick comforter to pull around her. I slid into bed and rested an arm underneath my head. Another thought gnawed at me like a feral beast, and before I could stop it, the question erupted from my lips.

“Why does Drake know what you wear beneath your clothes? Has he pulled your undergarments off with his teeth?”

Her hand reached out, and she playfully slapped at my chest. I reacted like I always did because it made her smile. Not her normal smile, but a brief one that made her nose wrinkle.

“Ow.” I flinched, rubbing the spot where she’d popped me.

“Oh, that didn’t hurt, you big baby.” There it was, that smile. I needed a name for it. “And no. He was just with me when I took Gabby shopping in Ruuman years ago. Now go to sleep and stop thinking about my underwear.”

“I promise that is not what I am thinking about.”

Dianna laughed and closed her eyes, snuggling further into the bed. “Sure you’re not.”

“I swear it.” And it was a complete and utter lie.

The memory faded as I watched the woman put that scrap of red lace into a clear bag and seal it. My hand fell to my side, and Logan turned to see what had caught my attention.

My jaw clenched, and I turned away. “I need you and the team to find out who this man was and what he was into. I need names, next of kin, anything you can find.”

“Samkiel.”

“What?” I snapped, turning toward Vincent.

“I don’t think you’ll need it,” he said, scanning some pages he’d picked up. “Looks like his name was Webster Malone, and these records show

transactions from an account tied to Donvirr Edge.”

“What’s that?”

“Let’s find out.” Vincent handed the papers to the celestial hovering at his elbow. The man grabbed them and quickly scanned them. His fingers flew over the thin tablet he held, and a few minutes later, he turned the device to show us an image of a dock. Ropes hung from a wooden bridge, and a large ship took up the background.

“It’s a shipping dock. Transportation of goods, mostly foods. There have been a few arrests for illegal activity and gambling in the last couple of years.”

“Okay, a shipping dock. I’ll go there.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go,” Logan said, striding toward the door.

“No, Logan. I want all of you to stay here and see what else you can find. See who he worked for and what else he might have known.”

Vincent put his hands on his hips and frowned. “You’ll need a ride. We can get a convoy—”

“I do not.”

I didn’t know if it was the rage that bubbled inside me or that the room now smelled of arousal and death, but I had to leave. I had to get away from it and all of them. Tendrils of electricity danced around me, and the room shook from the pent-up rage inside me. One minute I was in the room, and the next, in the clouds. A booming echo followed in my wake. Lightning struck, and rain poured from the sky as I turned toward Donvirr Edge.

TEN

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SAMKIEL



Rain poured from the sky, droplets bouncing off the metal chains that swayed in the growing wind. A storm had followed me here, one I'd created by accident. I changed out of the suit as I landed, the fabric of my new clothes light but durable, like the ones we used to wear on Rashearin. The black long-sleeve shirt and matching pants made blending in with the shadows at the end of the alleyway easier. The nap Logan had forced on me days ago had helped. Sleep, even for a moment, let me recharge, even if all I dreamt of was her once more.

I stayed low, surveying the area as several people moved large wooden sealed boxes onto a ship. I counted at least fifty heartbeats, but from the magic that hummed off their skin, they weren't mortal. Witches. That explained how they were moving those large crates so easily.

"Come on!" one man yelled. "This storm isn't letting up, and we have two more. We can't be late."

A gust of wind battered the docks, and the massive gray ship swayed. I needed to calm down. The rings on my fingers vibrated, begging me to summon a blade. I would welcome the opportunity to let off some steam. It had always helped in the past, but then I had never been tied up in knots over a woman. It had never been about someone I cared so deeply for.

They loaded the remaining crates and closed the thick doors on the back of a large truck. The engine revved, lights shining as it pulled away. Now that the vehicle was out of the way, I realized this was no ordinary cargo ship. It was massive. How much material was he moving? The trees behind the fence bent beneath the force of the howling wind, and the rain continued to pelt the concrete. I pulled my hood up and studied the treeline, my eyes

straining against the darkness. It felt as if someone or something was there, yet I saw nothing.

I shook it off, turning back toward the ship as the last few people boarded. They joked as the ramp slowly creaked and disappeared. I waited until the ship left the harbor before I shot back up into the sky.



MY FEET HIT THE DECK WITH A SOFT THUD. I LANDED IN A CROUCH AND remained there for half a second to make sure no one heard or came from below. I had followed them from above, riding the storm for a few miles. The city lights were so far away now you'd have to be a Netherworld or Otherworld creature to see them.

Where were they going? Originally, I had wondered if they were going to Novas, Kaden's previous base of operations and his home, but that was in the opposite direction from which the ship sailed. They seemed to be headed to the middle of nowhere. I moved, staying close to the bridge. No one was at the helm, but the witches on board had taken control. I could feel the magic they wielded.

Voices echoed from below. "I'm not going back up front. It's fucking freezing, and now it's raining. It's like the damn storm is following us."

I heard shuffling feet and a mean chuckle before another man said, "His instructions were clear. He said we need someone on watch, so you go."

"No, you." There was a pause, and then the stench of anxiety floated through the air. "You heard what they said. They are calling her winged death. You hear a clap like thunder before she descends and rains fire. She is hunting anyone fucking involved in that girl's death. We're done for, and of course, the idiot had to tape it."

"I would love for you to call Kaden an idiot to his face," the other voice shot back.

"I will if you go watch." Laughter, deep and quick, followed before I heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

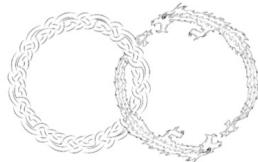
"Okay, you have a deal, and I want *that* recorded." Shadows slowly climbed the stairs. Their footsteps were heavy against the metal steps,

neither trying to stay quiet.

The man in front half turned, laughing with his friend. “I’m surprised Santiago hasn’t told him that to his face. My—”

He stopped as his friend’s eyes grew wide. He turned his head slowly toward me, looking to see what made his friend suddenly drip sweat. His eyes stopped at my chest and then slowly traveled up.

His throat bobbed as fear leaked from him. “Oh, fuck.”



“YOUR MAGIC IS WEAK COMPARED TO THE GODDESS WHO MADE IT,” I SAID, flipping open another crate. This one matched the others: boxes and boxes of sheets and rods of iron. The ship rocked, the heavy waves buffeting it. The room smelled of iron and the burnt flesh of the witches that had tried and failed to attack me. Santiago grunted from the ceiling, where I held him with my power. I flipped through the pages on the clipboard, circling two of the crates.

“Why are you moving so much iron?”

“Go to Iassulyn!” Santiago grunted, struggling against the invisible hold. My head tilted up, and I lowered the clipboard in my hand.

“You know of Iassulyn?” My lips turned down in a frown. “I’m impressed. It’s a realm outside of time and space. A place so brutal only the vilest and damned end up there when they die.”

I waved my hand, and his body dropped to the floor next to me, landing chest first. He raised his head, the gash on his nose threatening to open again.

“You took my fucking hands.”

“Yes, yes, I did.” I kneeled next to him. “I warned you what would happen if you put your hands on her. You should have listened.”

A sick, wet laugh left his lips. “Gods, you really are sweet on her. Pathetic.”

“Says the man who... what was that she said?” I paused. “Oh, yes, couldn’t take the word no.” My blood boiled, remembering what she had

said that day in El Donuma. I know he had never fully touched her, but that he would even try made me want to summon Oblivion to end him.

“Hey, you can’t blame me for being curious. Everyone that’s touched her has turned into a whipped dog. Even gods, I guess.”

With a flick of my hand, his body hit the ceiling once more. I heard his ribs crack, and he grunted before choking on a laugh.

“Have any of you considered that maybe it’s her that is so mesmerizing and not what’s between her legs?” I used my power to press his body hard enough against the ceiling that the metal groaned.

“He wasn’t kidding.” Santiago’s laugh died as he looked at me. “You really are in love with her.”

His shock soon turned into a smile, then a full-on laugh, when I dropped my hand. I held him above me and turned to rip off another crate lid instead of answering.

“Oh man, you are so fucked. Do you really think Kaden, of all creatures, will let you have her? Let anyone truly have her? She is the first and only one he has ever made. He isn’t letting her go.” Santiago grunted, the pressure of my power grinding against him.

I knew that. Everyone knew that. Kaden had proven he would do anything to keep her, including dragging her back in pieces if he had to.

“I am very aware of how far he is willing to go. He has poisoned her, degraded her, threatened her, had monsters drag her back to a hole in the ground while she screamed, ripped her to pieces, manipulated the people closest to her to betray her, and then he took the one person she loved away from her all because she refused to return to him.”

With another flick of my hand, Santiago slammed to the ground. He landed in a heap and let out a pained cough. I turned as he rolled over onto his back. He was half smiling as if it was the funniest thing in the world that Kaden had done so much to hurt her so badly. My control snapped.

“Do you find that humorous?”

The lights in the ship went out, and the engine died. Total darkness fell as thunder, loud and heavy, cracked the sky, so strong we could hear it in the bowels of the ship. I laid the clipboard to the side, the blackened silver ring on my finger humming. Tendrils of purple and black mist wafted off the death blade, and Santiago’s eyes went wide, the smile and laughter fading from his expression. I saw my eyes flare silver in the reflection of Santiago’s gaze.

“Do you know what Oblivion is, Santiago?” I moved the tip of the blade closer to him as he struggled against my invisible, vise-like grip. “It’s a weapon I made long before you were even a thought. It was meant to be an instrument of peace, formed at my accession. Only I carried too much anger and grief at the time. Feelings I couldn’t control spilled over, and I created this instead. It is every horrible emotion a god should not feel, yet here it is. It is a true death blade. There is no peace, no Astheroth, no Iassulyn, no nothing. It makes you into particle matter to be reused as the universe sees fit. Your conscience is gone. No you, no quirks that make you special, no memories, dreams, or nightmares. It is true death.”

Santiago swallowed, sweat and fear pouring off him. I glanced at the blade in my hand and back toward him.

“I had not summoned it since Rashearin fell, not until her. Do you know why? Because there are no boundaries I will not cross if it means keeping her safe, especially after everything you all have taken from her. It is the highest law not to touch anyone in my court or what I consider mine. That act alone is punishable by death, and she is mine. It will be your end.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard, I don’t think she knows that.”

His smirk died as the tip of the blade touched his suit jacket. The material beneath broke off and turned to ash, floating into the air around us.

Santiago’s eyes bulged as he watched it spread, and then he snapped, “Listen, I don’t know, okay? I don’t know.” He stumbled as if he couldn’t get the words out quickly enough. I lifted the blade from him before it spread further. “Kaden doesn’t tell any of us anything, especially after Alistair died and she left. He trusts no one but Tobias now. If you want answers, real answers, find him.”

“Why the iron? The ships?”

“All I know is he’s building something.”

My brows furrowed. “Kaden can’t build a god-killing weapon with Etherworld metals and minerals, and that’s what he would need to kill me. Only Azrael could make something from nothing, and he is long dead.”

Santiago pulled his worried gaze from the blade and looked at me like I had grown horns. “Who said Azrael was dead?”

My head reared back. “I saw it. When the Ig’Morruthens attacked, he died helping his wife escape. The light burned the sky. How can you tell me not?”

“Alistair could make you see whatever he wanted.”

“Alistair? Alistair never set foot on Rashearin. You’re trying to buy time with lies.”

“Why would I lie?” he practically stammered, as if afraid I would place Oblivion close to him again. “The Kings of Yejedin have almost as much power as your lot.”

“Kings?” It was my turn to stammer. “Alistair was no king.”

“You really don’t know who Kaden is at all, do you?” Santiago asked, genuinely confused.

The information ran too fast through my brain. If Alistair was there, did that mean Kaden and Tobias were, too? But how? I needed more answers. Were they the last three Kings of Yejedin? Had Nismera and the other traitorous gods not only called on the Ig’Morruthens but the Kings as well?

I had seen Azrael dead, seen him turn into that clear blue light. I started to tell him how idiotic his words were, but I paused as thunder slapped the sky again. Only the power behind it wasn’t mine this time.

“Winged death,” he whispered.

Santiago’s heart raced, the beat like a drum. He was terrified, and this time not of me.



“GET ME OUT OF HERE ALIVE, AND I’LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING I KNOW. I promise.”

I stopped and turned, Santiago skidding to a stop as I faced him. I raised my hand, pinching my fingers closed near his face. “Stop talking.”

That’s all he had done. Her arrival had reduced him to a shriveling mess. He knew she was here for him, and he’d practically pissed his pants. I waited to hear the fire I knew she would send through the ship, but it did not come. The witches I had knocked unconscious should be awake by now, but I didn’t hear a single scream or murmur. The worst part was the quiet.

I grabbed him by the shoulder, his shirt bunching in my grip, and pushed him forward. “Keep walking.”

“Don’t you think it’s safer to head away from the main area of the ship?” he said, digging his heels in and trying to turn back.

“Make no mistake, your safety is not my concern,” I said as I summoned an ablazed sword. I placed the tip of the blade against his back. Santiago paused before sighing and moving forward again.

“What’s the point in threatening me if you are just going to kill me, anyway? You already took my hands. I can’t cast magic now.”

I remained silent and pushed him forward. He stopped at one of the oval metal doors and looked at the handle before raising his arms to display his missing hands. My jaw clenched as I stepped around him to turn the large lever and push against the heavy door. It swung open, revealing an empty room with no exits. I shifted to the side and waved my blade, gesturing for him to enter. I did not trust him at my back, no hands or not.

“You are alive for two reasons. The first is that you have information I want,” I said.

“What’s the other?” he asked, turning when he realized I hadn’t followed him in.

I grabbed the edge of the door. “Bait.”

Santiago’s eyes bulged, and his face went slack in shock as I slammed the metal door. “You can’t fucking leave me here!” he yelled, and I heard him kick at the door. “She will kill me! Aren’t you supposed to be the good guy?”

I twisted the handle, locking him in, and leaned against the door. “I never once said that I was good. That is just a fable you all tell yourselves, I suppose. You tell yourselves that I will show mercy. You believe that to be the law and govern the realms, I have to at least be neutral, but sometimes a king has to be a monster.”

With a sigh, I pushed away from the door and called on my fire. Directing it through my eyes, I melted the edges of the door. I continued speaking as I sealed him in. “I will admit that I do seem more erratic, and I am aware it is because of Dianna. It’s confusing and frustrating. I have never felt for another how I feel about her. She makes me feral and possessive, but not in the way your master is. I would never hurt her, and I cannot allow her to keep hurting herself. That’s what she’s doing, and her pain grows every time she kills. She feeds and takes others to sate the part of her born from grief. She is trying to bury herself under those kills and prove to herself that she is the monster you all believe her to be. None of you know her. She is so much more. Dianna was kind to me and helped me

when I did not deserve it, so I must also be that for her. She has no one else. Kaden and all of you made sure of that.”

The pulsing heat in my eyes died, and I watched as the metal cooled. The beating against the door stopped as soon as I started speaking. I heard him sigh and then a thud as he dropped to sit on the floor.

“You’re a hopeless romantic idiot.” It was the last thing I heard him say as I took the metal stairs two at a time.

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ELEVEN

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SAMKIEL



T hunder clapped again, and I knew it had not originated from the swollen clouds crowding the sky. I stood on the deck, unable to take my eyes off the massive dark wyvern that circled the ship. She knew I was here with Santiago, and I could feel her calculating her odds.

She cut through a swath of clouds and I turned, waiting for her to reappear. The rhythmic beat of her powerful wings stopped, and the only sounds were the howl of the wind, the ceaseless brush of the sea against the ship, and the patter of the rain. Where had she gone? I knew she wouldn't just leave. I turned in a slow circle, stopping when lightning flashed, illuminating the deck for an instant before darkness fell again, concern and tension building in my chest. Another bolt danced across the sky, and my heart skipped. One moment I was alone on the deck. The next, she was standing a few feet from me.

It was as if she'd appeared from the darkness itself.

Gods, was she always this beautiful? It had been far too long since I had seen her last, and I was hungry for the sight of her. She stared back at me, her eyes glowing red, their depths too alien for me to read her emotions. The outfit she wore hugged her body lovingly. I had memorized every one of those curves in my dreams when sleep took me against my will. The wind cut, blowing sharp and cold, the storm growing.

She cocked her head, her body still as if listening for something below. I realized she was searching for him even as she stood here with me.

"I dislike being apart from you this long," I called to her.

Her head snapped toward me, those crimson eyes shifting for a split second, and I swore I saw a hint of hazel. Joy sparked through me that my

words had some effect on her, even if it was fleeting. It hinted at a chance, a small sliver of hope. Her eyes stayed on me this time, but she still did not speak, the rain and wind building to a tumult around us.

I gave her a slow smile, working at keeping her focus on me. “See something you like?”

Dianna’s lips twisted in a small grin. “I forgot how massive you are. Too many mortal men, I suppose.”

She meant for that jab to sting, to distract me, and it did hurt. She was not mine, not entirely. Given what we’d been dealing with at the time, we’d never discussed being exclusive, but it burned me to my core that she was with anyone else, and she knew it. I saw it on her face.

“Thanks for leaving your clues, by the way,” I shouted over the clap of thunder. “I thought you’d at least be more careful. Unless you wanted me to find you.” Dianna moved to the right, slowly, deliberately, then back to the left, pacing. She reminded me once more of the riztoure beasts, large, beautiful, sleek, yet fearsome felines from Rasheirim. She was all of that, and here she was, sizing me up like prey.

“Webster was a lowlife arms dealer who sold more than weapons. He deserved what he got.”

“If you didn’t want me to find you, you probably shouldn’t set places aflame.” I paused, another part of me raging to the surface. “Or leave your lacy undergarments behind.”

“Lacy undergarments?” Her laugh rolled off her tongue like a purr, echoing through the storm. “They are called panties, Samkiel. You know that, and you’ve seen plenty.”

“Yes, but I distinctly remember yours.”

“I’m glad. I left them as a parting gift,” she called back with another tip of her chin. “Another way to tell you that the girl you’re so desperate to save is long gone, and she is not coming back.”

I smirked, ignoring her blatant attempt to push me further away, even as it ripped at my heart. I had another plan.

“I will admit, I enjoy the fact you thought of me while you were with others,” I called over the raging storm. “Did it help you come, or are you still deprived, my Dianna?”

Whatever retort she’d prepared died the second those words left my lips. She faltered, and even though she corrected herself almost immediately, I saw her reaction to me calling her mine. I saw the flicker of

recognition in her posture as if she still craved and treasured those words. In that moment, I knew I'd won. She knew it too.

"I'll take your silence as a no."

I watched her shake her head, rain plastering her hair to her face. "Please, is that jealousy I hear? Does the mighty World Ender, the legend himself, get jealous? I don't remember that in your memories."

"I am not fond of others touching what's mine."

"Yours?" A sharp laugh escaped her, followed by a huff of smoke that curled from her nose. "When did we agree on that? When we hated each other? The one night we finally touched? Or was it when I stayed with you when they took her? Which part?"

"Dianna." Her name came out as a plea.

"Samkiel." She mocked me, clicking her tongue. "Besides, your jealousy is misplaced on Malone. He only lasted a few minutes before I ripped him to pieces." Her smile was deadly.

I tried to act as if her mentioning her tryst so nonchalantly didn't set my nerves and temper in overdrive, but the sky betrayed me. A bolt of lightning split the sky, followed by a clap of thunder, my energy disrupting the atmosphere. She caught it, her head tipping back as a laugh made of sin left her lips. The rain poured on her face, water flowing down her neck.

"Are you still having issues, lover? Not sleeping?" She glanced at me as the air continued to rumble.

"I'll be honest with you if you will be with me."

"Honesty?"

"Yes. Honestly, you helped more than you know, and I plan to do the same for you. No matter what words you toss at me or taunts you know affect me. I refuse to let you continue down this destructive path, Dianna."

She glanced down, nodding as if she were contemplating my words. Water dripped from the tip of her nose before she glanced at me again. Beautiful, she was beautiful even now. Not one single part of her scared me, no matter how hard she tried. The fangs, the eyes, every part was still her, and she was the only one I wanted. I longed for her just as she was, from the thick lashes she closed against the rain to that full sensual mouth now painted a deep shade of red, to her hair slicked back from her face and hanging far past her shoulders. I could see how losing Gabriella, how the blood she had consumed, had changed her, but to me, she was still my sweet, protective, caring, fiery Dianna.

“Honesty, then. Fine, I’ll be honest.” A flicker of emotion danced behind her eyes that raging persona slipping for a second. Her throat bobbed as she continued to stare at me. “This was a waste of time. Every second I spent with you was a waste of time. You were a means to an end. You were to keep my sister safe, and you failed even in that. I should have left the second I had the chance. Anyone smart would have. Now she is dead because of you just as much as me because we couldn’t keep our hands off each other. Kaden killed her because of *you*, because of *me*. Once again, I was reminded that I am not a normal girl with a crush on a normal boy who gave her flowers and told her she was pretty. I was stupid to think I could have even a semblance of normalcy in my life. I was weak and pathetic and didn’t realize that normal died the second I did in that fucking burning desert. And honestly? I’ll never be her again.”

There it was. Dianna tried to hide behind the violence and lovers she took, wearing it like armor to protect her shattered heart. She’d left the message, trying to prove to me she was truly gone. Only I felt in my soul how wrong it was. She was Dianna, my Dianna, and I saw clearly how broken she was now. The words she threw at me were meant to hurt me, but they originated in her overwhelming grief and pain. The same pain that clawed its way into my soul when Rashearim fell.

“You’re wrong, Dianna. You are trying to convince yourself, but you know I would have done anything for you and your sister. Blaming yourself and me will not bring her back.” My heart sank as she turned ever so slightly, her eyes glowing a shade brighter. “I still care about you. Need you. Want you. I always will.”

“Well then, I guess that’s a problem because I don’t care about you. Not when the cost of it took everything from me.” Her lips pursed into a thin line. “You’re not worth it.”

I had hit a nerve, and she’d struck back.

“Don’t project onto me. I know you, even if you hate it. You care about me. I know what I felt then, and I know what you felt. It was real. It’s the only thing I can still feel from you, and I will stop at nothing to have you back with me. I won’t let you suffer alone. You know I won’t. I’m too damned stubborn.”

A crackle of lightning hissed across the sky. A corner of her lips twisted up as she glanced at it. She swallowed, the long narrow column of her throat bobbing as she tilted her head back. “They wrote stories about us.

Me, the Ig'Morruthen, and you, Samkiel, the World Ender. Two creatures destined to spill each other's blood until the cosmos bleed." She looked at me, her gaze meeting mine and holding. "Not fuck each other."

I merely shrugged as the storm raged on. "Well, times change."

She smiled, but it was one of annoyance, not the bright one I craved. She clapped her hands together. "Hmm, well, this was fun, Samkiel, but I have a witch to kill. So..."

I knew what she was doing. Her attempt at avoidance was apparent, but it was more than that. I knew where she was better than anyone. When my father died, and I'd destroyed Rashearin, I'd locked myself away on the remains of my world. She was only locking her emotions inside, trying to push me away, trying to block me out, trying not to feel.

"Dianna." I took a single step forward. She thrust her hand toward me, a dark ring on her finger glowing for a mere second as she summoned a sharp, jagged forsaken sword made of serrated bone and held it between us.

Shock grounded my feet in place, my stomach twisting.

Inconceivable.

"How?" My voice was a broken whisper.

She'd summoned a blade from a ring. It was impossible that she had the raw magic it took to even stabilize the power it contained.

"Another honest moment between us. I remember the things you taught me. How to fight better, be quicker, how to take down something far larger than me, how to be *lethal*. Every little thing you showed me in that damned mansion when you just wanted to be close to me after our little argument. I remember every word you said, including how you must always have a weapon." She lifted the blade, assessing it. "Camilla made it for me. Took a while, but here we are."

"That's what you needed her for? To fight me?"

Why did rage and jealousy flair to life in my gut at that realization?

"I knew you'd only get in my way. Just like the blood that runs through that perfect body of yours, saving people is ingrained in your DNA. And honestly, how cool is this? The rings really are a great idea."

Camilla had forged a blade born ring. I knew her powers were unparalleled even here, but that much power and strength were catastrophic. And now, two of the most powerful women I knew had joined forces.

"I am a creature born of chaos, born to destroy you." She lifted her blade, pointing it at me. "You are the protector of all twelve realms and

every dimension in between. Shall we be what we were always destined to be, lover?"

She moved quickly, too quickly. I summoned my blade and raised it, stopping her strike just before it connected with my face. The heavy sound of steel rang out, and a part of me broke.



MY BODY HIT THE FLOOR, ALL THE AIR EXPLODING FROM MY LUNGS. I pushed to my feet, summoning another ablazed weapon. I refused to give up on her. She was still in there. It had only been a flicker, buried under anger and vengeance, but I'd seen it, and it was enough.

Lights flashed, casting a gray-blue tint with every rotation of the focused yellow beams. I scanned the hole she had made in the deck after hitting me with enough flame to sting. My clothes remained intact, minus the few cuts she had gotten in with her blade. She practically danced with that weapon. Even as her target, she was damn impressive.

I peeked into the hole and followed her in. The moment my feet hit, I went to my knees. Dianna's sword hit the metal just above my head and stuck. Her eyes blazed as she yanked the blade from the wall.

I rose and stepped to the side, out of her reach. "How did you get so good at wielding a sword? You despise swords."

She rushed forward, and I blocked the swipe she aimed at me. I held her there for a few seconds, the force behind her strike tenfold. She leaned in close and smiled, snapping canines sharp as the blade she wielded. Her first shot connected with my jaw hard enough to send me into the neighboring wall. I pushed off, ducking once more as she swung, the blade sparking against the wall where I'd stood.

"You can only perfect something if you train." She tossed my words back at me in a mocking voice. "Another lesson you taught me."

"Oh, so you do pay attention to what I say?"

A pipe burst where she had struck the wall, sending a plume of steam hissing into the hallway.

“You know, I saw you on the screen, prancing around and smiling at those stupid mortals as if nothing had happened. So precious, telling everyone how they have nothing to fear. What a joke you are.” She stalked me through the gray steam, spinning the blade as she rotated her wrist.

“I have to maintain face, Dianna. That’s all that was. You know that. The mortals are already in an uproar.”

“Yes, you looked so miserable with everyone practically drooling over you.”

A thought crossed my mind. “Is that how I looked? How long did you stare at me?”

She moved again, and I blocked it.

“He put her on display, Samkiel, just like that, and you go on there like it meant nothing. Lie to me again about how much you care for me,” she growled, her foot shooting out to kick me in the chest. I flew back, the wall groaning as my body hit. I rubbed at the lingering ache in my sternum and stood. Yes, she was definitely stronger and meaner. As I caught my breath, her words sank in.

“Dianna. I have to make the world, the mortals, feel safe so The Council of Hadrameil stays away. That’s all. I would never willingly do anything to cause you more pain.”

Steam continued to billow from the pipe, filling the hall with a thin fog. I could only see her red glowing eyes and silhouette as she took a step back, then another.

“I wouldn’t worry about me being in pain,” she said with a smile, her white teeth flashing in the gloom.

One minute she was there, and then the next, gone. I shot to my feet and dashed to where she had been. Smoke twined around my body, but the corridor was empty.

“Fuck,” I growled under my breath, another word Dianna had taught me spilling from my lips. She was baiting me, feeling for him, zeroing in on his location, and once I was far enough away that I couldn’t reach her, she’d vanished.

I turned, summoning the ablazed weapon back into my ring before darting down the hall. Knowing I wouldn’t reach him before she did, I stopped and portalled, reappearing outside the metal door. I grabbed the lever and yanked, ripping the door from its hinges. Santiago jumped, his

eyes wide with fear and shock. Not giving him time to react, I reached inside and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, pulling him out.

“You look terrible,” he said, his face grim as he took in the cuts and blood on my jacket. I had not noticed how many swipes she had gotten in during our battle, but apparently, she had done some damage.

I dragged him along, looking down every hallway and around every corner, waiting for her to appear. I was surprised she hadn’t gotten to him yet. Santiago caught on to my unease and hurried to keep pace with me.

“You know I could have just portalled both of us out of here if you hadn’t taken my fucking hands.”

“Shut up,” I snapped, reaching the end of the hall. I peered right and left, but the only movement was the shadows created by the dull flashing of the lights. I pushed Santiago toward the right and the exit sign at the end of the hallway.

“Why are you protecting me?”

My shoulders bunched as I stopped and spun to face him, forcing him to take a step back. “I’m not,” I said from between gritted teeth.

“Sure looks like it,” Dianna purred from the other end of the hall.

Santiago’s eyes went wide, his gaze focusing behind me. I turned slowly to face Dianna. She leaned against the wall, tapping the forsaken sword against the tip of her heel. How had she snuck up on me? This was the second time.

“Why can I not feel you anymore?” My brows furrowed, and I heard Santiago gulp behind me.

Her eyes connected with mine. She shrugged, pushing off the wall and twirling the sword in her hand, just like I had taught her. “It’s a secret, and we’re not best friends anymore.”

My lip curled, ready to tell her once more how deeply I loathed that word, but Santiago whispered behind me. “You are more Kaden than ever before.”

“Something like that.” A slow half-smile crept over her face. “Are you ready to die now?”

I moved, blocking him with my body. “Dianna. As much as I want him dead, we can’t. You can’t.”

She paused, her smile turning lethal as she shook her head. “Oh, yes, I can. Do you want to watch?”

I raised my hand. “Think about it. He knows where Kaden is and where they are shipping this. He said Azrael is alive, Dianna. Do you know what that means?”

She closed her eyes briefly, her shoulders sagging as she tipped her head back. I saw her lower the blade, but her grip tightened.

“That’s all you fucking care about,” she said, her voice but a whisper.

“What? No.” I shook my head, dropping my hand. “He’s valuable, Dianna. That’s it.”

“No,” She looked at me, and for a second, I saw the hurt and pain flash in her ember-filled eyes as she pointed the blade at me, “she was.”

“She was, and he is going to pay for that. Do you really think I care if Santiago lives after everything he has done to you?” Dianna tipped her head, listening. I had her attention, and I hurried on. “I need information, and I plan to extract that the same way I have done for centuries.”

Dianna folded her arms, the sword held lazily in her hand.

“So, that’s your plan? Use the energy you did on me until he talks and tells you where Kaden is?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“And then what? Kill him after?”

I waved a hand. “He will pay for his crimes. The Council of Hadrameil will see to his execution as they have done for eons.”

“For his crimes? Such a hero.” She stifled a laugh. “You’re adorable, always so kind to help the monsters, but we could skip all that, and you could let me have him. You don’t even have to get those perfect hands dirty.”

“Or,” I swallowed the growing lump in my throat, “we could come to an agreement and work together as we once did.”

“Been there, done that. Didn’t work out for us, did it?” She frowned and shrugged. “So, I’ll pass. You have to do everything by the book, and I’d much rather maim, you know? I mean, he would be what? A captive for you and this mythical council?”

“He would be a prisoner of war, yes.”

She tapped her foot on the floor as she glanced down for a moment. “Well, your prisoner of war is gone, so...”

I turned behind me and saw nothing but an empty hall. The small lights down the corridor still spinning. I cursed under my breath and placed my hands on my hips, before turning back to her.

“How did I not hear him?”

Dianna unfolded her arms, her long wavy hair bouncing against her shoulders as she shrugged. “You were really into your speech. Honestly, I didn’t want to interrupt you. Santiago is a creep and likes to spell his feet so he can sneak around. He’s a weasel like that.”

“Ah,” I said. A part of me missed this, and all of me missed her. It felt so right being in her presence, hearing her voice, bantering, the way we had worked together, all of it. Even if she denied our bond, I still felt it with razor-sharpness. Gods, I missed it all, but my nostalgia was short-lived.

“Did you see him leave?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“And you let him.”

She nodded again. “Yeah.”

“Why?”

She blew out a slow breath, her cheeks puffing from the air as she strode forward. “To be fair, I was going to come for you after I finished Santiago, but since you’re here now,” her voice dropped an octave, her eyes blazing a shade brighter, fangs lowering to grace the edge of her bottom lip as if the Ig’Morruthen inside of her had risen to the surface, “I have a better plan.”

Dianna lunged, swinging her sword over her head and toward me. I sidestepped, calling a blade from my ring and raising it to block her. Her attacks were hard and brutal, making even me grimace at the sheer force behind them. She was strong before, but now her strength was damn near terrifying.

I pushed away from her second blow, forcing her to step back. It was only a second before she came forward again, so quickly I didn’t even see her bend the shadows around her. One minute she was in front of me, the next behind me, just like when we fought in Zarall. My sword swept behind me, knocking away her blade as she tried to slash my back. I spun toward her, but she was gone again. Pain shot across my shoulder blade. Another brush of air and fire slid along my side, followed by a deep sting and a rush of blood from my arm. She was so fucking fast. I tried to block her, but another slash hit the back of my knee, dropping me. Her heels clicked across the floor as she walked around me and stopped, facing me. A smile graced her lips as she forced my chin up with the flat of her blade. “Look at that. Gods do know how to bow.”

"If you wanted me on my knees, Dianna, all you had to do was ask. You know that."

"Tempting." She rocked the blade under my chin, forcing my head back. "You should grow the scruff back, though. I like the way it tickles."

"Whatever you want."

Her smile was all fangs and cold brutality. "Whatever I want?"

"Always."

"I do want something from you." She leaned a fraction closer, the tip of her blade pressing into my neck. "I need you to bleed."

Faster than I could track, she grabbed me by my throat and lifted me with a predator's ease, the small muscles in her arm bunching from my weight. My feet barely touched the floor, which said a lot, given that I towered over her. I didn't have a chance to say anything before she drove her blade through my midsection, pinning me to the ship's metal hull. I groaned, reaching for the blade as she pushed it farther into my gut. Her eyes stared into mine as she bit the side of her lip and leaned in close.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love the sounds you make?" Her nails dug into the side of my neck. "Make them again."

Her voice was like liquid velvet across my skin, my soul, even with a jagged blade through my midsection. She released my throat slowly, trailing her fingers along my neck, tracing my collarbone to caress my chest. Blood pooled and dripped from my wound, but now it was rushing toward another part of my body. She heard my breathing hitch, and her grin spread, revealing canines sharper than daggers. She sliced through my shirt with a single nail before dipping her head. The sound I let out when her tongue flattened against my bare flesh was not one of pain. She glanced up through thick lashes, and it was a look I had fantasized about since Chasin.

"There it is," she said, following the trail of blood below the blade with her tongue.

She stepped back, my body going cold without her near. I watched as she pulled a small vial attached to a chain from between her breasts. She popped the lid off, spitting my blood inside. Desire morphed into worry as she filled it up, closed the top, and tucked it beneath her blouse once more.

I jerked forward, but to no avail. Whatever she had run through me and into the wall made it so I couldn't budge. My toes barely touched the floor, and I couldn't gain any leverage to pull it out.

“Hang tight.” She winked at me before disappearing in a cloud of black mist.

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TWELVE

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DIANNA



I walked down the hall using the back of my long sleeve to wipe Samkiel's blood from my tongue and lips. I needed the fucking taste of him off of me. Out of my head, out of my mouth, out of my... I stilled as I heard Santiago's damned heart thumping a floor below me. Fire danced against my palm, and I sent a powerful column of flame into the metal at my feet. It lit with a red-yellow glow and melted, dripping onto the floor below. I jumped through the hole I'd made, landing in a crouch. Santiago glanced back, and I saw him mouth the word 'fuck' before disappearing around a corner. I elongated my nails and reached out to scrape them along the wall, taking my time walking down the hallway as I whistled an old Eorian melody. Sparks and chips flew from beneath my nails, the sound a piercing shriek. I was coming for him, and I didn't care that he knew.

This was a hunt, and he was my prey. I wanted to savor it. He was trapped with nowhere to go and no one to save him. I came around the corner right as a thick metal door closed. It was mere seconds before I was in front of it, and with one solid kick, it flew off its hinges. A loud bang ricocheted through the room as it hit the wall and fell to the floor.

"Seriously, Santiago, this is getting embarrassing. Even for you." I laughed and stepped inside the small, dimly lit room, expecting to find him huddled in a corner, pissing himself, but it was empty. What the fuck? I saw him come here, and there was no way out.

"Looking for me?"

I spun, my lips curling back in a snarl as I prepared to rip his throat out with my teeth. He lifted his hand and blew a fine powder in my face. I blinked reflexively, sending whatever it was deeper into my system. I

stumbled back, feeling the metal dent when I hit the wall. Searing pain made my eyes water and my throat burn. I grabbed at my face, clawing and scratching at my eyes, trying to get it off.

“You know, that’s terrible stuff. Not only can it blind you, but it also attacks your central nervous system. Kaden knew you’d come after us and gave everyone a little way to defend themselves. Although, I guess it didn’t help the Vanderkais and Camilla.”

Opening my eyes, I had to squint to see him, my vision blurry and uneven. I saw two of him, his form wavering until I concentrated and forced him back into focus.

“I’m going to rip you to pieces,” I snapped, my body beginning to tremble. My legs and arms felt weak, but I struggled to my hands and knees, trying to push past it and stand.

Santiago wiped his hands on his pants. “Your boyfriend really thought he did something by cutting off my hands, but you didn’t tell him about that little gift Kaden gave me when I joined, did you?” He shrugged before kicking me in the ribs hard enough to knock the breath from me. “He really does fall for that whole helpless act, doesn’t he?”

“You’re a piece of shit, Santiago. Always were.” I grabbed at my midsection and rose to my knees, using the wall to brace myself as I stood. It felt like half of my powers had been sucked right out of me. Standing straight, I tried to wipe more of that damned powder off as I walked toward him. There were multiple Santiagos again, and all of them laughed at me, which only enraged me more. I slashed at them with my claws but hit nothing but air as I stumbled. I swiped again, and their positions changed once more. “Stop fucking moving! Be still, and let me kill you!” I bellowed.

His fist shot out, hitting me in the face and sending me to the floor. The effects of that powder had taken over a little quicker than I liked. Fucking witches. A hand grabbed me by the back of my hair and twisted hard enough to make me wince. He kneeled behind me, yanking my head back. I gritted my teeth against the pain. His face came into view mere inches from mine. His sneer filled with lust as he looked me over, his eyes dropping to the deep neckline of my jumpsuit.

“I always pictured taking you like this, you know. Call me curious, but I just wondered what felt so godsdamn good that Kaden would halt plans for a thousand years.” His mouth was hot against my cheek, making the bile in

my stomach rise. I could feel the beast in me, writhing and bucking, fighting against the spell he'd cast. Slowly, my strength was coming back. "I can't wait until Kaden gets you back. Maybe he will let me have you then as punishment for your tantrum. I mean, that's what this is. He has more important things to worry about than you crying over your *dead sister*."

My hand shot up, grabbing him by the back of the head. I twisted and flipped him onto his back, wincing as he pulled a handful of my hair out. Before he had time to react, I was on top of him, lifting him toward me as my fangs descended upon his neck. Blood, hot and bitter, coated my tongue, and I focused on shuffling through every memory he had.

Pain, sharp and blinding, burst through my skull. I screamed and pushed away from him, my head feeling like it would explode. I snarled, fangs dripping with his blood as I snapped, "What did you do to me?"

"You really think we didn't have a contingency plan? Gods, how dumb are you?"

I struggled to my feet, my head pounding as he summoned more energy in his hands. "Kaden spelled the blood of every Otherworld creature, everyone in the world that is important to him so that you can't find him. You should know by now that he won't be found until he wants to be."

"Gods, what a bunch of pussies. You can't even die with dignity. Good to know you're all running around with your tail between your legs like the good little bitches you are."

I hit a nerve. Santiago's hand flicked out, the tangle of green energy blasting from his palm. It hit me in the chest and sent me through the metal wall at my back. I landed with a pained grunt, my lungs not working and my chest concave. The bones beneath my skin popped back into place as I sat up, thankful I had been eating enough, or that blow would have knocked me damn near unconscious.

"You're stronger now. Powerful. I like it. You finally gave in fully, huh? I guess he was right. All you needed was a little push."

I tossed my hair from my face as Santiago stepped inside, ducking to avoid the sharp points of metal lining the hole my body had made. He glowed, dimly illuminated by the energy he wielded, and it shone brighter as he summoned more power to his hands.

Bands of green energy shot out, clasping my throat and hauling me up. My feet dragged across the floor as he pulled me toward him. Santiago's teeth flashed white as his fingers curled, tightening the band around my

neck. I just needed to get him a little closer, keep him talking, and keep him thinking he had the upper hand.

“You know, I don’t think you could kill Kaden even if you found him. It will take an army to stop him at this point, and you’re all alone. You have no one, and once he opens these realms, you will wish you’d stayed.” He stopped me a few feet away and smirked, the green tendrils releasing me.

“That’s Kaden’s master plan? He wants to open the realms with iron? The realms only open when Samkiel dies, and iron cannot kill an immortal fucking god. You’re both idiots.”

Santiago laughed like I’d told a joke. “We are? Please, it’s just one ingredient.”

I hid the smile behind my facade as he did the exact thing I needed him to. Talk.

“Oh, just one?”

The smile fell from his face as he realized what he had just said. “You are a bitch.”

“I know, but I’m a smart bitch.” I summoned the forsaken blade from the ring Camilla had made for me and rose to my feet in one fluid motion. Santiago leaned back in shock, swirling green energy dancing across his knuckles. He threw the magic toward me in desperation. I stepped back and brought the blade up, his power bouncing off it just as Camilla said it would. He cast another ball of energy, then another, and we danced for what felt like forever.

Every hit was intentional and deadly. There was a reason Kaden favored us both. I slid across the floor, landing a kick that sent him sailing across the hall and into another room. I chased him, which was stupid on my part. As soon as I stepped into the threshold, Santiago used his magic to slam the large steel door against my head. I stumbled back, knocked off balance, and he threw a tangle of green magic at me. It encased me from my throat to my knees, holding my arms tight against my body. He squeezed and lifted me into the air.

He stepped forward, his hand raised as he tossed me against one wall, then another. Pain ripped through me as I felt my shoulder pop out of the socket, but I had no time to focus on it as he threw me against the ceiling and then slammed me to the floor.

He lifted me into the air again, and I caught the maniacal glee warping his expression. He would kill me here if he could, and if not, he would

incapacitate me enough to take me to Kaden. My muscles bunched beneath the magic as I strained.

“I can’t wait to return to him with the iron and you. What’s that mortal saying? Two birds, one sto—” Santiago stopped mid-word. I strained to look at him. He frowned, and I saw the flash of a silver blade.

One minute he stood. The next, his body fell into two separate pieces, split completely down the center. The power binding me disappeared, and I fell to the floor, landing on my ass with a thud. Samkiel’s eyes remained focused on me as he stepped over Santiago’s corpse. He stopped in front of me and reached out to help me up. I glared at him, my nostrils flaring as I slapped his hand away.

“Why did you do that?” I shouted.

He frowned, offended. “Do what? Save you.”

“Save me?” I scoffed. “He had information, and I was getting it until you showed up to play the hero again and killed him.”

“Information? Between him wrapping you in magic or throwing you across the room until you are bruised and bloody?” He looked insulted. “You were—”

“I wasn’t anything, you incompetent ass.”

I hopped to my feet and popped my shoulder back into place with a grunt. I stormed past him and stepped through the hole in the wall. He swore, and I heard his heavy footsteps following behind me, always following me.

“Dianna.”

“No!” I shouted, storming through the ship. “Stop trying to save me, help me, and for the love of the gods, stop following me like a lost fucking puppy!”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means stop talking to me like we’re suddenly friends again because we are not.”

“Great. I despise that word. I wish to be so much more than friends.”

Heat suffused my entire body as a sudden memory of just how much he hated that word flooded in. He did that every fucking time. He always got in.

I spun. “How many times do I have to set you on fire, drop a building on you, or stab you before you leave me alone?”

“After what you just did?” He didn’t even look phased as he shrugged a single shoulder. “At this point, I’m starting to think the violence is foreplay for you.”

“We both know that’s not what I like.”

“It’s not?” He stepped closer, encompassing me in his warmth and scent. “Come home and teach me what you do like.”

Home. The word pulled at me, and I faltered. I felt my body slip as if I were taking a step forward, as if I considered it, as if he was my home. But no. I was doing it again, letting him get in, letting him distract me and make me feel. My leg shot out, and my foot connected, kicking him between the legs so fast that he didn’t have time to dodge. He groaned and fell to the floor, crumpling in on himself.

I glared at him, hating what he made me feel, and headed toward the exit.

“You can keep pretending that what we have done and been through meant nothing to you, but I know the truth. You have affected me on some deep level, Dianna, and I know you feel it too. I know it,” he called after me.

That’s what hurts the most, isn’t it? You fell in love with him while Kaden took your sister. I’ve been there. You guys might not have been fucking when he took her, but you weren’t there when she needed you. You weren’t there because you—

A lock on a door in a house rattled.

I saw red.

“You know nothing!” I hissed, flames dancing on my hands. I spun and stalked back toward him as he pushed to his feet.

“The flames on your hands tell me differently. There is passion between us.”

My heart lurched, and I hated it. Hated him. He was wrong. He was lying, and he was distracting me. I closed my eyes, willing the flames away. I shook my head before opening my eyes again to glare at him.

“Look, I get it. It’s natural. You haven’t been with a woman or anyone for a thousand years. It’s normal to get attached, but it’s not real. What we did or had; it wasn’t real.”

I have never seen Samkiel recoil as fast as he did. You would have thought I slapped him or said the most disrespectful thing I could.

“Do not try to simplify my feelings. Ever.”

“Oh, my gods. You’re over a thousand years old, and you stuck your hand down my pants one time. And what? Thought you saw god?”

His expression darkened as anger bit at his brows. “That wasn’t the only thing we did, and you know it.”

My core went liquid, and heat suffused my body. Memories and images of what we’d done in that damned cabin, how he tasted, how he’d touched me, and the sounds he’d made came flooding back. I struggled to contain my reactions, fighting to extinguish the emotions and hunger they roused.

“You know what I know? We are on opposite sides. We always have been. I would have killed Zekiel. Did you forget that? Did you forget that the only reason I even worked for you was because of my sister? Because you had something I needed, and I had something you needed. So, we made a trade.”

Lie! Hurt him! The beast screamed. Make him leave.

Pain flashed through his dark gray eyes. “Don’t do that. Don’t trivialize it.”

“Isn’t it? That’s it. That’s all it was. All it ever was, and you are as big a fool as me if you thought differently. You’ve had a thousand lovers, and you’ll have a thousand more. I’m not that special.” I spun from him, walking away.

Samkiel appeared in front of me. “Do you really think you mean that little to me?”

I groaned, frustrated at him, this conversation, and so damned much more. My hands fell to my hips as I tilted my gaze toward him. “You know what I think? I trusted another beautiful stranger to help keep my sister safe when I should have done it myself. I should have always relied on myself.”

“You said I taught you, but you taught me things too.” Samkiel’s gaze narrowed. “You can’t do everything alone, Dianna.”

“Oh, save the hero speech.” I rolled my eyes, attempting to turn away. He moved in a flash, invading my space and forcing me to lean my head back to look up at him. It drove me wild. Egotistical, arrogant god king who knew he could have anyone he wanted. He knew he could have me, and I would gladly allow it. I tried and failed to step around him as he blocked me in.

“You don’t think I know what this is? You let Kaden get into that beautiful head far too easily. Let his words twist what we both know is untrue. I would never hurt you or abandon you, Dianna. What happened to

everything we said? What happened to your burdens becoming mine? I know you are in more pain than anyone should have to bear. Let me help shoulder some of this weight for you.”

He reached out to brush a strand of hair away from my face. A sliver of heat burned me to my core at the slightest touch of his finger against my face, and that thumping in my chest increased tenfold. In that moment, I forgot how much pain I was in, how much my world sucked. I forgot about her, forgot what they’d done to her. He offered me a place to lay it all down. He offered to help me carry this burden, and I hated him even more for it. I could bend my shape, transform into terrible beasts, and breathe fire. I had super strength, but I wasn’t strong when it came to him and my feelings. Not by a long shot. As much as I fought it, I knew he was right. A part of me behind a locked door of chains and steel ached for it, begging me to lay this at his feet and rest. But that part of me had to die.

“You know what you can help me with? Leaving. I don’t want you or need your help. I’m going to say this one last time so you get it through your thick skull. You mean nothing to me.” I growled low in my throat and braced myself to shove him away from me, but something exploded, and the boat rocked violently. Sirens screamed, and we fell hard against the neighboring wall. Samkiel’s eyes cut to mine as if questioning what I had done.

“It’s not me,” I snapped.

He pushed away, struggling to stand, when another, louder explosion went off, this one closer to us. Flames rushed through the hall, and large chunks of metal flew toward us, all of it headed for him.

I tackled him, pushing him to the ship’s floor. He hit the ground with a thud, and I cried out in pain as the metal shrapnel raked across my back. His eyes lit, triumphant silver meeting mine. I realized what I’d just done and how it proved everything I’d said was a fucking lie. I pushed up and opened my mouth to hurl more insults at him, to prove I was still a lost cause, but the ocean beat me to it. Waves rushed forward, stealing our air and sucking us into the sea.

Santiago said Kaden had a contingency plan. If he failed to bring the shipment, if I had caught and killed him, the ship would blow up, and the cargo would go with it.

Kaden did not want to be found, and he was determined to make sure he wasn’t.

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THIRTEEN

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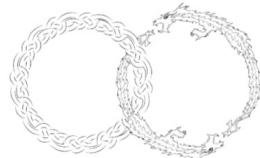
SAMKIEL



I blinked, slowly regaining consciousness. I felt the tug on my arm, strong hands dragging my body through the fine-grained sand. My vision swam, and my head throbbed, but I saw her. A goddess pulled me farther from the lapping waves. Had Oceanuna found me lost and adrift? I saw her lithe form, the large gash on her back slowly healing. Her dark, wet hair clung in a tangled mass to her shoulders and back. My body hit the ground with a thud, and my throat burned as I spit up thick, heavy salt water, my chest heaving and my vision blurry as I came to. Red eyes stared down at me. Not Oceanuna. Not a goddess. An Ig'Morruthen. My Ig'Morruthen.

“Dianna?”

As soon as I spoke, she was gone. Her form returned to the dark as if it owned her, and a part of me feared it might.



“YOU LOOK ROUGH,” VINCENT QUIPPED AS I ENTERED THE MAIN BUILDING back in Silver City. We were several floors up, and I’d hobbled through drenched in seawater, my shoes squeaking an ungodly amount. I had not gone unnoticed. “I’m starting to believe every time you leave that you will come back in disarray.”

“No more televised interviews. I want my face completely erased from the past ones. If the mortals wish to hear words of affirmation, you will do it, Vincent.”

“O-okay,” he stammered.

Dianna’s words rang through my skull once more. How careless and stupid was I not to realize how that would sting? I put my title, my job, before her.

I shook my head, ignoring the celestials gawking at me.

My wounds had healed, but my clothes remained slashed and tattered. I looked like I had fought off a wild beast, and some would say I had, but she was mine, and she held a part of me no one had touched before. My heart ached far more than the soreness now ebbing from my body.

Vincent strode next to me, a worried expression on his face. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

He grunted. “And I am assuming the ship is no more?”

“It’s currently at the bottom of the ocean. In pieces.”

“Santiago?”

“Dead.”

He shook his head. “She really is killing everyone involved.”

“It wasn’t her.”

We reached an elevator, and Vincent leaned forward to press the button. “You did it?”

“Santiago was one of the lowest of the low. No one will miss him, and I do not take kindly to those who attack me,” I said, my voice deepening to a low growl.

Or her.

Vincent nodded. “I am very well aware I just assumed we would hold him longer for information. Unfortunately, we still have nothing.”

The elevator door opened up, and we stepped inside. Information? All he’d given me were stories I assumed were wrong. Azrael still alive? Alistair on Rasheirim when it fell. Stories. They had to be. I would know. I would have felt it.

“Did you hear me?”

My head snapped toward him. “Hmm?”

“When will we speak to The Council of Hadrameil?”

“When it’s time.”

The numbers danced across a small screen high above. Vincent chewed the inside of his cheek but nodded. I knew he wanted action. He wanted The Hand here. He wanted battles as we'd fought so long ago. To him, she was just another Ig'Morruthen causing mayhem and destruction. He believed she needed to be put down like a rabid beast. I felt his eyes on me, but I did not know what to say. I'd failed, like so many times before. So, I didn't tell him what I'd learned. I didn't tell him how Dianna nearly bested me in a fight, how she moved like me, how maybe I'd trained her too well in Zarall. Nor did I tell him how utterly dangerous that made her.

"Where's Logan?" My question seemed to startle him. I had not realized how quiet it had become.

"Out searching for Neverra."

I nodded. Logan had been looking for her non-stop since this had begun, which I did not mind, but he wasn't bringing a team with him. I worried for him as I worried for her. We had spent weeks looking with no lead. Dianna was the closest thing to an informant we had when it came to the Otherworld, but she currently wished me dead.

"Did he take a team?"

The elevator door slid open to a large lobby. Several long benches took up the hallway with potted plants in between. The images carved into the walls were reminders of the past, depicting battles I'd rather forget but that the younger generation loved. No one was on this floor at this time of night, most having gone home hours ago. Only a skeleton crew, as Vincent called them, remained.

"I'd be lying if I said yes."

I made a low, exasperated noise deep in my throat before stopping and turning to him with a sigh. "Go get some rest. There is nothing else to do tonight that I cannot take care of myself."

Only more research, more looking for things I knew I would not find.

He leaned against the elevator wall, staring at me for a moment before pushing off. "I can help."

I shook my head, my hand splaying over my midsection. A deep ache still throbbed where she had impaled me. "I just want to be alone."

"I know, and that's what worries me."

He meant it. I knew they all worried. I'd noticed them watching me closer these last weeks, staying near me more, constantly checking in. They meant well, but I despised it. They could do nothing to fix it. Fix me.

"I'm going to shower and go to bed, Vincent. I do not think you'd wish to be around for that."

He forced a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Well, you've got a point."

I turned away from him, calling out, "Let Logan know that if he leaves once more without a team, he will find himself sitting in a holding cell for weeks."

"Yes, sir." I heard a soft chuckle, followed by the elevator door sliding closed.

I meant every word. I would not lose another person who meant something to me.



MY REFLECTION STARED BACK AT ME IN THE STEAM-FILLED MIRROR. LONG, dark strands curved above my brow. My hair was getting too long again, but I didn't care. Muscles corded my body, but I didn't feel strong. A thousand scars, representing a thousand different failures, decorated my chest, arms, legs, and back. I ran my hand across my abdomen, remembering how Dianna had rammed that blade through me so effortlessly, as if I meant nothing. A dark part of my brain thought that maybe Drake was wrong. She had said as much, but then she saved me, even if I hadn't needed it.

Another dark thought crossed my mind. What if I could not reach her? Would I have to put her down like all the beasts, creatures, and gods before? Could I end that smile that had brought me peace at a time when I'd wanted nothing but to disappear? I pushed from the sink, and with a flick of my wrist, lounge pants the color of sand draped my lower half.

I walked into the bedroom, keeping the lights low. My rooms were at the top of the building. A large pane window allowed me to see the buildings far below and the clouds that danced in between them. It was a room built for a king, a god, but I didn't feel worthy of either title.

Dressers stood against the walls next to the bathroom. A bed large enough for seven sat in the middle of the room, and a lounge area spread in front of the windows to my left. Ancient texts I had taken from the council on my last visit were piled in a heaping mess on the table. I plucked the

small strip of black and white photos off the table and turned toward the balcony.

Cool night air greeted me as I stepped over the threshold. The city below was quiet. Only the celestials were out, enforcing the curfew. I folded my arms in front of me and glanced at the photos. The corners of my eyes prickled as I ran my thumb across the images. Her favorite was the middle one, where she had to force me to look at the camera. She'd said it reminded her of how I never listen to her, but she was wrong. I listened to everything, every word, every breath. I listened.

I looked up at the night sky. Every star here looked like a dull mockery of what I knew existed. I sighed and did the one thing I had not done in so very long. I spoke to the old gods.

"I know when souls pass, even I cannot reach them. It is forbidden, but please, I beg you, if Gabriella is there, if she can hear me, let her help me. Give me a sign that I am at least on the right path."

I watched the sky, searching for any sign. I shook my head, realizing how idiotic this was. She could not reach out or hear me. I leaned back right as a star far off on my right twinkled. I turned toward it. It was located high above the others but a shade brighter. How had I not noticed it before?

"You may not have been as we are, Gabriella, but if you managed to help her before, it makes you stronger than even I. I'm scared I won't reach her in time, absolutely terrified, and I've fought and have seen things that would make others pray for death." The star did not so much as even flicker. Of course not. I blew a breath out and looked at the photos in my hand. "But I promise I won't let her lose herself any further. Nor will I give up on her. You wouldn't."

I turned from the balcony, heading inside. As I lay down and tried to force myself to rest, I could have sworn that same star sparkled brighter than those around it. Then again, maybe I was just losing my mind, searching for signs that could not reach here. Yet still, that star flickers.

FOURTEEN

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DIANNA. THREE WEEKS LATER.



She bellowed, the shriek so loud it busted out the brick wall behind me. I felt the blood pour from my ears as I stalked toward her. Fucking banshees. She kneeled, holding her broken arm, the gash on her forehead bleeding. We were in an abandoned factory filled with refuse. I grabbed a piece of sheet metal and hurled it through the air. Silence fell, followed by a thud as her head hit the floor.

Sasha, leader of the banshees, was dead, along with the rest of her faction. The factory creaked, the beams no longer able to withstand the amount of damage we'd done here. I reached down, grabbed her head by the blue-tinged ponytail, and vanished.



A WET THUD SOUNDED AS I TOSSSED SASHA'S HEAD ONTO THE LARGE circular altar in the middle of the room, knocking various items onto the floor. Camilla shrieked and backed away.

“There. Find me another location.”

She gulped, her hands still in the air and her eyes wide. Runes scarred the darkened wood of the altar, feathers, animal feet, blood, bone, and an assortment of powders surrounding it. The banshee's head fit right in with all the witchy nonsense.

Camilla shook her head, the long silky tresses of her hair shifting with the movement. “Okay, but it will take at least a day.”

I glared at her and felt my eyes blaze. She glanced down. “I don’t have a day. Every day we waste gives Kaden another day to plot and plan, and it’s another day I have to worry about godsdamn Samkiel finding us.” My next words came out in a clipped snarl. “Do. Better.”

“That’s the best I can do.” Her eyes met mine, sparks of green magic burning there.

I folded my arms, a wisp of smoke curling from my nostrils. I held Camilla’s gaze and stepped closer. She had the audacity to flinch but didn’t look away. I was a fraction taller than her, and the stilettos I wore only added to the difference. She didn’t speak or back down, but I could smell the fear coming off her in waves.

“I let you live because you serve a purpose. If that is no longer the case, I am more than happy to bury you with your coven.”

A flicker of emotion shone in her eyes. “I said I’ll need a day. Have I not helped? I cloaked you so he—”

I lifted my hand, cutting her off. I didn’t want to hear Samkiel’s name. It was true that I’d been able to avoid him for weeks because of her spell. She had hidden my power and location, but he was close. He was always so damn close. I could be vicious if necessary, a cold-blooded killing machine, but the minute he was near, the minute I saw or smelled him, every memory, every emotion I’d buried threatened to consume me, and I wouldn’t allow that, not again.

Never again.

“I am well aware of what you’ve done, and now I need another location. How is it a mortal can hide from the great and powerful Camilla?”

“Probably because I’m using the majority of my magic to hide this place from the world and cloak you.”

I rubbed my temples. “Don’t confuse the fact that I haven’t incinerated you as us being friends. Use her blood or eyes or whatever you need. She was close to the others in that room when you all stood by and watched as he slaughtered my sister.”

She took a breath. “Okay.”

“Good witch.” A forced smile curved my lips. “What about the talisman? Any luck?”

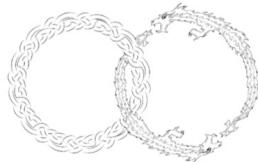
Camilla grabbed a small green vial. “Even with Samkiel’s blood, I need to make sure it can get you in and out without turning you inside out.”

“So, more waiting.”

“This stuff takes time.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. “I don’t have time.”

That was all I said before I spun and headed down the hall, the edges of my long dark coat flowing behind me.



I STAYED IN THE TEMPLE’S LOWER LEVEL, TRAINING AND DOING ANYTHING I could not to think or sleep while Camilla worked. Sweat slid down my spine as I leaned forward, taking slow, deep breaths. Hours I’d spent down here, and it still didn’t feel like enough. The last blade I had hurtled through the air was a fraction slower than before. I needed to be faster. I sighed and stood, wiping my brow with the edge of my tank top and glancing around the room. This place was a sweeping display of half-crumbled ruins, but it was home.

The swords and assortment of daggers I had accumulated when I raided the remains of Novas stuck out of the various training dummies scattered across the large beige stone room. My chest heaved, but I wasn’t tired, not by a long shot. If I wanted to kill Kaden, I had to be stronger and meaner than him. I picked up another forsaken blade, repeating every move Samkiel had taught me, every technique, every breath, and stretching exercise, seeking to make myself stronger than even him. No one could stop me now. No one could touch me. I would be a force of nature, ruin, and destruction. I would never be her again, never that weak emotional excuse of a person ever, ever again.

“Raise your arms, Mer-Ka.” My father nodded as he raised his arms, showing me what he meant. He held a dagger that shimmered like glass. He told me he’d bought it from a merchant during a shopping trip in our small town. It looked similar to the one I held, the hilt gleaming. I wanted that one, though, and he said I could have it once I earned it. It was midday, the

sun beating down on my back, making my garbs stick to my already sweat-drenched skin.

“How much longer do I have to train, Papa?”

A soft chuckle left his lips as he pointed the dagger at me. “You asked for this, remember?”

He wasn’t wrong. I dropped my arm, the muscles singing in relief. “Ain is good with helping you and Ma with medicines and the people here, and I-I don’t know where I fit in.”

“And you assume fighting and blades are for you?” A look crossed his features, one I had not seen on him before. He wasn’t scolding me by any means, but it was as if he knew a secret I didn’t, and I was close to finding it.

“It’s freeing in a way. It’s like a dance except with sharp objects.” I smiled.

“Yes, and it is also a good skill for you to have so that you may protect yourself and our family if need be.” He smiled slowly as the sun hit his face, making him seem almost divine. The mess of shaggy, thick hair curled in different directions, the same as mine. My mother always said that I got my looks from my father. We both had the same inky dark hair, bronzed skin, and fire. She always spoke of the fire.

“Okay, then teach me, and then we eat.”

He chuckled. “And then we eat.”

I wanted a place, a purpose, something beyond hills of sand and everyday tasks. I couldn’t explain it, and my parents only looked at me strangely when I told them I dreamed of a world past ours, past the stars.

The memory faded. I threw another forsaken dagger at the makeshift stone target across the room. The ones I’d thrown earlier were all embedded into the skull-shaped head—two for eyes, three for a smile, and two in the throat. I tossed the last dagger between my hands. The room was a disaster, just like me. Stone targets had been reduced to ash and rubble in every direction.

“I found—”

The dagger left my hand. It stopped mere inches from Camilla’s face, and she held it there with that glowing green magic. The dagger clattered to the ground as she lowered her hands.

I wiped the sweat from my brow. “Don’t sneak up on me.”

“I called your name, but you were busy.” She waved to the room, rectifying the mess I had made. My chest tightened, remembering how easy it was for Samkiel to clean up every mess I made.

My teeth clenched, hating the memories and what they made me feel, hating that I felt anything at all. “If I want you to fix something, I’ll ask.”

“If you’re going to train to kill Kaden and a god, you’ll need more than bricks and fake dummies. I can help.”

I put my hands on my hips, tipped my head back, and sighed. “You said you found something. What is it?”

“Wolves.”

That’s all I needed to hear. Without a single word, I nodded and passed by her, heading up the carved stone steps. I needed to take a shower and change. If wolves were moving through the forest, it meant they were comfortable enough to come out to hunt, which was great for me and terrible for them.

FIFTEEN

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DIANNA



The dart connected, drawing a long groan out of Julian.

“Bullseye.” I grabbed the glass and downed the werewolf blood inside before slamming it back on the table. “I guess I should come up with another word for it since I hit your balls with that one.”

Julian hung suspended on the far wall, covered in sweat. He howled, his entire body shuddering when I tossed another dart, and it found its mark.

My heels echoed against the scarred wooden floor. A few drained bodies slumped against the far wall, and the two pool tables were overturned.

“You really won’t tell me where your dear old dad is, will you?”

He shook his head as I neared, one bloody eye glaring at me, the other lost somewhere across the room.

“Why prolong the inevitable? You know I am going to kill you, him, and everyone else involved. So why not just hurry the process up?”

“No.” Power swirled behind his remaining eye, the wolf inside ready to end me, but I had drained him to near death.

I sighed and stopped in front of him, shaking my coat off my shoulders. My hands gripped the sides of my shirt, and I parted the low dip a tad farther. Julian’s face scrunched as I exposed the skin between my breasts.

I pointed to a small scar. It was almost completely healed. Almost.

“I ripped my heart out in a tomb months ago. I thought I’d die, but I was willing to give up my life for those I care about, and I didn’t see another option. If Tobias got the book, then Samkiel and my sister would die. But that was back when I believed in the greater good and saving people, blah, blah, blah.”

His breathing hitched.

“It didn’t kill me,” I glanced up, “but I thought about what bliss it is to die for the ones you care for.” I shrugged back into my jacket and held his gaze. “This isn’t the same thing. There is no glory in your death or theirs. You’re not saving them. You all assured your deaths the second you let Kaden keep her and didn’t move to help.”

“We couldn’t, and you know that!” he spat. “You knew what Kaden would do, and still, you aligned yourself with the World Ender. You are to blame for—”

My hand whipped across his face with such force blood splattered the wall. I gripped his hair, forcing him to look at me. “Where are the others?” I snarled in his face.

“I won’t tell you.”

“Fine.”

I lifted my free hand, talons replacing nails, the curved tips glistening. I ripped them across Julian’s chest. He hissed and writhed in pain, his shirt hanging in tatters.

“I know werewolves are pack animals. Even with you all hiding from me, you wouldn’t be too far away from one another, especially the know-it-all son who needed a night out, right? I also know you howl to signal your pack, and with the heightened vocals of your species, it can be heard almost fifty miles away in open terrain.”

I placed the tip of my nails in the center of his chest, over his pounding heart. “Do you want to know what it feels like to have your heart ripped out?”

“I won’t call him.”

“Yes, you will. Anything will break when you apply the right pressure, even you.” The tips of my nails pierced his skin, his entire body going rigid. I tipped my head, my voice dropping an octave as the Ig’Morruthen in me crawled to the surface. “Now, scream for Daddy.”



THE FRONT DOOR BURST OPEN. I STAYED SEATED AT THE BAR, WIPING THE blood from my cuticles.

“Took you long enough.”

Feet ran into the room, hurrying to Julian’s hanging body. A soft sob escaped one throat and then another as they reached him. I continued to clean my hands. That one damned spot was almost impossible to get. I licked the edge of the small towel and rubbed, finally getting the last smudge before placing the blood-covered towel on the bar. I stood and studied my nails, the ragged edges after turning them to talons bothering me.

“I wonder if I ask nicely if Camilla would get me a permanent set. There has to be some magic for that, right? No more chipped nails.”

Caleb appeared in front of me, huffing and his chest rumbling with a low-level growl.

“What did you do?” he snapped at me.

I glanced at Julian’s body as the wolves cut him down and held him. “I didn’t do anything. It’s not my fault you took too long.”

“Killing my son will be the worst mistake you have—”

“No.” The room shook with the force of my voice, gaining the attention of every wolf in the room. “You, like the rest, made a mistake thinking I was weak when she was the only thing keeping me in line. This is your consequence. I warned you. I warned him. You chose.”

“You act as if we could defy Kaden.”

“That is the weakest excuse I have ever heard when you are all supernatural fucking creatures. I did. I defied him.” The tiny bit of control in me that wanted answers began to fray. “Gods, Caleb, my balls are bigger than yours.”

“Why my son, Dianna?” he choked out. “How are you even different from Kaden? He was innocent in all of this.”

The wolves stepped closer, flexing their fists, ready to die for their alpha. I kept my gaze on Caleb as the bar went silent. No one even breathed.

“No, *she* was innocent. You use your son like your own personal bloodhound. The underground fights and cash exchanges that keep Kaden in the know. The information you all run for him back and forth. Don’t preach now, Caleb. We both know we are in the business of liars and murderers here. None of us are innocent. None.”

Caleb glanced at his wolves and stepped forward. “What do you want?” he asked, his tone changing.

“Your blood. Give it, or I slaughter the rest of your pack in front of you and take it by force.” I cocked my head and smiled. “Your choice.”

“Fine. Take it. My blood will rip your head apart.”

I smiled coldly. “Do you all really think I’m that stupid? That I wouldn’t figure a way around Kaden’s stupid contingency plan. I’m not an idiot. I had Camilla do a spell on the water supply. Helps wash magic out from the blood of numbskulls like you.”

His face grew slack, his throat bobbing.

“Exactly. Now hand it over.”

He looked from his son’s body to his pack, his family. He moved closer, all the predators in the room shuffling toward him. His eyes returned to mine as he rolled up the sleeve of his sweater, exposing his arm. He clenched his fist, the veins along his arm filling.

“No, thanks.” I shook my head and smirked. “I want something bigger.”

He swallowed, and I heard his heart race. Exposing his neck was certain death for the wolf in him, but he obliged, reaching up to unbutton his collar. He leaned in, and I grasped the hair at the nape of his neck. I brought his throat to my mouth, fangs piercing flesh. Memories, quick and fast, slammed into my mind, but there was only one I fixated on.

Footsteps followed me as I hurried down the hall. How was I supposed to tell them? What he asked was damn near impossible to find. My thoughts died as I opened my office door. Tobias stood beside my desk. He picked up the letter opener and studied it.

“Silver. How cute.”

I swallowed and closed my door, locking out the few pack guards behind me. I straightened my tie and stepped around the other side of the large mahogany desk, glancing at the pages of lunar phases he’d been rifling through.

“The folder on the left is all we could find,” I said, nodding toward it.

He stared at me, crimson eyes blazing as he placed the letter opener down.

Tobias walked around the desk, and I shifted, my wolf’s hackles rising. He stopped a mere foot from me and picked up the folder. He flipped it open, scanning a few pages before he closed it and looked back at me. His hand closed on my shoulder, not in pride but as a threat.

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. “As for your other demands, Julian and the pack tracked them as far as they could. We don’t

know where she is.”

Tobias grinned and gave my shoulder a hard shake before releasing me. He stepped away and said, “Don’t worry. You did what we needed. Once the vampire prince comes through, we will gather you all for a meeting. Be there. All of your beasts.”

“We will be there.”

“Good, you better. This will be the last one before we prepare for the equinox. It’s getting too close to time, and Kaden will not risk exposure.”

I nodded. “I’m aware.”

Tobias studied me, his gaze hard and threatening. He finally nodded and turned away. I felt his power surge and a portal appeared on the wall, the air vibrating in response. Just before he stepped into the dark pit edged in flames, he looked at me over his shoulder and said, “Let chaos reign.”

I lifted my head, licking my tongue over my fangs. The memory faded, and the destroyed bar came back into focus. I swayed, half kneeling on the floor with a limp Caleb in my arms. His skin had turned a pale gray, but he glanced at the wolves practically vibrating in the corner of the room, signaling them not to attack.

I tapped his face, and he squinted, his focus returning to me.

“What’s the equinox?”

He gritted his teeth, trying to sit up. “You already got what you wanted. Let me go.”

My hand shot out, and I grabbed the front of his jacket, hauling him up. I lifted him and slammed him to the center of the bar. With my other hand, I raised a wall of fire, separating us from the others. Several yowls and yips came from behind the flames as the pack shifted and tried to break past.

“What you’re not going to do is play games with me. *What is the equinox?*” I wrapped my hand around his throat, my nails biting deep.

Caleb gripped my arm, his face turning red as he gasped for air. I lifted my hand slightly, allowing him room to speak.

“All I know is that it is a major celestial event, that’s all.”

“When?” I asked.

“That I don’t know, only that it’s soon. That’s why Kaden needed the book so quickly.”

So he had a date and a plan the whole time, and I had been none the wiser. He’d kept everything from me. Had he planned to sacrifice me as

well? Or did he not trust me at all? I had been so dumb to stay as long as I had, but I could do nothing about that now.

“Who else knows?”

Caleb swallowed a lump in his throat. “Everyone in his court. Except you.”

“Why?” The words seeped out like acid.

“I don’t know.”

“Julian lied to me about having information, and so did you. Shame on you. Even your mutts leave behind prints, and I have a witch that told me what I already knew. Whoever you sent after me needed a pretty powerful nose to track me all the way to Camilla’s borders. They also needed to know how to hunt so that a god or I could detect them. Isn’t your cousin a photographer?”

His pulse skipped beneath my palm.

“I noticed the frames on the screen when Kaden showed them. They were amateurish and at a poor angle. Whoever took them was trying to sneak up on the World Ender and me. I also remember him bragging about the new camera you had gotten him. A birthday present, wasn’t it?”

His eyes never left mine “You can’t blame me. Kaden commands, and we do. It’s how it’s always been. I must do what I can to keep my family safe. You, of all, should understand.”

I nodded slowly and clicked my tongue. “I do.”

My hand tightened on his throat, and I dropped the wall of flame.

“That’s why I want them to watch as I kill you. Then I’m going to eat your pack, and when *you* watch from the other side as they die screaming, I hope it rips you apart as it did me when she died.”

With a brutal twist, I ripped his head off and tossed it to the center of the room, the thud echoing in the room.

“I am curious,” I said as I turned around, shaking the blood from my hands. A dozen wolves snapped their teeth at me, their snarls a chorus of death as they slowly approached. “How many wolves does it take to make a fur coat?”

SIXTEEN

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SAMKIEL



You're running out of time.

An unknown voice whispered in my head, but it was more than a voice. It was a feeling, and one I couldn't explain. The first snowfall of winter began to dust the world in a light flurry. It landed upon the street and sidewalks, a nice coat of white over the city. I stood amongst the mortals and celestials as they went about their busy day. Several people stopped to take pictures on their phones, but for the most part, they did not bother me. Some stared too long, but they kept their distance even as they whispered and gawked.

I should be accustomed to it. I have had nothing but beings praising me since the minute I was born. Their symbol of hope and peace and a promise of a new world. A responsibility I soon learned to dread. I pushed off the lamppost and turned toward the large window. My reflection shone back, the long coat hanging to my knees over the dark shirt and pants. I sighed and looked past it, staring inside. Logan got up from his seat, the older gentleman brushing remnants of hair off his shoulders as he smiled and laughed. Logan slipped him more than enough money to pay for the haircut. The man tried to decline but failed. The door chimed, and Logan joined me on the street, people moving out of his way.

I handed him a coffee, steam dancing off the top.

"You know the Guild has barbers, too?" Logan accepted the cup gratefully and took a sip as we started down the sidewalk. We towered over most of the mortals, and they moved out of our way almost instinctively. Silver City had become one of the most popular places in all of Onuna. It had grown substantially since it was first established, now a bustling city

with buildings that reached past the clouds, filled with businesses, shops, stores, and homes as far as the eye could see.

I glanced at him as I sipped my drink. “Yes, there are, but I needed to get you out of the Guild. If you are not holed up there, you are gone all night.”

His eyes cut to mine. He didn’t explain why he had been gone so much, but I knew. Logan still searched for Neverra. He would until the mark on his hand burned out. So far, there had been no trace of her in this realm, which seemed inconceivable.

“Besides, think of it as a gift for how you helped me not look so,” I searched for the right word, “rough, I suppose.”

He had spent so much time worrying about everyone else he had let himself go. His hair had been unruly, and a beard had obscured his face for a while now.

“Thanks.” He forced a smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Nothing had existed in his eyes but rage and despair for weeks. I was losing him. I knew that, and I refused to let it happen.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Logan chuckled. “It’s funny hearing you say that to me. When you first got back, it was I who asked.”

“Things change, I suppose.”

Logan was one of my closest friends, and I despised he saw so much, despised he could pick up on my moods and read me like a damned open book.

“They do.”

It was silent for another moment, both of us lost in our own heads as cars honked and people laughed.

“It’s not her,” Logan said.

“Hmm?”

“Dianna. It’s not her. Not really. Gabby spoke about it once with Nev and I. How bad she had gotten when she first changed. She also told me she dragged her back from it, and I know you can, too. She’s just grieving.”

“I know. Gabby told me the same thing, oddly enough. Not in great detail, but she did mention it to me.”

“You spoke to her?” Logan lifted a brow.

“Yes, I had called to talk to you, but she answered. She spoke like Dianna. As if she has never met a stranger in her life.”

“That she did.” Logan smiled softly.

I knew Logan had cared for Dianna’s sister. So had Neverra, and that care had led to Neverra being so far out of our reach.

“I hope that you also know anyone Dianna is with physically while she is in this place of despair means nothing to her.”

I stopped, my eyes shutting as he hit a nerve. I’d confided in him after the sinking of that damned ship, but we’d not spoken of it since.

“It’s idiotic to have such strong feelings regarding that.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You know I wanted to kill him, the one she touched, as if she hadn’t already scattered his corpse around the room. I wanted to put him back together and kill him again. The feeling I got knowing someone had touched her so intimately.” I shook my head. “I’ve only felt that in battle, that pure blinding rage, yet there I was contemplating the murder of a mere mortal. A mortal, as if there is even the slightest competition compared to me.”

A street lamp above us flickered before bursting.

Logan smirked as the few people closest to us scurried by a tad faster. “I’m possessive of Neverra in the same regard.”

“That is different. I have no claim over Dianna.” My voice was barely above a whisper. “It is dull-witted of me to profess such an assertion when we never spoke of it. Even if it pains me, we never talked about ourselves like that. Everything happened so quickly, I suppose. One moment I felt as if we couldn’t stand the sight of each other, and the next...” I glanced at the cup in my hand as if it would give me answers. “The next, I couldn’t stand the thought of being away from her.”

Logan’s hand landed on my shoulder, squeezing once. “Well, I guess you should make your feelings known when you get the chance.”

I sighed. “I have always been much better at solving my problems with fists and swords than words. There has never been someone like Dianna for me. I’ve never had someone who I cared for so deeply. I think it was easier back then.”

“Easy? Maybe, but you were alone. I saw it no matter who you surrounded yourself with or how many lovers you had. I always saw it. That fleeting look before you’d catch yourself and bury it. I did not see that look when you were with her, not even for a second, so if it’s real to you, if you

could love this girl, it's all worth it." Logan's jaw clenched as he glanced at his finger and back. "It's always worth it."

"You're so much better at speeches than I." I forced a smile, his words settling into my very soul.

Logan shrugged and took a sip of his coffee. "I've been around a lot of gods."

"I hear you and will heed your advice. If I ever get such a chance, I will not hesitate."

"Good." Logan was silent for a moment, the snow crunching beneath our feet as we continued down the sidewalk. "A thousand plus years fighting beside you, battling countless monsters, gods, and things I'd rather forget, and not once have I been afraid until now. This feels different. Wrong. Like we angered some elemental, omnipotent beast, and now we are paying for a crime we didn't commit."

I only nodded. Logan was not wrong, not at all. I felt it too.

You're running out of time.

I heard the whisper every time I tried to close my eyes.

"You okay?"

I glanced at him, not realizing I had placed my hand above my eyes, rubbing at the dull ache. "Yes, just headaches."

"More frequent?"

I nodded. "I am becoming more frustrated. We have no leads. No one is talking, and nothing is stirring. The Otherworld is quiet, as if something is waiting for the precise moment to strike. It is wearing on me." And the dreams. But I did not want to burden him with the harrowing premonitions that bit at my heels like ravenous beasts.

He glanced at me as if he could read my thoughts. "You're closing yourself off again. Even if you haven't returned to the remains of our home and locked yourself away, you're leaving us again. No matter how much you try to hide it, I can feel it."

I stopped, and he stopped with me, turning to face me. My finger tapped against the lip of my cup. "You sound like Vincent now."

"What? Worried about you?"

"There is nothing to worry about," I lied. "We must concentrate on stopping whatever nefarious plan Kaden is concocting with that book."

He didn't believe me, nor did I have time to try to be more convincing. Luckily enough, his phone rang, interrupting our conversation. He

answered the phone, listening but never looking away from me.

“Got it,” he said and hung up, his words short and clipped. “Edgar is awake.”



EDGAR, THE CRIME LORD, STARED AT VINCENT, LOGAN, AND ME AS WE entered the intensive care room. He wore a thick white gown, a tangle of tubes and wires protruding from him in all directions. The machines whirled and beeped, working to keep the mortal alive.

“You guys are some big motherfuckers.” The monitor near him sped up as his heart rate increased. Fear? Maybe, but something told me it was not us being here that made his heart beat so erratically.

Vincent shifted on his feet, and I folded my arms. Logan leaned against the wall, parking himself near the door.

“Tell me what happened.”

He glanced at me, the bruises on his face still apparent. The cuts and his bandaged arms told me Dianna had tossed him through something.

“We had a meeting. Waiting for Webster.” The name was acid in my veins. I couldn’t forget that she’d let him touch her. “He showed alright, except it wasn’t him. It was *her*.”

The monitor beeped a tad faster. “She was quick, faster than before. Kaden always spoke of what a perfect killing machine she would be if she just let go of her mortality. I guess her sister was just that—her mortality.”

That I already knew. Gabby was Dianna’s heart, her moral compass. The one part of her that kept her balanced and grounded. Gabby could reach her far better than I could. Without her, Dianna’s world shattered, dragging mine with it.

“Go on,” I pressed, growing restless.

“She slaughtered all of us, asking about the ships that Santiago had. She wanted to know about the iron Kaden wanted to move, too.”

“And you told her about it? That is why you are alive?”

“Alive is questionable.” Edgar coughed, and I heard the fluid still present in his lungs, along with an ominous crackle. If the blood in them did

not kill him, the cancer beneath his breast would.

“How did you survive?”

He lowered his head, nodding toward his phone. I looked at Vincent. He grabbed it and handed it to me. I pressed a button, and the screen lit up, showing me a picture of Edgar and a woman, both smiling. They were in a garden, surrounded by flowers, a strange and innocent image for a man known for trafficking mortal flesh.

“She saw the picture and stopped. Of course, I was good and well impaled against a wall at the time.”

I handed the phone back to Vincent, who pocketed it. This had to be before she showed up at the ship. I had smelled blood on her, and now I knew where it came from.

“What else did you two talk about? I need names and dates. What were you to do after the meeting? How much more iron does he need?” I didn’t tell him I had shut down all the water traffic from here to the Naimer Sea. I had celestials at every port, harbor, and dock. Nothing left unless I allowed it, and no iron had shipped anywhere since the explosion.

Edgar shrugged, causing the line of fluids on his arm to pull tight. “I don’t know. We only get a message and follow orders. If we don’t, Tobias shows up. Tobias is the only one who speaks to Kaden now. He would know, but I have a feeling you won’t find him until Kaden is ready.”

I had no doubt that was true. I rubbed my jaw, mulling over the information Edgar had given me. It was nowhere near what I needed.

“Where is his hideout? Besides Novas? Another location he would frequent.”

“I don’t know, man. We, us mortals, were never that close to him. Only those in his close circle have any information. Dianna might know, but she is cleaning house.”

I was growing more and more frustrated by the second. We had nothing. I was a step behind her, and I was so afraid that it would be too late by the time I caught up. How could Kaden hide so well? How could she? I had every known resource in this realm looking, yet we had nothing. The lights flickered in the room, machines beeping, and alarms blaring as a bit of my frustration and power seeped out. Vincent and Logan glanced at me but said nothing.

“You will be taken into custody for your crimes against the Etherworld. Your stay will be as long as it needs to be before you are judged by The

Council of Hadrameil.”

He chuckled and gazed out the large window of his room, watching the snow swirl in the chill wind. We were high enough here that you could see the mountains in the distance.

“Eh, I’ve lived a long life and done things I wish I hadn’t, but at least, judgment or not, I’ll see Evelyn again.” He looked at me, a strange look crossing his features. “You asked me why she stopped. She didn’t. The picture of my wife made her pause, and I might have gotten fewer bruises had I not opened my mouth. Evelyn always said I talked too much.”

“Explain.”

Edgar coughed once more. “She went on a rampage in that warehouse, but I saw it. She had that same damned look I’ve seen so many times in the mirror. I figured out why, and I might have thrown it in her face, but I knew I was going to die, anyway.”

Every muscle in my body tensed, instinctively seeking to protect her, even though I knew she did not need it. Logan shifted closer, placing a hand on my shoulder. “What did you say to her?”

“I just told her the truth. I told her that the reason she is really mad is you.”

“Me?”

Edgar’s smile made his eyes crinkle as if my reaction alone told him everything he had wished to know. “Yup. Even monsters love something.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but a loud boom raked through the sky, the crescendo shaking the hospital. The lights flickered off, then came back on with a low hum. Vincent looked at me, but I shook my head. It was not me. My heart began to race as Logan, Vincent, and I strode to the window.

The neighboring buildings went dark, the entire power grid shutting down for miles, but it was the three iridescent cobalt lights racing toward Silver City that gave me pause. They burst through the atmosphere with such force it shook the world.

I spun toward Vincent, my voice booming. “You called them!”

Vincent took a step back, his eyes widening as he held his hands palms out. Logan flanked my side.

“No, no, I didn’t. I swear it.”

He had to be lying because I had not summoned them, but The Hand had returned.

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SEVENTEEN

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DIANNA. EIGHT HOURS EARLIER. THE REMAINS OF
RASHEARIM.



The wind caressed the thin black feathers of my wings as I circled the large, sharp-tipped building on the remains of Rashearim. I blended in with a small flock, watching several blue-tattooed celestials walk in and out of the massive structure. The sun reflected off its glass-like panels. A golden paved bridge connected it to the large nearby city, a thick clear river running beneath it. Large, lush trees towered over the structure, aiding me in my efforts to stay concealed. Camila had helped cloak me, but I was nervous her magic wouldn't reach this far. It was fine, though. I didn't need to be here long, just enough time to take a few things.

I circled once more, darting away from the flock and heading toward the top of the building. It was the same one Samkiel had taken me to the first time we had visited. I saw a couple of figures move from the racks of books and back out of sight. I slowed my descent and landed on the balcony railing before hopping closer to the open doorway.

"There has been no word from Samkiel, so we will not act," a gorgeous redhead said, clasping her hands together, the blue tattooed lines running over her skin only enhancing her features. Her red hair tumbled past her shoulders, practically glowing against her alabaster skin. She turned, the long silk white gown trailing after her as another spoke.

"The world shook. He summoned Oblivion, and yet we have heard nothing of it? Imogen spoke of her concern, yet we waited as always." I hopped a little closer to see who spoke, careful not to give myself away. The man sighed as he stood from the large carved marble table in the middle of the room. He was tall, lean, and had a nose that took up most of his face, but it didn't look bad on him. No lines glowed over his features, so

he wasn't a celestial. He wore the same white and gold garbs as the others. "Regardless, it is better to be prepared for what may come than be left waiting once more."

"I understand your unrest, Leviathan, but we are no longer on the brink of war. The realms are sealed and will remain that way as long as he breathes. The gods and creatures from our past are long dead. If Samkiel summoned Oblivion, that means he erased the threat," the redhead said.

This must be the Council of Hadraneil.

"You have a fool's heart and head, Elianna," Leviathan said.

Elianna, huh? I ruffled my feathers, playing the part of the bird as I kept an eye on the room. The two other members here, a female with short hair and a male with inky dark hair, both celestials, watched Leviathan and Elianna's exchange. I hopped a step closer right as a large figure stepped in front of me, blocking my view. I craned my head as the blond celestial I had met when I came here with Samkiel leaned against the balcony. He wore the same black and gold suit The Hand wore, with the interlacing gold buttons and tassels. It fit him like a glove, outlining every powerful lean muscle.

"Lost, little bird?"

Cameron. That was his name.

I froze as he turned toward me and tilted his head. The long blond mohawk ponytail spilled down his back. Had he sensed the Ig'Morruthen beneath my skin? Had he smelled me? That was his trick. He had a highly developed sense of smell. A tracker, Samkiel had said, but I suspected more of a hunter. My wings stretched, playing into the species I wore as if I didn't understand a thing he said.

"Talking to birds now?" Another man approached, his voice deeper.

A smile formed on Cameron's lips as he looked over his shoulder. The man that approached had his hands clasped behind his back. His garbs matched Cameron's, and he wore his dreads in twin locks that draped across his shoulders. I recognized this man as well. Xavier. My heart sped up. I could take them. Of course, I could, but not here, not now. I came here for a reason and was hoping to sneak in and out.

Cameron grinned and nodded once at me. "I think our little bird here is lost."

"Oh?" Xavier came closer, leaning against the railing on the opposite side of me. I didn't move or fly away, afraid that if I did, it would give away who and what I was. I needed to be in the center of the room for what I

came to do. Fighting them would take too much of my time and alert Samkiel. I saw how animals reacted to the celestials. They seemed to enjoy their presence, so I remained calm. “Or you are avoiding another council meeting.”

Cameron snorted. “Fair, but I tire of Elianna and Leviathan practically jerking each other off over what’s the next power move.”

“They are just concerned,” Xavier said but chuckled at Cameron’s words. “Besides, Samkiel was a little peculiar on his last visit. So maybe there is cause for concern. Especially considering Gregory’s demise.”

Cameron tapped his fingers on his chin. “I liked Gregory.”

“No, you didn’t. You liked to annoy him.”

Cameron smiled, reminding me of a mischievous little boy. “Still, if something on Onuna is happening and celestials are dying, why hasn’t he called us back?”

Xavier shrugged and looked out into the forest. “I trust Samkiel. If there were a threat, a real one, he would call us.”

“Or he hates us.”

Xavier laughed. “If he hates anyone, it’s definitely you.”

“Me! It would be you. Remember the broadsword you lost?”

Xavier snorted, and they continued to quip. I focused again on the council room, where Leviathan and Elianna still argued. I hopped a few inches on the balcony and flapped as if stretching my small wings.

“How much you want to bet they fuck after this?” Cameron rubbed his hands together and chuckled, the sound rumbling in his broad chest.

Xavier laughed once more, this time the sound deep and rich. “Elianna fucking anyone is asking for rain on Gouldurim.” Xavier paused. “Fifty gold coins, at least.”

Cameron’s answering smile lit up his face. “You have a bet.” He focused on me again, placing a hand underneath his chin, his silver rings glistening in the sunlight. “Now you, little bird. Have you lost your flock? Where is your family?”

Dead.

The word screamed inside me, but I only chirped in response.

“Seriously?” a feminine voice snapped from behind them, pure blue eyes glaring at the two of them. “Both of you?”

Cameron and Xavier stood straight as if she had caught them doing something they shouldn’t.

She'd swept her blond hair back, revealing her perfect face. She wore the same garbs as the council members, but hers were cut at the sides to reveal the elegant lines of her torso. Her skin shone as if she were born from light itself. She was leaner than in Samkiel's dreams but still curvy and one of the most gorgeous women I had ever seen.

"Honestly, are you really surprised, Imogen?" Cameron sighed, waving toward the throne room. "I was bored after the first ten minutes."

"It doesn't matter. We're The Hand. We stay, we watch, we listen, you know this. And you," her voice turned sharp as she looked toward Xavier, "can't you keep him in line for one meeting?"

Xavier grinned. "My apologies. I'll try harder next time."

Cameron shot him a look of pure mischief. "Please, he encourages me."

They laughed and Imogen rolled her eyes. I spread my wings, heading back into the sky. Unable to be there any longer. My stomach rolled. They were happy and joking. They were a family, and I envied them so very damn much. Their world kept spinning as if mine hadn't stopped at all.

"Ah damn, Imogen. You scared my little bird away." I heard Cameron say as I circled the building, heading toward the treeline.



HOURS. I'D SAT HERE FOR HOURS, WATCHING AND WAITING, BUT THAT damned council never left the chamber, not once. Didn't they have to pee or something? Damn. I could see the open balcony perfectly from where I perched, and I watched them refer to books and talk and talk and talk. Occasionally, I would catch the black and gold uniform passing by the balcony as Cameron and Xavier did their rounds. Every time Cameron's gaze would focus on the heavy tree where I sat. It might be exhaustion trying to creep back in after the exertion of power it took to get here, or maybe it was just paranoia, but I swear he looked right at me each time.

I shook it off, nestling into the thick part of the tree, and waited.

And waited

And waited.

The sun set, and the world finally went quiet.

I glanced at the balcony again. This time I saw no one and heard no feet or voices. Finally, I wasted no time in taking to the sky, flying toward the balcony. As soon as I passed the ledge, my form twisted into black smoke, and I became myself once more. My heels clicked across the marble floor, the twin tails that hung from my jacket flowing behind me with each step. The enchanted vial Camilla gave me rested snug between my breasts. I patted it, making sure I hadn't lost it.

"Spill one drop to enter. Two drops to summon the vortex. Three drops to return to the Etherworld."

Camilla's voice floated in my head, reminding me what to do. I released a long slow breath, remembering just what swished in the vial between my breasts. It held Samkiel's blood I had collected on that ship, and blood from a god could open many doors.

The council room was silent. The flames flickered in the sconces, casting puddles of light on the floor. I spun, turning back toward the balcony. This was where we had come after visiting Roccurem for the first time. I had held his arms and forced him to look at me, to listen as I tried to exorcize the demons that plagued him. I cared for him more than I wanted to admit. My eyes grew hot, the pain in my chest threatening to grow.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

No. It wasn't real. It was just convenient at best. We were stuck together, looking for that damned book. That was all it was. That was it, and it had cost me everything. I spun away from the edge and those memories, turning my attention to the books scattered on the table. Old texts and scrolls I could not read. Hmm. They may come in handy, though. My fangs descended as I raised my hand and bit, blood pooling in my palm. I drizzled it over the books, chanting as I went.

"Ves grun tella mortumon." Return to the void.

As the blood touched the texts, they popped out of the room one by one until nothing was left but an empty table. Good, now it was time for the real work. I dipped my hand into my shirt for the enchanted vial and stopped.

I wasn't alone.

"Well, aren't you gorgeous and not a little bird, after all?"

I slipped my hand from my bodice and turned toward his voice as the room shimmered and changed.

It wasn't dark or empty as I'd first thought. Cameron leaned casually in the doorway with an ablazed weapon in hand. Xavier was on my right, his

hands clasped in front of him as he stared at me. I didn't need to look to know that Imogen was glaring holes in my back, her own sword drawn.

"You like?" I ran a hand over the white pantsuit I wore. The top exposed my midsection, the jacket hanging off my shoulders. "I thought white seemed more of your guys' style here. The fake notion of all things good and right in the world. I wanted to look my best and fit in."

A low whistle left Cameron's mouth. "You're a nasty little thing, aren't you?"

"You have no idea."

A corner of Cameron's lip twitched as the other two circled me.

"I am curious." My words were short and genuinely concerned. I hadn't felt them here the whole time. "How does your little magic trick work?"

"If you know about this place, I assume you know about us. See, Xavier here descends from the Witch Goddess, Kryella. He may not have all her powers, but he can cast a very effective glamor."

"That's neat." And unexpected, I thought. Fuck. This was going to take longer than I had planned.

Cameron's eyes scanned me from head to toe, no doubt scanning me for weapons. "So, tell me, little bird, who and what exactly are you?"

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EIGHTEEN

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DIANNA



“A n old friend.”

“Of Samkiel,” Xavier said, not as a question but as a statement.

Cameron smiled and bit his lower lip, pushing away from the wall. “I don’t know. I know all of Samkiel’s *friends*, and I would have remembered you,” he said, his eyes raking over me.

Xavier tipped his head, studying me. “What does she smell of?” he asked Cameron.

Cameron raised his head and inhaled deeply, his lips curving in a slow smile. “Cinnamon. The same as the lovely fragrance Imogen said Samkiel never brought her.”

“You,” Imogen hissed, glancing at Cameron for confirmation before turning back to me. “You were the one who wore my face that day.”

I held my hands up in mock surrender and wiggled my fingers in a small wave. “Guilty.”

Twin fireballs appeared in my hands the next second, and I threw them at Imogen and Xavier, sending them flying backward. Cameron ran at me, jumping onto the table. My leg shot out, sending the large marble table flying into the nearest wall with him on it. Books flew through the air, the wall shaking from the force. The ring Camilla had made me vibrated, a forsaken blade appearing in my hand as I spun.

The sound of blade on blade rang out in the council hall and Xavier’s eyes widened. He took in the jagged bone edges and my red eyes and knew exactly what he was dealing with.

“Ig’Morruthen.” The word left his mouth on a whisper.

I shoved him a step back, his braids swinging with the force of the push. I twirled the blade in my hand and took a step forward. “Shocking, isn’t it?”

A shiver of power came from behind me, and I spun to my left, meeting Imogen’s and Cameron’s blows. I was out-skilled and outnumbered at three against one, but I would hold my own, blocking every slash and countering every move. I remembered how fast they moved, where they moved, and the feeling of power that went with them each time.

You have to breathe, Dianna. Otherwise, you’ll be winded and dead. Samkiel spun that stupid wooden staff again. I wanted to snatch it out of his hands and shove it up his ass. I lay on my back on the mat as he circled me. His movements reminded me of a predator, slow and assessing. His eyes stayed on me in a way that said he could eat me alive but chose not to.

I know how to fight, you ass. I flipped up from the ground, firmly landing on my feet as I raised my staff, knocking his out of the way. He stood in front of me and grinned.

“Yes, other creatures maybe, but not me and not—”

“The Hand.” I sighed and rolled my eyes as I waved my hand. “I know, I know. You only tell me every day.”

His smile grew, but he was right. Bruises and red marks marred his perfect bare chest, evidence of the hits I had managed to land, but I couldn’t take any of them, not yet.

I shrugged. “I mean, it’s not like I am ever going to fight you or them.”

“No, but I’d still like you to be prepared for whatever is coming.” He raised his staff and lightly tapped the top of my head, causing me to scowl. “Now, less talking. Remember to breathe, think, and focus. Every move has to be premeditated, not driven by emotions or feelings, or you’ll be sloppy. I have a feeling Kaden will use both against you. He will seek to make you falter, and then,” he disappeared and reappeared in front of me, sweeping me off my feet again, “you’re dead.”

I glared at him as I hit my ass once more. At least Drake wasn’t watching us this time. I couldn’t stand to hear him laugh at me again as I got my ass handed to me.

Samkiel read my expression and cocked his head. “Just try to feel for me.”

I swallowed hard. How could I not? I felt him the day I met him, and my awareness of him grew with every moment we spent together. Even when I avoided him, trying to keep my distance, I still felt him.

“Watch the air around me. You will see the molecules charge as we pull the energy to move so quickly.”

He disappeared and reappeared on the other side of me. “If you pay attention and feel it, you’ll catch even me.”

I nodded and jumped to my feet. Samkiel smiled at me with possessive pride.

“You’re a quick little bird.” Cameron’s voice came from my left just before I felt the air shift, and he appeared on my right. My blade sang as I swiped at his head. He bent back, my strike narrowly missing. “Really quick.”

Even in fight mode, he seemed impressed. Rubble moved behind me as Xavier extracted himself from a pile of debris. “You will not defeat us, Ig’Morruthen. We were trained by Samkiel,” he said, all traces of the easy-going warrior gone. Now he was a pure death dealer, and he had me in his sights.

“Trained by Samkiel?” I snickered. “Funny story. So was I.”

Imogen thrust her sword at me, aiming for my middle. I grabbed her wrist and slammed the hilt of my sword against it. She dropped her blade, grunting as I spun with her in my arms. Cameron and Xavier froze.

I wrapped Imogen’s long blond hair around my fist and slammed her head against the broken table. Her body went limp. I picked her up and tossed her across the room. Spinning, I grabbed Xavier’s blade, stopping it before he could run me through with it. The steel cut my hand, but I held on, our gazes locked.

A second burst of energy behind me heralded Cameron’s attack. It felt like fire licked my back with a razored tongue as he slashed at me. I dropped Xavier’s sword and dodged, barely avoiding his strike as he spun, aiming for my head. I fell and rolled away from a kick from a heavy boot. Jumping to my feet, I had about two seconds to remember why I’d been so wary when I’d first met them. I had two seconds to dodge, to move, to escape them. It was like watching a deadly dance. For every move Cameron made, Xavier had an equal one. Where one pushed, the other pulled. They were a deadly duo, and I was growing tired of them both.

I watched and allowed them to get closer. Cameron sliced at my shoulder, and Xavier went for my legs. The pain was blistering, but nothing I couldn’t handle. I pulled them in, focusing on their strengths and weaknesses. I studied the steps to their dance, learning which tactics and

skills made them so deadly. One would kick lower, the other aiming higher. One would swing a blade left, the other right, waiting for their opponent to dodge one and get caught on the other. They would be unstoppable if it weren't for one thing. I had nothing left to live for, and they did.

Cameron's blade swung left, and I moved, raising mine as Xavier thrust from the right. I threw my sword to my other hand, my fist shooting out and connecting with Xavier's face. He dropped to his ass with a thud. Cameron ran toward me. I spun in a tight circle and side-stepped, my blade flashing. Xavier's eyes went wide. Cameron halted, his next breath a gurgle.

I smiled at Xavier, Cameron standing between us, cerulean blood trickling to the floor and pooling between his feet. Cameron's sword clattered to the floor, and he grabbed at his abdomen.

"Careful, don't drop your organs," I said. I shifted my weight and kicked Cameron with enough force to send him flying over the balcony.

Xavier didn't hesitate or spare me a glance. He was on his feet in an instant and running toward the railing. With no hesitation, he jumped over the balcony after his fallen friend.

Movement behind me had me turning right as Imogen's blond head popped up. A large gash marred her forehead, but her skull must have healed enough for her to function. She glared at me, cobalt blood running from her temple and down the side of her face. She looked behind me where Cameron and Xavier had fallen, anger, pure and vicious, twisting her features.

"Boys and their swords, am I right?" I smiled and slung the blood from my blade as she summoned an ablaze weapon of pure silver.

"You will not leave here alive," Imogen said and came for me.

"Oh, I think I will." I grabbed the vial between my breasts and lifted it. Imogen stopped, unsure of what I held and what I meant to do with it. Her eyes followed my movements as I spoke the incantation and dripped two drops of blood on the floor. The room darkened and bent, a tear forming before me, a swirling hole of stars and galaxies staring back at me.

I waved at Imogen and said, "We'll catch up later." I stepped inside and felt the darkness press against me like a lover.

Imogen's scream of denial was the last thing I heard before the rift closed.

NINETEEN

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DIANNA



I placed my hands on my knees, trying to keep my lunch from coming back up. Blowing out a breath, I stood. Fucking vortexes. I would never get used to them. I summoned the forsaken blade to my ring and spun, taking in the swirling room. It looked just as it had when Samkiel brought me here, but I had a feeling that things didn't change much in Roccurem's little pocket of the universe. Stars whizzed by, the colors ranging from dark purple to an array of greens and pinks. An entire galaxy existed in this one room, but the scenery was not what I'd come for.

"Roccurem!" I shouted. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

I stepped forward, my nails elongating as I scraped them across the neighboring sky. It shimmered and bent as if trying to twist away, and I smiled.

"Please, do stop that. It is painful."

I lifted my nails, inspecting the darkened material that clung to them. I watched it crumble and float away before turning toward Roccurem.

"So, this place holds you and is made from you. Interesting."

The matter that made the room swirled around his lower half like a thick coat blowing in the wind. He floated a few feet from me, his three faceless heads spinning.

"Queen of Yejedin."

"I hate that name."

"Daughter of—"

"Stop." I held up my hand. "Can we skip the names? It's stupid."

One of those three heads paused and jerked as if he laughed before resuming a counterclockwise rotation.

“You made it to me here without the World Ender. You are learning, and you are,” his heads stilled and seemed to stare at me, “evolving.”

“Thanks, I thought so too.” I clasped my hands behind my back and smiled, baring my sharp canines.

“You are here to end me as well, I suppose. For the death of the one you call sister.”

I nodded and rocked back on my heels. “Smart creature.”

“And how do you plan to accomplish such a task when the gods themselves could not extinguish me?”

I moved faster than even he could track, grabbing the swirling mass by his throat and lifting him. “I am a big believer that with the right pressure, anything,” I squeezed and felt his body vibrate, “can break.”

His three heads did not falter nor look away from me, but a swirling mass of hands grabbed at mine. A shimmer of a star blinked behind him, drawing my attention. It flickered, beckoning me like a signal to a ship lost at sea. I felt the need to stop for the first time since her death. Strange.

“Thousands of galaxies, millions of stars, and you get to see them all? That’s impressive.” I tipped my head back toward him and studied his odd form. “Can you see her? Where she is?”

“Your sister rests,” one head said, and then another continued. “Far beyond here and far out of your reach.”

“Good. Good for her. Finally, she is far enough away that I can’t hurt her anymore.” I didn’t mean for that part to come out, but I couldn’t help it.

“Is that how you feel? You think you hurt her?” Roccurem, the single head I believed was truly him, asked.

I shrugged a single shoulder. “Doesn’t matter now.”

One of those heads seemed intent on watching me as the others went about their business. “How have you thought of killing me?”

I exhaled through my nose. “I thought about cutting your heads off one by one, then maybe seeing if I can set fire to that weird floating skirt thing you wear. You don’t really have any actual limbs, so I can’t cut those off, but I wanted it to be slow and painful, unlike her death.”

“You truly blame me?”

“I blame everyone involved,” I snapped at him. “You saw. You knew what would happen to her, yet you said nothing to Samkiel or me while we were here.”

“I told you everything that’s to come. You did not listen. Instead, you clung to The World Ender with defiance on your tongue.” I squeezed a fraction harder, and the head that watched me joined the others, continuing to spin. “Now look at you. You have come fully into your own power. You could burn stars, conquer worlds, all of it if you should wish it. And all must happen appropriately to ensure what’s to come.”

Unease flared in me. Roccurem caught my apprehension, and his heads stopped spinning. I let him go and put my hands on my hips. “For what’s to come?”

“Your ascension.”

“My what?”

“I see different realities, one per second. No matter the reality, your sister was supposed to die in every single one of them. Some sooner than others. In this reality it is how it had to be for you to ascend to power. You were always the catalyst for worlds to burn.”

My heart dropped, and whatever was left of it shattered.

“So, you’re saying no matter what it’s my fault?”

My breath hitched. I really had killed my sister. The room threatened to swallow me whole. A blade ran across my already bruised and beaten heart. A cut so deep I wanted to scream, but nothing came.

“You mistake my words. Gabriella fulfilled her purpose just like you will yours one day. The universe will have its balance one way or another. That is how it has been and always will be.”

My eyes cut toward him. “You saw all of that?”

“Yes.”

A new plan flickered to life in my mind. One that may benefit me far more than his death would.

“Your mind is changing, planning, plotting. I can see the tides of your thoughts redirecting your path.”

I nodded, glancing around the room. “You are right about one thing. I have changed my mind.”

I raised my arms, flames shooting out and ripping at the walls of this prison. Roccurem jerked as if in pain, the swirling dark mass taking the brunt of my power. I pushed harder, the flames growing, lighting the place in shades of bright orange and red. The walls shook, and his heads spun so erratically I feared they would pop off. The room smelled of burning flesh

and ash. Roccurem screamed, an aching sound that whipped like the wind, but I didn't stop.

I pulled the flames back when the room turned a dull shade of gray, and ash filled the air. The glowing stars were dead, and whatever illusion this place held had died with them. I approached his hunched form, my heels the only sound in the silence. I kneeled beside him, his flowing mass shriveled and clinging to him.

“What did you do?”

“I freed you,” I said and stood. All three of his heads turned toward me in shock. “This place isn't you. It is just an illusion to keep you chained. They locked you here for thousands of years because of Samkiel's father. Well, he's dead, and you are no longer trapped. No more prisons, Roccurem, for either of us.”

He seemed to register what I said. His form shook as he rose and floated once more before me. He looked around and then back at me. Long ago, I wished for someone to free me from my chains to Kaden. No one came, so instead, I grew claws and fangs and freed myself. Roccurem couldn't, so I would be his claws.

His freedom.

“I don't feel...” His voice trailed off.

“Burdened?”

If he could have nodded in this form, I think he would have.

“Good. Now you will belong to me.” A slow possessive smile curved my lips. “Understand?”

“You freed me just so you could bind me to you?”

“Don't worry. It won't be forever. Help me find Kaden, and you're free to go.” I raised my hand, a ball of flame bursting to life on my palm. “Say no, and I will continue until you match your old room.”

“Not even the gods could kill me.”

“Well, lucky for me, I'm no god.”

“No.” He seemed to register what I said with newfound respect. “No, you are not. Although your chemical makeup has similarities, you are much worse. You follow no one's rules, not even the laws of nature. You will be a problem across the stars.”

A corner of my lips lifted. I swear he made no sense half the time. I shook my head and smothered the flame before placing my hands on my hips. “The stars don't concern me. I want one thing, and you're going to

help me get it. I have scorched half of Onuna, killed, and hunted, yet Kaden is still out of my reach. Why can't I find him?" I raised a hand before he spoke. "And no vague answers, please."

His heads spun once to the left and twice to the right as if they were having their own private conversation. Once they settled, they all focused on me.

"You already know the answer. You just refuse to speak it."

My shoulders drooped. I had thought it was impossible, but impossible seemed my new norm. "He is not on Onuna, is he?"

Roccurem only stared at me.

"How is it possible if every realm is sealed?"

All three of those heads cocked toward me. "All realms are sealed."

I growled and took a step forward. "What did I say about vague answers?"

"You are running out of time." Roccurem shook his heads. "The One True King comes."

My heart sank. Fuck. I forgot that time moves differently here. I'd gutted one of Samkiel's precious Hands, and the others had run home crying. Dammit.

"Fucking, Samkiel." I grabbed the vial from beneath my shirt and spilled three drops of blood to return home. I looked at Roccurem and lifted a brow. "Ready to go see the world?"

TWENTY

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SAMKIEL



I heard the screams from the medical wing before my feet touched the ground. Lights flickered as I ran down the hall. I knew those screams, and Cameron was by no means weak. Several celestials flung themselves out of my way, Logan and Vincent right on my heels. I lifted my hand, the thick doors blasting open so hard they broke off the hinges. All eyes turned toward me, the large white room growing silent. Even the machines hooked to the walls seemed to stop when I entered. The healers and assistants draped in medical gear and covered in blood stepped back as I burst through the door.

“What happened?”

“Your new girlfriend happened,” Cameron grunted and tried to sit up. Blood poured from a gaping wound across his abdomen. Xavier stood next to him, fear a living thing in his eyes and his hands on Cameron’s midsection.

“Dianna?” Her name was a whisper, a prayer.

Cameron grunted once more. “You know I didn’t catch her name before she eviscerated me. I get it. She’s super hot, and I have never judged. Not when we had that one goddess show up on Rashearin because you stopped talking to her, not when the King of Talunmir threatened war because you stopped talking to him. I mean, the list goes on, but since *when do you fuck Ig’Morruthens?*”

“I’m not,” I said, my mind spinning. Dianna had attacked them. The remains of my home. The home I had taken her to. My heart thudded, and my pulse quickened. Did she hate me that much? After everything?

Xavier turned toward me, eyes blazing. “Why do you lie to us? She had the same smell as the one who wore Imogen’s face. We also know you lied about that, too.”

“You didn’t.” Vincent groaned.

“Not now,” I snapped at Vincent. I had not slept in—I didn’t remember how long—and it was starting to show.

“No. It doesn’t matter because she’s dead after what she did to Cameron.” Xavier turned back to his fallen friend.

“Aw, thanks, buddy,” Cameron said.

“You are not to touch her. End of discussion,” I said, moving to the side of Cameron’s bed opposite Xavier. My eyes bore into Xavier, meaning every word I said.

Xavier shifted as the tattoos along my arms and beneath my eyes flared to life, the silver pulsing with my temper. Cameron groaned when I pressed my hands against his midsection. Power poured from them, the lights in the room flickering on and off.

Xavier huffed, confusion crossing his features. “You are seriously defending it?”

“She is not an *it*.”

“Good luck trying to get between them.” Vincent rolled his eyes and folded his arms.

I ignored his comment, concentrating on the skin and tissue in Cameron’s midsection.

He met my gaze, gritting his teeth as he fought the pain of his wound closing. “Samkiel, what is going on? We protect them now?”

Vincent took a step forward, flanking Xavier. Logan remained quiet. “She has to be put down, Samkiel.”

“No.” The light faded from my hands, arms, and face, the power in the room returning to normal as I lowered my hands. Cameron fixed his shirt and grimaced as he sat up on the disheveled hospital bed.

“No?” Vincent rolled his eyes, throwing his hands in the air. “How many more bodies does she have to drop for you to come to your senses? Dianna has slaughtered countless and has no intention of stopping. Look what she did to Cameron and the others. Do you think she will stop there?”

“I said no.”

“Gods. Why is it so difficult for you? You’ve been with thousands through the centuries. What makes her cunt so special?”

Electricity bounced around the room, and everyone ducked. Machines sparked, and darkness blanketed the room.

“Watch your goddamn mouth.” The voice and words weren’t my own, as if some dark possessive part of me I was not even aware of had taken over.

Vincent’s throat bobbed, but he said nothing.

Every eye glowed, and they all focused on me. The room felt too small, too crowded. I needed to leave. The tension built, and the drumming in my head started again. I did not want to harm anyone here. I cared about these people. They were my friends, my family. I shook my head at Vincent and moved toward the door.

“Stop shutting us out,” Vincent said, not raising his voice this time. “Why can’t you just tell us? Help us understand.”

I paused, smoke rising from the few machines I had destroyed. I took one breath, then another.

“This isn’t her.”

“Are you sure you just haven’t met the real her? The two of you only knew each other for what? Months?” Vincent said.

“Yes, months. Months spent stuck together, every hour of every day. You don’t know her as I do. She’s hurt and lashing out.” I turned back to him and saw the complete and utter judgment on their faces.

“You know, this would have been easy for you centuries ago. A beast of some sort got out of line, and they were gone. Do you think Unir would allow this much suffering and chaos to go on?” Vincent demanded of me.

“Vincent,” Logan said. He folded his arms and glared at him in warning.

Vincent rubbed his face, shaking his head. “How many more bodies or attacks on our home will it take for you to realize the girl you remember, the girl you care so much for, is gone.”

Some part of me snapped.

“You have no idea what you speak of, do you? Have you ever asked what I felt after Rasheirim fell? Have you considered what I have lost and how it changed me?”

Vincent didn’t back down, his eyes shining with that celestial blue. “How could we? You don’t talk to us!”

“Why would I?” Now that I had started, there was no holding back. “You cannot relate. You have not lost everything you knew, loved, and

cared for. You have a fake crown *I* provided. You all have a home *I* made for you. You have each other. What did I gain from my sacrifice?"

I knew I was spilling every damned emotion I'd kept buried these last weeks, years, centuries. I knew my words were like whips against bare skin, but I couldn't stop.

"Nothing." My voice was barely a whisper. "I have gained nothing for my sacrifice. Nothing but nightmares, judgment, and words thrown at me like I did not give everything I am, everything I have, for you all. For the world."

One by one, their heads dropped, or they looked away. A hint of sadness crept into their expressions, but I didn't need their pity.

"I had a crown thrust upon me from the moment of my birth. My life is not my own. It never was. It's a thing. My life is sacrifice after sacrifice for you, for all of you, for the millions who live, eat, and die in this universe and the next. And then my life was bound to realms I had to keep closed by my *father*. You can yell and scream that what I am doing is unjust. You can say that I've fallen off whatever path you have concocted in your head that I must stay on, but you've lost nothing. None of you have."

"We lost you." Logan's voice cut through the drumming in my head.

I turned and smiled sadly at my oldest friend. "I was gone long before Rashearim fell, and you didn't notice. You all hold me to this standard that I have to meet. Do you know how heavy that is? The weight of it. You act as if I must know everything and how to fix the disasters that come my way, but I don't have all the answers. I never have. And the people who were supposed to help counsel me are scattered amongst the stars, and the ones that are not deceased look at me as you all do."

Unable to stay still, I paced, the hospital staff pressing against the walls out of my way.

"I understand I failed. I do. My father died because of me. I lost the war and, in doing so, sealed the realms and us here. I understand your disgust or loathing for me because I feel it, too."

I rubbed a hand across my face. The bristles covering my jaw scraped against my palm.

"And you know what the funniest part of this is? It's that it took someone who our texts label as our enemy to bring me back. That's what she did. She brought me back, and it wasn't in the way you think or some crass joke Cameron cannot wait to make."

Cameron held up his hands and said completely unconvincingly, “I-I wasn’t.”

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. “I didn’t have to tell Dianna anything at first. She saw me, all of me. Just as I have seen her, she is strong and selfless. I’ve seen her run headfirst into danger for those she cares for without a single thought for herself. She’s funny and smart and beautiful, so beautiful. She’s a fighter, a warrior stronger than any I’ve ever trained. Above all, she is a woman who had no choice in the life thrust upon her. Dianna survived against all odds for Gabby, and Kaden ripped her away. Dianna is not a monster. She never was. She loves, cares, and feels, and right now, all she feels is grief, pain, and loss. I’m not... I won’t give up on her. Who would I be if I did?”

The room stayed silent, everyone frozen and watching me warily, but I kept going.

“You still hold on to the same prejudices that the gods before us clung to. She was not born an Ig’Morruthen. Kaden made her. She allowed him to carve her from the inside out to save the very sister she lost. You see blood, death, and anger, but not the pain I see. You cast stones and judge her, but you stood by my side for eons while I shed more blood than she ever will. All of you made noble and honorable excuses for my destructive nature, but I will carry the consequences of it until my last breath.”

“That was different,” Vincent interjected. “You’re different.”

The ring on my right hand vibrated, calling the Oblivion blade forward. It hummed in my hand, and Vincent took a step back. The sword chimed, ready to eat, to taste death. The swirling black and purple smoke caressed it as I gripped the hilt. Everyone leaned away, trying to put distance between themselves and me, whether or not they realized it.

“Tell me what it is, what it does,” I demanded, lifting the sword and shaking it. “Explain to me how I’m a savior when the very blade I created ends worlds. Tell me I’m worth it. Tell me I am not the cause of our damnation. Tell me why I can’t sleep. Why do war drums and the screams of every battle echo through my skull? Tell me why my very existence is crumbling. Tell me how to fix me, Vincent, since you know so damned much. You can’t because no matter what you or anyone else wishes to believe so you can sleep better at night, it is the same thing. Dianna’s and my crimes, no matter if they are in the name of peace or not, do not differentiate. Death is death. If she is a monster to you, then so am I.”

Vincent lowered his gaze, the others following suit. All of them except Cameron. I recalled Oblivion back into its ether, and the world fell silent. Footsteps rushed down the hall, and we all looked toward the destroyed doorway.

“What happened to the room?” Imogen asked, tucking a small device into her bloody tunic and glancing behind me.

“Vincent made Samkiel mad again,” Cameron said as if I had not just scolded them all. “The usual.”

Imogen looked around and nodded. “Sounds about right. Samkiel, I just spoke to the council. They are furious and request you.”

“I’ll be there in a few days. I need to find Dianna.”

Imogen held her hand up, small runes forming on the blood-splattered floor. “Gregory is dead, and they have appointed me your advisor, and this is more a command than a request. They want to see you immediately. Samkiel, she took Roccurem.”

Rage squirmed through me, and I felt the color drain from my face. I gritted my teeth, my jaw flexing. Who did they think they were to command my presence? I would go, but they may not like what they got. “Very well,” I said with a sigh. “Cameron, you need to go home and rest for a few days. Vincent, get them updated on the rest.”

“Wait, why am I out? Vincent is the one who opened his mouth and pissed you off, not me.”

“You need time for your organs to heal,” I said with another weary sigh.

He opened his mouth to argue but then shrugged and nodded. “That’s fair.”

I turned back to Imogen and waved an arm for her to proceed. She held her hand out, and the runes flared, transporting us to the remains of Rashearin.

TWENTY-ONE

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DIANNA. A WEEK LATER.



“There, all done,” Nora said, ripping the thin black cape off the front of me. I stood in one smooth motion and leaned in to stare at my reflection in the large rectangular mirror. The bright lights of the salon shone down on me as I twirled a long piece of hair from my face and then ran my fingers through it.

“I heard about Gabriella. I’m so sorry.”

My hand stilled as I focused on her in the mirror. She cleaned up her tools. Roccurem stood stiffly near the door, his hands clasped in front of him, watching the people in the salon. “Why?” I shrugged.

Nora paused in her tidying, taken aback by my question. “Because she’s your sister.”

“And? People die every day. Like your cheap father who made you pay back your college tuition instead of helping.” I tossed my hair over my shoulder, making sure the strands didn’t get caught in my earrings.

Nora scoffed, her jaw going slack. “That was rude, even for you.” She placed her hands on her hips. “Your price just went up.”

I smiled at myself in the mirror before turning to stalk toward her until I invaded her space. She tilted her head back to hold my gaze, her heart beating against her ribs hard enough to drown out the blow dryer in the back of the room.

“How about I don’t pay anything? In return, you get to keep your stupid little shop in your stupid little city, and I don’t eat every single person in here and toss your body in the dumpster in the back.”

This time when I smiled, I made sure my fangs showed. Nora gulped and nodded. She hurried away and disappeared into the back room without

looking at me or anyone else.

Everyone in the shop pretended not to have seen or heard what had happened except for Roccurem. He watched me intently, his alien eyes filled with secrets. I spun, taking one last glance at myself in the mirror. I adjusted the long sweep of hair from my face and headed out, Roccurem falling into step beside me. The weak winter sun beat down as the door closed behind us.

“Perhaps public displays of power are not good if you wish to remain hidden from the King of Rashearin.”

A few mortals passed us, bundled in coats and thick clothing against the chill breeze. Oblivious, they went on with their lives. Several small tables and stools were placed around the pavilion. People sat around, laughing and eating in the busy city of Kasvaihn.

“How many times do I have to say I don’t care until you realize I don’t care?” I said to Reggie. Reggie. That’s what his name was now, no longer Roccurem. He needed something normal while he was here, so I renamed him.

Reggie looked at me, a crease crossing his normal-looking mortal brow. He wore the shape of a man wearing a casual all-black business suit. He’d seen one of those obnoxious male models on a moving billboard screen when we’d first arrived and taken his form. I told him he needed a disguise, and he’d found one. He was tall and lean, with a dark complexion and hair cropped close to his head in coarse curls. He looked normal until he spoke in tongues, and then his six all-white eyes appeared, two above the regular and two below.

“Yes, your actions seem to roar about your lack of care. Or maybe that is just another illusion to hide the opposite.”

I folded my arms with a close-lipped smile. I nodded, focused on the passing vehicles. A horn honked, but my attention remained on the approaching black truck.

“Okay.” I dropped my hands and walked away.

I bumped against a table as I passed. The couple shouted at me and grabbed for their drinks. Ducking under a low-hanging branch, I stepped off the curb, a white car swerving to miss me. I stood in the center of the road, watching the vehicle bearing down on me. Noises came from all around me as passersby stopped and watched. I heard the brakes squeal, the large truck skidding on the pavement. I stepped to my left and dropped to one knee.

My hand shot out, talons replacing nails. I ripped them through the tires and metal of the wheels. The truck rolled, glass breaking. I stood and smiled at Reggie, who watched from the sidewalk.

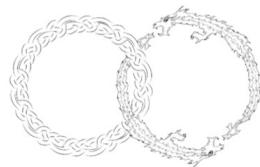
“Someone call for help!” a woman screamed as others came near. I strode to the truck and ripped the door from its hinges. Elijah looked up at me. He was half slouched, seatbelt still on. He shielded his eyes from the sunlight pouring in behind me.

As soon as his eyes adjusted, he began scrabbling at his seatbelt. “No, no, no, no.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll help with that.”

I reached inside and ripped the seatbelt from Elijah before yanking him out and onto the street.

“You want to get out of here?” I smiled, not giving him a chance to answer.



MY FIST CONNECTED ONCE MORE, ROCKING ELIJAH’S HEAD TO THE SIDE.

“He is mortal. You may very well damage his brain before you get the information you seek,” Reggie said.

“I am aware, but he’s not talking.” I tossed my hands in the air.

Elijah sat up and spat blood on the floor, trying to smile despite his broken face. “New boyfriend already, Dianna?” He clicked his tongue, and my fist connected with his jaw again.

“I am not her boyfriend or a replacement for Samkiel.”

I hit Elijah maybe a tad harder when I heard Samkiel’s name.

“Elijah, stop stalling.” I patted his lapels after pulling him up and sitting him back in his chair. “Just tell me where Kaden is.”

“Can’t you feed off me and see? Oh, wait, you can’t.” He laughed, and I sent my fist into his gut, causing him to cough.

I snarled, my head still throbbing with the memory of the migraine from trying to read Santiago. I’d found the wolves quickly enough but Elijah was like a small bug that scurried too damn quickly. Apparently, Camilla’s little

water supply spell ended quicker than I could find Elijah, so we were back to the basics.

“I liked you better when you were scared.”

He spat to the side. “Yeah, well, then I remembered you won’t kill me until you get information, so I feel a little safer now.”

Sunlight shone through the cracks in the sheet metal at the abandoned old factory. I ran my hands through my hair, the blood on them coating the strands and ruining Nora’s work. Frustrated, I looked at Reggie.

“See.” I pointed at Elijah. “What’s the point of this? I am terrible at torture. I’d much rather beat him to a pulp and move on.”

“He will not speak if he is dead. Patience.”

“Patience? I don’t have patience.” I turned back to Elijah, who just stared at me. “Just tell me where he is.”

He shrugged, the split in his lip spreading. “No.”

“Fine.” I stomped forward, grabbed him by the neck, and twisted. His body slumped, his eyes open and unseeing.

“Your temper has increased even with your feedings and extracurricular activities.”

I grumbled as I ran my hands through my hair and closed my eyes, taking deep, measured breaths. Reggie was right. I was more snappy than usual, but I was wasting time. I wasn’t any closer to finding Kaden than I’d been when I started. He still hadn’t shown up, and I was running out of people to kill. I needed Tobias. If I could find Tobias, I would find him.

“It seems that killing Elijah and the others did not bring you joy.”

“Nothing brings me joy, Reggie.” I lowered my blood-stained hands, sighing.

“Samkiel has returned from the council and the remains of his home world, with Lady Imogen at his side.”

I kicked at the chair Elijah’s lifeless body slouched on and folded my arms. “That’s nice. It seems they are inseparable again.”

Did you love her?

I did not love her, nor is she my anything you previously stated.

Liar.

“Jealousy is a powerful emotion, too. An indicator of another.”

A small snarl left my lips, and I glared at Reggie.

“I am merely doing what you requested. You asked me to keep an eye. I have kept several. I know the current whereabouts of The Hand if you wish

to know.”

My gaze dropped. “No. I don’t need them.”

It had been days since I had returned with Reggie. We had watched him leave that night, his silver light burning across the sky perfectly in sync with a singular blue one. She had come back, and then they had left together.

“I hope you have a plan. You are making a god desperate, and it will not end as you wish.”

I rolled my eyes a fraction harder than normal. “I’m sure Imogen is helping all she can with his *desperation*.”

I felt Reggie’s eyes on me. “If you think Lady Imogen’s return will make Samkiel give up on you, you are sadly mistaken. He summoned Oblivion for you.”

I fought the instinctive shudder as the forest returned, along with the pain in my shredded legs and the stench of the gaping pit. The Irvikuva dragged me toward it, determined to return me to Kaden. Samkiel slammed to the ground, draped in the famed silver armor, the renowned king appearing to save me. An ache formed in my chest, and I struggled to suppress it.

“How did you know about that?”

“I see everything,” Reggie said.

“Pervert.”

He said nothing as I wiped my hand on my dark leather pants, ready to change the subject.

“Indulge me, Reggie. How did you end up locked away in that place, anyway?”

“There was a prophecy of rebirth for an unraveled cosmos. A child born from celestial and one born from a god. They were meant to rule it all. Save it all.”

“And this prophecy wouldn’t be about a certain World Ender, would it?”

“Correct, you are.”

“We have time to kill, so tell me.” I folded my arms and nodded. “What happened next?”

“The babe meant to rule at his side was taken and destroyed.”

I shrugged. “Samkiel said he had no Amata and that the universe had been unkind. I guess he wasn’t lying.”

“The universe can be cruel.” Reggie cocked his head to the side. It was an oddly mortal expression. “Would you not agree? After everything you have seen and lost.”

I ignored him.

“So, how did that get you locked away?”

“My family, the Moirai, spoke too soon about it. A god bent on ruling the cosmos heard and ensured their reign would be the only one. They slaughtered my brethren, and Unir saved me, keeping me away from those wishing to use my gifts for evil.”

That got my attention. I strode closer.

“How can you use a fate? Every story I have heard shaped you out to be the ones that controlled all of our destinies.”

“Controlled? No.” All six eyes appeared on Reggie’s face, glowing an incandescent white as he lifted his hands. The room faded, and a wave of galaxies and stars appeared. I spun in the galaxy-filled factory, looking at every single passing star and planet. All alight with small orbs of yellow and green. I realized this was what Reggie was, everything and the nothing in between.

“We see a thousand different variables all shaped depending on your actions. I have seen stars born and stars die. A million and one worlds with a million and one actions with a tether that connects every single one of you.”

I reached out my finger, touching a planet and watching it shimmer beneath my nail.

“So, my question remains. If you were this powerful, how could you use a fate?”

The room sucked itself back in as Reggie retook his mortal form. The room, the world, seemed dull compared to the universe he’d just shown me.

“Power. Power to take away even the one's fates cares for.”

“And that's why there is only one fate left?”

“Correct.”

I wondered if fates felt pain. I waited for him to show some flicker of emotion, but nothing came. Maybe fate and I were more alike than I thought. Had the world used him as well, chewing him up and spitting him out until nothing but a hollow shell remained? Or was I truly alone in that feeling, too?

“You know what I don’t get? You are this all-knowing fate, but you couldn’t see yourself getting locked up?”

“I saw several outcomes for my Moirai and myself.”

“You saw them die?”

He didn’t miss a beat, but I thought his voice faltered. “I have seen many die.” His face remained stoic, unchanging. “And before you become erratic, I have answered these questions already. Some things you must endure yourself. Some things are meant to happen. You see death and assume it is against you, but death is natural. It is not cruel or kind. Death takes no sides. Death does not discriminate or hate. It just is and has remained since the first living being existed and will be here long after. It may hurt, but it happens to all. Gabriella and you are no exception. You may have prolonged her life once, but her name was still on the list. You only delayed the process.”

“Stop.” I raised my hand, my migraine roaring back.

“You will have a choice. One you must make. Choose out of selflessness, and the path is set. Choose vengeance, and well, the outcome will be devastating.”

“Another damned prophecy?” I groaned, rubbing my brow.

“Not a prophecy, a path, a choice. One only you can make.”

“You literally just said that in different words.” I scowled, dropping my hand from my face. I turned back to Elijah’s slumped form. He had been a part of Gabby’s death, yet taking his life made me feel... nothing.

“Fates,” a deep masculine voice said, “they’re so damn tricky with their words.”

The air in the room suddenly felt condensed and suffocating. I turned and saw him standing there, all proud, smug, and soon to be dead.

Kaden.

He smiled at me, his hands in his pockets. “Miss me?”

TWENTY-TWO

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DIANNA



There it was. All the fire and hate came rushing to the surface when I saw him. My skin prickled, and a wave of heat drowned me. My hands shot out, thick flames spinning toward him, bellowing and snapping like the jaws of a raging beast, destroying everything in their path. The acrid scent of burning metal stung my nose, but I didn't let up. Sweat was beading on my brow before I lowered my hands, some deep and feral part of me coming alive.

"So dramatic," Kaden said, glancing at everything behind him I'd charred to ash and ruin. He shook his head and folded his arms, muscles straining his dark shirt.

I clenched my teeth, biting back a scream of rage and frustration. It didn't matter if I couldn't burn him alive. I would rip him to shreds with my bare hands. I moved, swiping with my claws, aiming for where his face should have been. My strike met no resistance, and I stumbled through him, catching myself on my next step. I turned, looking at my claws, free of blood and flesh. "You're not even here. Coward."

He smiled, a single canine elongating as he looked at me. "I prefer survivalist. That power is dripping off you in waves, Dianna. I bet the creatures beyond this realm feel it and quiver." He leered, his gaze dropping to my chest. "You see me, and your heart doesn't even falter."

I grimaced and snapped. "My heart doesn't beat for you."

"Oh, I assume it beats for him, then?" he asked, rubbing his chin.

"Reggie. Leave."

"As you wish," Reggie said and faded from the room, leaving me alone with Kaden, or the shell of him, at least.

Kaden watched the thick, black, star-filled mist of Reggie's true form disappear. "You kidnapped a fate, and it listens to you? I'm so impressed, Dianna. I knew once you truly gave in, you'd be unstoppable. How did you carve him from Unir's prison?"

"How do you know about that?"

Kaden only shrugged. "I know a lot."

I sighed, smoke curling from my nose. "Why are you here?"

He grinned, trying to play coy and sweet. My stomach revolted. "Maybe I missed you."

I placed a hand on my chest. "Aw, I missed you, too. Couldn't you tell by the bodies I left? Maybe we should have an actual reunion."

"Yeah?" he purred, taking a step closer. "Will you wear something pretty for me as you did for your World Ender?"

Pretty? My mind flashed through possibilities, wondering what he could possibly mean. Then it hit me. He was talking about the dress I wore in the garden at Drake's, the one Samkiel made for me.

"You were there."

He smiled. "Mirrors are the mortals' greatest invention, and a passageway for ancient creatures, Dianna. I told you I have eyes everywhere."

My lip curled in disgust as I replayed every place I had been with any sort of reflection. The memory of Sophie speaking into the mirror just before she attacked me.

"Don't make that face. It's only obsidian-lined ones. I made sure every member of my court had at least one."

Dangerous. A beautiful, dangerous stranger I had met in a desert. A sand viper is what I'd thought of him, and that was precisely what he was. But everything Kaden did had a purpose, so he was here for a reason. He was either stalling or preparing to strike.

"Let's not play games with each other, okay?" I squared my shoulders and tipped my head a fraction higher. "I'm no longer the quivering girl with nothing but a dagger strapped to her thigh. Why are you here?" My voice was even and flat. I folded my arms, the long sleeves of my jacket falling at my sides. He wasn't here, and I had no inclination to waste my energy on an illusion.

"No, you are definitely not, but I know you still have a pretty weapon between those thighs, don't you?" He raised his hand, pinching his lower lip

as he circled me, his gaze nearly a physical touch. “Powerful enough to make a god change his plans.”

I groaned, dropping my arms and tipping my head back. He didn’t have to be corporeal for me to know he was tense. I had spent lifetimes studying him. “Did I ever tell you how annoying your voice is? There have been times I wanted to rip my ears off my head rather than hear you go on and on.”

“You know, I never thought you’d kill Drake. I always assumed you two were fucking when no one else was around.”

“No, you were the one who needed multiple lovers to stay satisfied, remember?”

Kaden smiled coldly. “Or maybe there was another reason.”

“One I don’t care about.”

He was trying to distract me. But from what?

“I’ll ask again.” I sighed. “What do you want?”

He stopped before Elijah’s slack form, sliding his hands into his pockets. “You nearly took his head off with that twist. You’ve been paying attention to me, huh?”

Another distraction.

“Yes, Kaden. You killed my sister. We all know. Do you want to broadcast that once more? Or will you stop hiding so I can repay the favor?”

His eyes scanned me from head to toe as he bit at the corner of his lip. “You really are different, aren’t you?”

My body shuddered, the Ig’Morruthen stirring and waiting to attack. “What? Do you want me to be sad? Cry in a corner? No, that girl is long gone. You made sure of that. I want blood. A fucking river of it.”

He strode forward, stopping inches from me, forcing me to look up to hold his gaze. “Gods, I miss you.”

“What do you want?”

“You.” He moved his hand as if he would touch my hair. “Always you.”

“Me? Or are you here about the ship at the bottom of the sea?”

Not even a hint of surprise crossed his features.

“I will admit, I am glad I am the only thing on your pretty mind. Is Samkiel jealous?”

He is a manipulator, Dianna. Don’t get distracted, my mind whispered. Don’t let him see you falter for a second, or he will eat you alive.

I swallowed, squaring my shoulders. “I don’t care what Samkiel feels. The only thing on my mind is killing you.”

He took a step closer to me, his eyes roaming. “And how will you do it, my pretty little vixen? Slowly? That’s not how I like it.”

“I know you’re moving iron. A lot of it.”

“Yeah?” A smirk made of sin graced his lips. “And did you have to spread those pretty little legs to find out?”

I made sure the smile I gave him in return was all teeth. “No, I did that for fun.”

“Fun or that raging bloodlust coming back with a vengeance? You know your true nature, and you have buried it for far too long. That hunger hits, and then you crave something hard and stiff.”

“Not always. Sometimes I prefer tongue,” I snapped back.

“You know you could come home, and I could take care of that?”

Home. That fucking word again. A void I would never fill because of him. I felt my nails bite into my arms.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I never had a home with you. My home is spread across the Naimer Sea because of you. Now, what are you making, Kaden, and why do you need so much iron?”

He twisted his head slightly and inhaled deeply.

“You still smell divine even from this far away. I would recognize that scent anywhere.”

Kaden stepped closer, but I ignored him, refusing to back away from him. I would never do that again. Incorporeal or not, my entire being raged at the monster of a man who made me.

“Is it for the weapon to kill Samkiel? The iron? You have the book of Azrael but haven’t used it yet. It’s been months.”

He reached out as if he could touch me. “Was your hair always this long? I miss the way it bounces when you—”

A small laugh left my lips, the pieces snapping together in my mind. “You don’t have what you need. You’re missing a final ingredient, and you’re stalling.”

His eyes flashed, and I knew I was right.

I stepped forward, invading his space for once and closing the remaining distance between us. No longer the docile girl who bent or lowered her gaze in fear of him. Never her again. “You know what the funny thing is? I don’t think you’re as evil as you want others to believe.

You collect these people and surround yourself with these creatures so you don't feel so fucking alone all the time. My guess? You're just a damaged little boy who just wasn't loved enough."

His eyes flashed bright crimson. "Says the woman so desperate to be loved, she conspired with and fucked the enemy."

"Oh, I never fucked Samkiel. Got pretty close, though." I let out a low whistle. "The things that man can do with his hands. I can only imagine the rest. Which, you know, I have."

I added the last part, knowing it would cut him, and if I could hurt him even a fraction as badly as he had hurt me, so fucking be it.

I saw the jealousy flash in his eyes as he snapped his teeth. "Yeah? I think he is using his hands right now on his betrothed."

It was always tit for tat between us. One always aching to hurt the other worse. Only this time, I knew every pressure point and a way to make him wince in pain for once. I knew I had gotten under his skin, and Kaden knew... I finally registered what he'd said, and my thoughts scrambled, everything coming to a screeching halt.

Betrothed.

My control over the fiery anger that smoldered ceaselessly inside me snapped, and a volcanic rage bubbled to the surface. An emotion I was a fool to think I had any control over.

My head jerked back. "What are you talking about?"

Kaden's triumphant smile made my stomach turn. He thought he'd won something. "Oh, you didn't know? He and Imogen are destined to rule the twelve realms. Arranged marriage and all that."

I said nothing.

"Hmm, I can't believe he wouldn't share that with you."

My eyes narrowed. "You're lying. I saw Samkiel's past."

"All of it? Doubtful. Even with your blooddreams, you'd have to consume him daily to get that, and by the look on your face right now, I know you haven't."

I shook my head. "No, you're lying. You're trying to distract me. I asked him."

I fought to keep from cringing, realizing how ridiculous I sounded.

Kaden pouted, his bottom lip mocking me. "Did you ask him? And he told you the truth? Please. Does that ruin your dreams of a castle with a view?"

I didn't answer this time. Kaden reached out, and I felt a phantom hand slide through my hair. I knew he would have wrapped the long strands around his fist if he'd been there in truth.

"A king must always have a queen, and you are not *his*. I told you this already. I mean, come on. Samkiel and Imogen have been together almost as long as you and I have. Do you really think he cares more for you than her? He has known you for mere months. You're not important to him. He's got a world to save. You know, from creatures of the night like you and me."

I studied him, desperately looking for any tell that he was lying, hoping against my better fucking judgment. Still, none came. The edges of my vision seemed to blur. Kaden was telling the truth.

He clicked his tongue. "All you did was bring The Hand back, including his intended."

Intended.

Betrothed.

My world spun. My head was crowded with noise, the same noise left on the screen when Gabby and I had fallen asleep while watching a movie, trying our damndest to squeeze as much time together as we could. I always woke up to that blistering static as she continued to sleep, her hand plastered to her face. Now, just like then, I turned it off, and everything went dark, quiet, and empty. I had trusted him, yet he had lied like everyone else. I had hesi—

And a lock on a door in a house quieted.

"You really didn't know?" Kaden asked, and I realized I had been quiet for too long. "Aw, sweetie, I thought you guys were best friends and all of that, but he didn't tell you?"

I blinked back the emotions that reared up, threatening to drown me. They hid a far more devastating truth. "Whatever Samkiel and I had was merely a convenience. It was never permanent. I do not care who he fucks."

Kaden smiled, and even if he wasn't in his physical form, I could still feel the power that radiated from him. "You're many things, Dianna, but a liar is not one of them. Remember, love, I have eyes and ears everywhere. They should be back from that council meeting. I say let's have a look for ourselves."

Kaden reached into his pocket and pulled a slab of obsidian from it. Its smooth surface shining like a mirror against the light. It rippled, and a room

appeared, not just any room but the large conference room in Silver City.

“I had one of my lackeys add this while you two were out fighting somewhere.”

I glanced at Kaden. “Why are you telling me this?” I asked, my voice barely audible.

“Because I don’t think you’ll care after seeing this.”

Voices spilled from the mirror, drawing my attention.

Samkiel’s hand rested under his cheek as he looked through what appeared to be an ancient book. Several stacks of paper and what resembled a map sat next to him. He looked so tired, half slumped over in his seat. I could see others moving in the background. Laughter and jokes spilled from Cameron and Xavier as Logan paced toward the far side of the room. The Hand was there, but that wasn’t what made me stop. Instead, I focused on the tall blonde who came to his side and offered him a drink. He took it from her, giving her a warm smile when she placed a hand on his shoulder and rubbed it. It was the smallest act and yet one that had the remains of my world tilting on its axis.

His betrothed.

His intended.

She comforted him now, taking my place so effortlessly, where I was the cause of his distress.

Bile rose in my throat as I remembered another time he’d held a damned mirror in front of me. Only it was the truth of my relationship with him and not a damned shard of glass. Kaden had shown me then, in the most heartbreakingly way, that anyone was replaceable. I had vowed never to get attached to anyone like that again, and I had held to it. Until Samkiel. Now, I had no right to be upset.

Kaden whistled. “They make a cute couple.”

“Absolutely perfect.” The words left my lips even if my chest burned.

“That,” he nodded at the mirror, “is what he needs. Do you really think she would hurt him? Stab him? Assault his friends and the world he is sworn to protect? Even if you kill me, he will need his family, and you will never be a part of that. We are what they hunt, what they fear. You know this. Can you really say you care about him and be that selfish?”

The rest of The Hand moved around the room. All lost in conversation. He turned toward them and soon joined in the discussion. I saw it then; the ivory castles on distant worlds with clouds dancing between the peaks. I

saw the birds weaving through the rays of sunshine. Imogen walked toward him in a gown made of diamonds and gold. The others stood with bowed heads in their finest clothing. I saw a crown on his head and hers. I saw it all, what he could have. The realms would be in order without chaos, death, or pain because I would be gone. Kaden would be gone once I was done, and there would be no more darkness in his life.

He deserved that because he was good and kind and honorable. I knew I couldn't be selfish with him as I had with Gabby. I'd held her back, not letting her live the life she wanted, the life she deserved, until it was too late. And that one harrowing truth rang loud and clear in my ears, heart, and soul. I'd known it the second she died, and vengeance consumed me.

Samkiel and I were not meant to be.

What we had, as short as it had been, was not real. Samkiel deserved so much more than me. I couldn't take the life he was destined to live. A curse, that's what I'd been to Gabby. I wouldn't force that on him.

The pain in my already broken heart dulled, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I finally felt nothing. The last nail in whatever coffin encased my heart. An icy wave swept over me like a blanket, solidifying my resolve.

Kaden placed the obsidian slab back into his pocket.

"They may not need you, but I do," he whispered, stepping closer, his large frame invading my space. "I always have."

I swiped my hand across my cheek, furious that I was still capable of tears and that I'd cried in front of him.

"Is that your master plan? Show me his ex, and I'd come back to you?"

"Not his ex, his current."

"You're pathetic." I spun away, heading for the exit.

"You know, there's a way to get your sister back?" he called after me.

I stopped. "What?"

"I can do it if you help me. Help me open the realms. Once Samkiel dies, every world returns to how it was in the beginning. Every realm will be open, and you could see her again."

Realization hit. I was the missing piece in this fucked up game. I was the key.

I threw my head back and laughed, turning to face him. "Gods, you are so fucking manipulative. How did I not see it before? That's what this is. What it has always been. You need me, don't you?" I took a step, then

another, and another. I smiled, allowing my fangs to show. “That’s why you haven’t attacked yet. Why you haven’t come for him.”

“I always needed you,” Kaden said. “I never denied that.”

“Kaden?” My voice was low and soft, even as I swallowed every bit of bile that rose with his words. I stopped a fraction away from him, barely controlling the Ig’Morruthen trying to rip itself free from my skin and eviscerate his incorporeal form.

“Yes?” His eyes fell to my face, my lips as if his words meant a godsdamn thing to me.

I raised a single hand tracing over the side of his face. He shuddered as if he could feel the tip of my nails along his skin. “What in that psychotic brain of yours makes you believe I would bring Gabby back to this kind of life? I already damned her once. I will not damn her twice. That is not love, but then, love is not a concept you are familiar with.”

I dropped my hand, and Kaden straightened as if waking from a trance.

“Let’s make one thing perfectly clear. You will never have me again. You lost me long before Samkiel returned. You kept her from me, used her to make me do what you wished, and then you *took* her from me. I will burn this world to ash, and when I find you, I will kill you. Then Samkiel and his betrothed can build their new kingdom from that.”

I spun on my heel, my form rippling. I shot out of the factory in my wyvern form, leaving dust in my wake. Family. That’s what Samkiel had now and what he could keep. My wings beat a fraction harder as I climbed higher in the sky, away from the factory, from the street, from Kaden.

Kaden was a sand viper for sure, but this time his strike had pierced deep and true, the venom burning its way through my veins.

TWENTY-THREE

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DIANNA. A FEW DAYS LATER.



“Self-isolation is not healthy for a being with powers and emotions as strong as yours.”

Candles flickered along the rim of the large ceramic tub, the water long since cold. I took another long pull from the wine bottle, the taste dulled by the residue of blood on my tongue. I lifted my foot, the edge of my painted toes appearing above the water. A small bubble popped in the large cloud that surrounded me. I didn’t hear him enter, although I never heard Reggie. I was pretty sure he didn’t actually walk.

“Are you to remain in here until your skin wilts off?” Reggie asked.

I took another long drink and looked at him. “Do you think it will, or will I heal from that, too?”

“It has been a few days since Kaden taunted you. You have fed and trained religiously but haven’t left the temple. Why is that?”

“I’m cramping.”

Reggie said nothing.

I waved my hand. “Yeah, even creatures of the night menstruate.”

“Ah, I assume Kaden referred to you as such?”

I ignored him and set the empty wine bottle beside the tub before sinking beneath the water. The noise of the world became muffled, and I heard nothing but the steady rhythm of my heart. I slowly sat up, pushing my hair back from my face. The bubbles clung to my skin as I turned to eye Reggie through thick, wet lashes.

“It makes sense that your appetite would increase with your menstruation, but I am not a meal for you to eat.”

A slow smile crossed my face. “Don’t worry. I’ve fed enough, and besides, I am sure you taste like stars and dust.” I reached over the tub’s edge, grabbing the third bottle of wine.

“Your temper as well has increased in the last few days. Maybe there is another reason?”

“Nope.”

“Not the words from the angry creature that made you, perhaps?”

The wine bottle stilled against my lips as I glared at him. “I have to be stronger for what I have planned. Kaden reminded me of that. That’s all.”

Reggie stared at me as if he didn’t believe me. I took a long drink before letting my arm hang over the side of the tub, bottle in hand.

“Do you want to hear a story?”

Reggie waited.

“It’s how I originally got my bloody reputation.”

Reggie tipped his head in interest. “Enlighten me.”

“When I first changed, my body was adjusting, and I was adapting to my new life. I did everything Kaden said, killed who he wanted, and made a mess of it. Funny part was that I enjoyed it. Blood lust in its purest form is damn near orgasmic. Every sense is in overdrive. Kaden said it was normal when changing, but I soon learned how not normal I was. I don’t remember it happening, but I remember slipping into this pattern. My sister caught on before anyone else. She always did. Kaden noticed our connection, and slowly our visits became fewer and farther between.”

I snorted and took another drink, leaning my head back against the tub.

“I think the only time he actually liked me was when I was more like him, and I felt less mortal. It didn’t matter, though. Gabby never gave up. She would call and write, trying to find me every chance she got. Gods, I think she would have sent an army for me if she could. Eventually, she found Novas, took a boat in the middle of the night, and walked into a house of monsters. She *demanded* she get her sister back.”

I looked at Reggie. He hadn’t moved, unnaturally still in the same position.

“Of course, Kaden said no, so she threatened to leave me forever, and something in me snapped. I couldn’t lose my sister. I mean, I gave up my life for her. So I remembered why I changed in the first place, who really mattered, and who never gave up on me. Everything changed after that night. I stopped feeding recklessly. Kaden let me see her more, even if it

wasn't frequent enough, and the rest was history. She turned some part of me back on, I guess. I cared again, felt again. Even if I was never truly how I was before I turned."

The bathroom grew silent.

"I don't have that anymore." My voice dropped, the tears filling my eyes, making the wine bottle in my hand blurry. I picked at the label with my thumbnail and continued, speaking mostly to myself. "The one person who actually loved me, who cared, who would cross oceans and face monsters to save me, is gone. I am truly and utterly alone. That's what Kaden reminded me of when he showed me Samkiel. He got his family back, and I lost mine."

His voice was like a whisper in the wind. "That's where you are wrong. There is so much you have yet to do and see. You've only just begun."

I rolled my eyes, sinking further into the tub. I tilted the bottle back, taking a large gulp. "You know you never make sense."

"If I could make a suggestion."

I sighed, raising a single brow. "Go on."

"I would merely suggest you be more careful with whom you spend your free time. Gods, like Ig'Morruthens, are very territorial beings. To put it lightly, your attempts to drown yourself in men and women every night to erase the taste of Samkiel are in vain. It will not deter him. He sees past your illusion. I would not be surprised if he even feels your pain on some level."

"I haven't, not since Malone in that stupid burned hotel," I said, pinching my lower lip between my teeth. "It helped, for a little while, indulging in others. Helped block out that void that lives in my chest now that she's gone. But I need to preserve all my energy for what's to come. That's what I need to focus on, and I can't waste it on lackluster mortals who can barely perform."

"Ah," Reggie said. "No other reason, perhaps?"

"Like what, oh wise one?"

"That maybe your feelings for Samkiel are far stronger than you recognized?"

My lips curled into a snarl. "I feel nothing."

"Your reactions suggest otherwise."

I closed my eyes, refusing to look at him. It wasn't a complete lie. No matter what I did, I just felt more and more empty. Something in me ached,

something profound, lonely, and angry. I'd shoved it so far down, praying it would suffocate. Yet, even knowing how vile and manipulative he was, Kaden's words hit something. Then, when I saw Samkiel and Imogen together, for just a moment and against my better judgment, I'd felt ill.

"Also, I hope you are aware that being betrothed means something else in the Netherworld."

Of course, Reggie hit the mark on the head once more.

"I don't care," I said with a sigh, opening my eyes.

He nodded toward the bottles surrounding the tub. "This would also suggest otherwise."

I turned my head, my eyes narrowing on him. "What happens if I rip you into tiny shreds in a small area? Do you think it would affect my temple?"

"I think this act you portray will only suffocate you. Burying feelings hurts no one but yourself. You will drown in the tide you are trying to subdue, slowly and painfully. You will end up truly numb. That will be a grand mistake and not only just for you."

I traced a bubble on the side of the tub. "You know you make sense only like fifty percent of the time, right?"

"I know you hear me perfectly, yet you refuse to listen. I understand your grief for your sister, but why does feeling for Samkiel hurt you as badly? What else have you buried?"

The hair rose on the back of my neck, his words crawling over my skin. A part of my subconscious begged me to answer. Only it would be anger he got, not the harsh truth.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

"Reggie, I came here to relax, and you are ruining it." I pinched the bridge of my nose, wincing.

Reggie went on. "You are not hearing me. It was preconceived that if Samkiel could not find his mate, his soul tie, then he would marry. There must always be two rulers for the realms. Two leaders. Two monarchs. It was just how it was done at that time."

"Great, I wish them all the best. I hope they have a grand wedding with stupid birds that sing too loudly and a castle and children to rule long after them." I waved a hand, splashing water on the floor between us. "See? Completely unbothered. Can we talk about anything else?"

If Reggie could sigh, I swore I heard it.

His words hit me, though. A soul tie. I hated that word, too. Another part of their world that fell into ours. The perfect mate, the reason the Mark of Dhihsin even existed. You were lucky if you found yours. Most didn't, and those who did loved to flaunt the marks that appeared on their fingers. I always assumed my soul tie died in some freak accident. At one point, I thought maybe it was Kaden, but now the thought made me nauseous.

A soul tie couldn't hurt you, not really. It would be like shredding their own soul. It was every bit of love you could have for another person, and of course, Gabby had eaten that up. She had wanted her soul tie. I wondered if it had been Rick. Maybe it was. He had died for her.

"Look, Kaden may be manipulative, but he's right. What was I thinking? We're so different. I was stupid to think..." I paused, something inside of me stretching awake.

"If I may," Reggie interjected, but I ignored him.

"It doesn't matter. Imogen's perfect for him. They are about fairness and justice. Both made and crafted by that beautiful light." My nails tapped on the edge of the bathtub. "Powerful men, Dianna. Be careful of powerful men."

"Yes, but..."

I nodded to myself, tipping the wine bottle back and cutting him off. "That's what Gabby said, and she was right. Now, she's turned to ash, and I'm stuck between them."

"You do realize that falling in love with Samkiel did not kill your sister?"

The water in the tub boiled around me, and the wine bottle hit the wall, shards of glass exploding into the air. The temple ruins shook as every candle burst to life. Flames flared, chasing the shadows from the darkened room. A low, thunderous growl escaped my lips as I gripped the tub so tight it melted beneath my hands.

"If you ever say that to me again, I will rip you to pieces." My voice emerged deep and rough, but Reggie only folded his arms tighter. "Now get out."

"I have witnessed gods made of light and dark make realms shudder from their power and then be completely incapacitated from loneliness and heartbreak. What happens when there are no more enemies for you to burn? I do not wish that fate for you."

“Says the fate, who has seen a thousand different outcomes and does nothing about them, right?” I yelled. “If you didn’t want that, maybe you should have helped a little harder before Drake dragged my sister back to that damned monster. Instead, you are just as useless as the rest of them. Grand fucking speeches once the blood has already hit and dried on the floor.”

I was slipping again. I knew it. A vile and vicious creature made of scales and claws and teeth. One designed to protect me and my bruised and beaten heart. I waited for Reggie to snap, to tell me how much of an ugly, mean bitch I was, but he said nothing.

I took a shuddering breath, steam pouring off the water. “Why do you care, anyway? I am what you and Kaden have all preached, a monster and an abomination, right? That’s what you said in your now destroyed prison.”

“The translation of those words does not mean the same here. You are merely something that should not exist. It does not have to mean anything —” Reggie went rigid, his head craned back. The slits above and below his eyes opened, opaque beams shining briefly from his six eyes. They closed as soon as they opened, returning to normal as he looked at me.

“What?”

Reggie gave me a chaste smile. “It is nothing.”

It was a sudden switch in conversation, but one I so desperately needed.

“Okay, well, go away then. I’m done talking.” I nodded and turned away from him. The water in the tub no longer bubbled and spewed. “I want to be alone.”

Reggie’s gaze did not falter, but I knew he was about to disagree. “You know, back in the ruling era, monarchs would meet to try to bridge peace before battle?”

“Well, I am not a monarch.”

The flames from the candles and walls smoldered before burning out completely.

“I only wish to help you. I hope you see that.”

I leaned my head against the cool lip of the tub, closing my eyes and meaning every word I said. “Fate or not, get out before I burn you alive.”

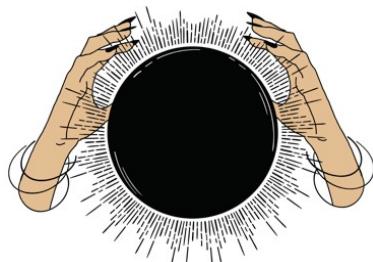
The air shifted as he left me.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

TWENTY-FOUR

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CAMILLA. TWO WEEKS LATER.



Emerald magic swirled around my extended hands, the small ring vibrating against the table as I whispered the spell again. It stopped, remaining perfectly still as the edge finally sealed. The last rune burned a deep emerald green before disappearing. Sighing, I dropped my hands and wiped my brow. This much magic in such a short time wore me out, although I wouldn't mention it to her.

Her mood had been so abrasive, so aggressive these last few weeks, and I was too afraid to ask for even a small break. She didn't come upstairs much anymore, staying in her wyvern form, feeding and waiting. I knew what was coming, and I hated that, in some part, it was my fault.

"I should have done more."

The air stirred to my right, and Roccurem appeared. "You are worried about her behavior, too?"

I nodded, thumbing the ring in my hand. "She's been erratic these last few weeks, to say the least."

"I believe she has reached the point I feared."

"She has been at this point for a while now. I think Gabby was the only thing keeping her from going off the deep end."

Roccurem tilted his head. "Enlighten me."

"She is so vicious and uncaring. So—"

"Don't mistake her behavior, young witch. She is in pain. Grief is a powerful emotion that all beings handle differently. No one is the same. The god king sees it as well."

I nodded and dropped the ring on the large mantle before turning to face the fate. "And I had a hand in that. I had hoped Samkiel would get to her,

reach her before it was really too late.”

“He was close, very close, it seems. The form she rests in now is a precaution.”

“Why?”

“It helps her not to dream of the sister she lost and Samkiel. She feels anguish that he can reach her so well. She wishes for the pain she feels, and he eases it. Samkiel makes her feel something more. He makes her want things she doesn’t feel she deserves. Therefore, she lashes out more violently. She considers the pain she feels as punishment for what occurred. The more time Samkiel is with her, the more of her mortality slips through, but Kaden hit a very fragile nerve. One, he knows how to strum perfectly.”

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat, my eyes darting to the dungeon beneath us. “About Imogen?”

The day Imogen came back was the day the tiny spark of life that remained in her eyes died. Darkness had followed her like a cloak since then. Dianna felt intensely for someone who worked so hard to subvert her emotions.

“Yes, but more.” He nodded toward the lower floor where she stayed now. “He only seems to remind her how alone she truly feels. Now she has no sister here to bring her back from a perilous edge, no one she trusts to confide in. Emotions of beings with such great power can be deadly to themselves, like poison. The Old Gods calcified and turned to stone. Some even took their own lives after battles. Depression is peculiar for beings of the Otherworld. I have learned from watching so many that grief comes in waves and patterns. It flows, ebbs, and returns, claiming its way through the chest, the heart, and the brain. It seeks what they bury, aching for release from emotions pushed down far too deep. The darkness she claimed when she took Kaden’s blood is only feeding her own beast. When she is around Samkiel, he makes her see, feel, and care. Only this time, I am afraid Kaden may have gone too far.”

“Kaden.” I nodded, the reality of the situation seeping in. “It was always so funny to me that he claimed to not care about her, yet he destroyed anyone who even attempted to get close to her.”

“It’s more than that. More than I am allowed to say, but in simplest terms, Gabriella was her heart, Samkiel is her soul, and Kaden has orders to destroy both. I am afraid he has accomplished his task.”

“How romantic.”

“Do you know the history of the Ig’Morruthens?”

I scraped up the remains of ash and cedar. “I can’t say that I do.”

“Their creation was forbidden. An ancient ritual crafted from the darkest form of magic and chaos to help end the war of wars. One ruled all. He was the first to shift, to walk on two legs. His blood could make harrowing beasts, and he and his kin were feared among realms. Some of his creations ruled beneath the ground, their forms so large they could block out the very sun. Some had no legs, others far too many. Kaden’s classification is very powerful. Before The First War began, they only created two because that was all they needed from his line. They ruled the skies above, giant winged beasts known as dragons by the mortals, although the name came from a word long lost. They were made to fight Primordials, Titans, and Gods and succeeded dangerously well. If a dragon took the field, warriors were not needed. One creature alone was destruction and ruin. Wings were heard from above, and cities were left in embers. You must realize how powerful they are, how strong, and how much I fear what she is going through.”

“You think she will destroy this world?”

Reggie’s lips formed into a thin line. “She has the potential.”

I nodded, dread eroding my gut. Reggie had seen it all as a fate, and I could tell he was worried. It terrified me to the point of making me sick. I leaned over the altar, grabbing the small stone I had crafted for her. I flipped it in my hand and looked it over again. “She wants this, and I know you know what for.”

“A final decision.”

“Are you going to tell him?” His brow lifted as he regarded me. “I know where you go when you phase from here.”

“You are a very powerful queen. It seems Kryella’s blood runs through you more than you know.” Roccurrem tilted his head toward me, his six opaque eyes alight.

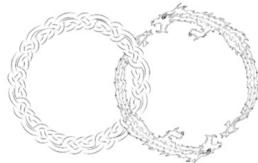
“Kryella? The Goddess of Magic? I don’t think so.”

“You also have a long road ahead, witch queen. They will need you for what’s coming. I do apologize for what you will endure. Hold on to the light you find. You will need it.”

Dianna was right. It was as if he looked so far ahead and only gave us the bare minimum. Half the time, his words made no sense, but my gut churned, thinking about what he could see that would make him worry for

me. I glanced at him, wiping my hands along my side. “What exactly is coming?”

“Something far worse than Kaden, far, far worse.”



MY HEELS ECHOED AGAINST THE RUINED STEPS AS I ENTERED THE TEMPLE’S lower level. Torches hung every few feet, the flames beating against the rustic temple walls. I wondered if this place was an old home to her, one she never told me about, or just something far enough away in the desert that no one could find it. Not even him. The stairway opened into a large, dark, empty expanse. I flicked my fingers open, and green flames danced against my palm. The darkness pressed in on me, and I stumbled. Bones scraped and rolled beneath my feet. I glanced down and wished I hadn’t. Skeletal remains were scattered, crowding the floor. Skulls, femurs, and rib bones serrated by teeth far larger than mine.

The back of my neck prickled, screaming at danger. Hot, scalding breath moved the hair atop my head. I raised my magic higher and turned, my heart leaping into my throat. The beast’s mouth gaped, revealing an orange glow of pure flame at the back of her throat.

“I finished it.”

Her massive jaws slammed shut mere inches from me, and I willed myself not to close my eyes.

She was massive, and all serrated plated scales jutting backward. The single claw on her thick heavy wings dug into the floor, supporting a massive lean body. Her hind legs were powerful, and a thick serrated tail wrapped around a half-crumpled column.

Dianna didn’t speak and didn’t move. She just continued to stare at me with those crimson gleaming eyes. The spikes and scales along the elongated reptilian form of the Ig’Morruthen shimmered with specks of blood. She exhaled, her snout inches from me, her breath bathing me in heat. A noise of agreement vibrated from her throat. It was a scare tactic, and I knew she could hear the erratic beat of my racing heart. She was so massive she could swallow me whole with one bite. My throat bobbed, and

a bead of sweat ran down my spine. Her head swung to the side, her sinuous body following, the ground shaking with every step.

A part of me ached for her. She had fallen so far in only a few short months. I had seen the videos and the pictures Kaden had his spies take. She'd smiled at Samkiel at that festival with cotton candy and bright lights behind them and seemed so happy for once. When she was with Samkiel, I didn't need my magic to see that she glowed. He woke something in her, powerful, primal, and necessary. And now it was gone.

She was now everything Kaden had wanted her to be: a perfect weapon, pure destruction, and merciless rage. This was the Dianna he wished for when Samkiel first came back. Honestly, I was lucky to have my head still.

I watched as scales, wings, and tail disappeared into the darkness.

"I-I need a week to recharge if we want to keep to the plan. I've been using too much to cloak this place, to make the stone and the ring. Just a week. Please."

I expected a growl in response, flames to erupt from the far corridor, or even the room to shake and shudder. The only response I got was silence, and truthfully, that scared me more than anything.

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TWENTY-FIVE

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SAMKIEL. ONE WEEK LATER.



“I’m telling you exactly what I saw. They were out there one minute and gone the next. It sounded like a convoy rolled over my house and then just silence.”

I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose as the small man placed his hands on his hips.

Vincent shuffled on his feet as Imogen returned a framed picture to its place.

“I understand your concern, but telling the local news only made matters worse. Do you understand?”

The graying man held up his hands. “All I know is red-eyed monsters walk this world, and I’m not taking any chances, okay?”

“And the large sum of money given for said tip was inconsequential, right?” Imogen stepped up beside me.

He swallowed and opened his mouth to respond, but I dropped my hand, cutting him off.

“Enough.” The room rattled along with every nerve ending in my body. “You made a spectacle over missing bovine, put a neighboring city in fear of a winged beast, when in reality you may have very well let them out yourself.”

“I would nev—”

“We are done here,” I said, turning on my heel. I stopped near Vincent. “Pay him double. Replace the creatures he so desperately cares for, and make sure he doesn’t call mortals the next time he has an *episode*.” I emphasized the last word, glancing toward the stack of empty alcohol

bottles. I stepped into the sunshine with Imogen right behind me, the screen door slamming shut at our backs.

“That was a little harsh, even for you,” Imogen said.

“I do not have time for this.” I strode down the walkway, dirt coating my shoes.

“Storming out and being rude won’t help us find her any quicker,” Imogen nearly shouted.

I spun to face her right as Vincent left the house and jogged down the wooden steps.

“Neither will the house calls I must make over every slight inconvenience. Do you truly believe Dianna is flying around stealing large farm animals? That’s not what she is feeding on.”

My heart sank at the thought of who she may be ingesting, plaguing my brain with horrific images.

I blew out a breath and dragged my hand through my hair roughly. Imogen stood there, watching me and waiting. “She’s alone, Imogen. I know what that can do to someone. My isolation was self-imposed. A madman ripped everything and everyone from Dianna by force. She did not just lose her sister. She lost friends, shelter, and a home. Now, she has nothing and no one—”

“She has you, and that’s a lot. You have saved countless others. You’ve saved us, and you can save her, too. Just please try to be level-headed about this.”

“I am trying. That’s the problem. All I know is I feel this immense ache, and it screams at me to do something. I know it’s her. I can’t explain it, but I know it is.”

Vincent stood quietly and watched us. I expected him to shoot off another retort, but he said nothing, something stirring in his eyes that I didn’t recognize.

Imogen only nodded. “There’s still time to find her, to find him. We have not lost the battle yet, my liege.”

“We may not have, but something is wrong, and this is not helping.” I sighed, my head thrumming once more. “Nothing is.”

The last part slipped past my lips without my consent. I said nothing more before calling upon my power and shooting toward the sky, thunder rumbling ominously as my being mixed with the energy above.



I REFORMED OUTSIDE OF SILVER CITY GUILD. THE BALCONY I'D LANDED ON opened up to the office. The guild was busy, everyone scurrying around, trying to pick up the pieces of this now turbulent world.

I walked past the desk and into the conference room, where Xavier presided over a large pile of papers, news clippings, and laptops.

“Anything else?”

His head snapped up. He ran his hand over his hair. “Was the farm a bust?”

My brow ticked up in confusion.

“Was it a dead end?” Xavier clarified.

Cameron and Xavier adjusted so quickly to the new language here that even after only a month, they knew phrases I still tried to grasp. They were smart when not being mischievous, but perhaps that intelligence only heightened the chaos those two caused.

“Oh.” I cleared my throat. “Yes, missing bovine from a mortal that smelled of cheap alcohol.”

Xavier nodded. “I haven’t—”

The air in the room shifted. I drew a blade, the steel tip resting at Roccurem’s throat as the fate solidified.

“One move and your blood will decorate this table. Am I clear?”

The fate stood very still.

Xavier leaped to his feet, his weapon appearing in his hand. I had felt Roccurem’s arrival, but Xavier had not, and he was none too happy about it. Xavier flanked me on my left, ready to defend his king. Papers settled as the air rectified itself.

“You will not find your queen in articles or by questioning mortals with poor eyesight.”

My hand flexed on the handle of my blade. “Where is she?”

“She plans to siege the city.”

“The city?” I took a deep breath. “Why?”

“She will take it if...”

“If what, Roccurem?” I pressed the tip of my blade a fraction harder against his throat. The storm that roared through the sky this time was mine. A million particles of my power crowded the air, disrupting the atmosphere. Shelves shook, the room resonating from the force of the thunder. I had told myself I was slipping, and here was proof. “You have been right there with her, yet you cannot stop her.”

“I cannot. You know how this works. As a fate, I am not to interfere.”

I actually laughed, and Xavier shot me a concerned look. “Not to intervene? That’s all you have done since the beginning. Isn’t that why you were locked up? Wasn’t it your brethren’s inability to not interfere that caused your downfall? You are supposed to be neutral, a whisper upon winds to spin mortals’ destiny, a vessel, a tool for the old gods and the next. Yet you are not by my side.”

“She is starved for affection.”

Blood raged in my ears at even the mere mention. “I am telling you now to watch the next words that pour from your lips, for they may well be your last.”

“You are the problem.”

My lip curled as I damn near drove the blade through his throat.

Roccurem did not flinch as it pressed into the flesh between his collarbones. “She fell in love with you as you did her. That is the problem for so many.”

I felt something in me break, my chest physically aching at those words. Fates, while annoying, were not capable of lying.

Roccurem’s hand flicked up, a cloud of stars and mist springing from his fingertips. It floated overhead, forming images. My gut tightened when I recognized Dianna and me at the festival, playing a memory of us. Her laughter as she walked, even distorted, damn near dropped me to my knees. Gods, how long had it been since I’d heard that sound? I wanted to run, to chase it.

I watched, desperate for even this sight of her. Her hand wrapped around the cone of that damn fluffy treat. She turned and smiled at me, whole, bright, and radiating life, the jacket I’d given her slipping off her shoulder. The scene shifted, and we were back in the garden at Drake’s. I handed her that yellow flower. Her eyes widened, taken aback by the gesture, her lips curving in a gentle smile. Emotion flared in her eyes, the

spark of something soft and infinitely special. Why hadn't I picked up on it until now?

"It is also a problem for her." He moved his hand, twisting his wrist, and the image changed. "The memories resonate with guilt."

Dianna screamed and blew the building to pieces. I jerked. The anguish filling that scream haunted my memories and fueled my nightmares.

"She feels her emotions were the driving force of her sister's demise, that caring for you, even for a moment, was weakness."

The room returned to normal, and he clasped his hands in front of himself. Xavier lowered his weapons, the room falling into a quiet, somber silence. My hands shook. I was struggling with despair and not only my pain but hers.

"What's your plan, Roccurem?"

"When she comes for the city. Let her in. You *must* stay on this path for it all to work."

"For what to work?" I growled.

"Everything," he said. His eyes opened, two above and two below where the natural ones sat. They were all white and opaque. "You are running out of time." He looked at Xavier behind me. "You all are."

Those damn words! I wondered if fate had been whispering in my ear this whole time.

My fist clenched on the blade I held angled at his throat. "I have neither the time nor patience for riddles and games. Not now and never about her. *Where is she?*"

The room vibrated with unkempt power, demanding a way out. Coils of energy snapped and bent against my skin.

"Kaden spoke to her. It created another fracture in an already damaged psyche."

"If he touched her, I will—"

"He did, but not physically, and yet his words cut sharper than any blade."

"Is she hurt?"

"Deeply, but you can feel that can you not? Your concern is not only for her physical well-being but mental as well."

"I know what solitude can do to a damaged mind and heart. I also know that Kaden uses his words to push her farther away from me. What did he say to her?"

He only nodded, ignoring the blade digging into his throat. “Dianna knows about your father’s plan for your betrothal.”

My blade faltered. Energy writhed and bucked against my wavering control. I had not realized the room was shaking until I spotted Xavier trying to hold on to the desk and the items atop it.

“Kaden used a portion of your past to further drive a wedge between any progress you have made.”

I felt sick to my stomach, my heart hammering in my chest. “But Imogen and I never... It was null and void. War broke out, and there was no need for a union.”

“She does not know that.”

I dropped my blade, summoning it back to its ether. “I need to find her, talk to her. Please. It’s imperative.”

He stepped back, a swirling mass of stars bending at his feet, reminding me he wore the shell of a man, but he was not one.

“You need not beg me, god king, for she will come to you. You merely must let her in. She seeks an item you have, and she will take it, but if you can somehow trap her instead, maybe, just maybe, there is hope for a better future—a better outcome than what I have seen. She has constructed a wall of armor around herself and her emotions. You simply need to find a crack, a way in.”

I swallowed, knowing he was about to leave and even my power could not summon fate. “How?” I snapped. “Tell me how.”

The growing mass at his feet grew, encompassing him. He dissipated into the cosmos, but his last words rang through the room.

“*Kaden took her family from her. Give her one back.*”

TWENTY-SIX

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CAMERON. A FEW DAYS LATER.



The sun peeked from behind one of the large silver skyscrapers as horns honked and people talked, shouted, and laughed. I rubbed my eyes, trying to wake myself up.

“Are you dozing off again?”

A swift kick to my shin had me jerking awake. I dropped my hand, sitting upright as Xavier shook his head at me.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Have you been awake the last few days hunting a dark-haired Ig’Morruthen or trying to find Neverra?”

His brow ticked upward. “Yes.”

I nodded. “Oh yeah, you’re right, you have.”

We sat at a small round table outside a busy cafe. I thought that was what Imogen had called it. All their words were so different from ours. After Logan and Samkiel had shown us the massive database of the myriad of languages they spoke, what they ate, and how they interacted, Xavier and I were exhausted. Xavier had been on my team when Samkiel split us all up, but Xavier was always with me. I was pretty sure we’d been inseparable since joining The Hand. We just clicked.

I leaned back in my chair, rubbing the back of my head. My hair was so much shorter now. Xavier also had his cut, but he had gone with a faded undercut with a few of his dreads still sitting atop his head.

“I wonder how good it is?”

Xavier snorted and shook his head, raising a fork full of fruit to his mouth. My eyes followed, watching hungrily as his lips closed over the bite. “Of course, that’s where your mind is at.”

“I’m just curious as to where Samkiel’s mind is. He never acted this way toward anyone, not even Imogen. He hasn’t slept, but neither has Logan, both of them running around like madmen.”

“Love will do that to you.”

“Do you think he is in love?”

“After Roccurem’s little light show, how could I not?” Xavier said.

I reached forward, stealing a bite of his food.

“I don’t even know why you bother ordering food when you always eat mine,” Xavier snapped, poking my hand with his fork.

“Yours always taste better.” I grinned through a mouthful of pancakes before swallowing. “But you’re not wrong. Typical Samkiel, falling in love with the most dangerous creature in the world.”

Xavier snickered. “It makes sense. He is also one of the most dangerous beings in the universe.”

I went to respond and stopped as the curvy brown-haired waitress from earlier returned. It was the fourth time in less than thirty minutes. She smiled, her gaze lingering as I leaned forward, folding my arms on the table.

“Refill?” she asked, a wave of nervousness wafting off of her.

“No, baby. Thank you.”

Her cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink. She looked at Xavier, but he only shook his head and smiled.

“Umm.” She paused and glanced back toward the large window of the cafe before continuing. “Is it true you two are members of The Hand?”

I placed a hand underneath my chin and smiled. Her throat bobbed, and a bead of sweat touched the side of her face. She was nervous but brave enough to ask.

“And what makes you think we are?” I asked as Xavier shifted in his seat.

She shot another quick look toward the cafe, curling a piece of loose hair that had escaped her ponytail around her finger. “We... I mean, I saw on the news the falling blue lights, and I’ve seen... Samkiel.” Her blush deepened as she said his name. Xavier snickered as he caught it, too. We had grown so used to how everyone reacted around him. He had a unique effect on women, men, and apparently fire-wielding Ig’Morruthens.

A slow smile curved my lips. “Oh, you like him? You know he is not the only one with powers?” I lifted my hand, the blue celestial light dancing

between my fingertips.

“We are good on refills, miss,” Xavier said, drawing her eyes back to him. She nodded once, clutching the pitcher she held. She took one last glance at the flicker of blue power before heading back inside.

My eyes followed her as she left, the other three waitresses scattering as I caught them staring.

“Leave the mortals alone, Cam.”

“But they blush so easily.” Not that Xavier cared. He was more interested in men.

“You just love to tease them.”

I winked at him. “Maybe.”

Xavier stabbed at another piece of fruit. “Do you feel it too?”

I smiled at the group of whispering waitresses inside. “Oh, I feel something.”

“Cameron.”

Xavier’s tone grounded me, and I grinned at him. The intricately woven metal chair groaned as he shifted his weight, just a bit too small to support him fully. “I’m being serious.”

This whole world seemed too small for us. Samkiel was right about the clothes, too.

“Yes, I feel it. It reminds me of the Battle of Gurruth with that damned giant wyrm that swallowed the whole town and then almost ate us, except now we’re just waiting for those jaws to open, and they haven’t yet.” I curved my fingers like teeth and clapped my hands together, snapping like jaws close to his face.

Xavier laughed, swatting my hands away. “Well, let’s hope we won’t be swallowed.”

“Why?” I shrugged. “That’s always the fun part.”

Xavier shook his head, ignoring me. “Did Samkiel tell you what they discussed at the council meeting?”

I rubbed my hands together. It was getting colder here. Logan had told us how long winter seemed to last on Onuna, but he also spoke of its beauty.

“Mostly. They want Dianna. She stole a fate, attacked us, and attacked Samkiel. Those crimes alone are grounds for execution.” I met his gaze. “The permanent, Oblivion kind.”

Xavier chewed the inside of his lip. “Do they think she is as bad as the one they call Kaden?”

“Absolutely. Especially after she gutted me.”

His fork stilled. “You know what I mean.”

“She’s very bad and not just in the hot can summon fire with a wave of her hand kind of way. Something inside of her makes Samkiel weak in the knees, and they are terrified of that kind of power. But she gave her life for her sister, and that deserves respect. That’s why she is all fire and blood, according to Samkiel. That counts for something in my book.”

Xavier nodded, sipping from his cup.

The shops and businesses near us buzzed with life, people coming and going, laughing with their loved ones, or just talking on the devices they carried. The silence grew at the table, both of us thinking the same thing.

“He won’t do it.”

“He has no choice,” Xavier said. “Unir made the council before Samkiel was born. It is the only thing that has a hope of keeping gods in line so they don’t become what Nismera sought to be. The realms cannot fall under one god’s total and complete control.”

“Fucking Nismera.” I clicked my tongue. “A shame she was so hot but so evil.”

Xavier chuckled. “It’s been quiet the last few days. It worries me.”

“Me too. Samkiel thought he felt her the day they returned from the council as if she was in the room with us. He’s been saying something feels different and has been even bossier and mean since then. He’s worried, but it’s been quiet for weeks except for the weird livestock shortage.”

“You think she is still watching him? Watching us?” Xavier leaned forward, his fingers tapping against his cup.

“Honestly? No. I think she is gearing up for something else, and that worries me. I’ve never fought a King of Yejedin, and from what Samkiel said, she’s a Queen. She ripped my guts out and barely seemed out of breath.”

Xavier looked away. “Yes, thanks for reminding me again.”

“Sorry.” I forced a smile. Xavier was just as protective of me as I was of him, even if his current boyfriend wasn’t a fan of our relationship.

“It’s fine.” Xavier shifted in his seat as if he’d grown uncomfortable. “I actually need to talk to you about something. I wanted to sooner, but everything has been crazy, and honestly, I don’t think there’s a right time.”

“Okay.”

“So I know—” He stopped and tipped his head back. My gaze followed his as the overcast sky darkened, thick, heavy clouds rolling toward us.

“Is it supposed to snow today?” Xavier asked. “Or did Samkiel find something else?”

“Only one way to find out.” We stood, nearly toppling the chairs. His powers had been growing more explosive, to say the least, but even a slight mood change could affect the atmosphere.

“Leaving so soon?”

My blood ran cold, my rings vibrating, shouting danger. I couldn’t believe we hadn’t felt her sooner. I was so attuned to what Xavier had to tell me that I hadn’t noticed the birds had stopped singing and flown off. Xavier’s head whipped toward her, both of us drawing an ablazed weapon.

Dianna rolled her eyes, the gesture so mortal compared to the beast I knew lurked beneath the facade. She sighed, her tongue running over her red-painted lips. She shrugged out of her long jacket, exposing her bare shoulders. Her skintight black dress clung to her curves, revealing that she had no weapons. Xavier and I paused at the display.

“No weapons,” she said and twirled, showing us the crisscross design of the dress across her back. She shrugged back into her jacket before grabbing the bottom of her dress and raising it to reveal one toned tan thigh, then the other. “See.”

“I guess you don’t need weapons when you are one,” Xavier quipped. I tried to hide the smile that curved my lips. She nodded and sat, gracefully crossing her legs. Dianna relaxed like a large feline, her red-tipped claws tapping on the chair arm. I swore I saw sparks ignite against the metal.

“What about your hair?” I asked. That knot arranged atop her head could easily hide a dagger.

Dianna cocked her head to the side, a slow smile spreading over her face. She reached up and took it down, the inky dark mass falling in waves around her shoulders. A small blade hit the table. She shrugged. “Okay, I’ll give you that one. Maybe I had one weapon.”

She waved a hand, the long sleeves of her dark jacket dancing with the movement. “Now sit.”

Xavier and I shared a glance before sitting in unison, the chairs scraping against concrete, the only sound. Vehicles didn’t pass or honk. The wind had stilled as if it, too, was afraid of the woman before us.

“How’s your day?”

This time I laughed. “Excuse me?”

She shrugged and tucked her hair behind her ear. “It’s brunch time, right? I never understood the need for breakfast this late. I think it’s more so for the alcohol, really.”

I nodded, Xavier and I remaining on alert. “That’s why you’re here? To talk about brunch?”

“No, I’m stalling, but apparently, I suck at it.” She sighed and plucked at her nails. “I know Samkiel is about two hundred miles away right now, and I need him a little closer.”

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. “Oh, yeah? Keeping tabs?”

“Of course.”

“He’s been keeping tabs on you, too.”

Xavier kicked at my shin under the table, telling me to stop.

Dianna merely rolled her eyes. “Of course he is. How’s your stomach, by the way? Organs feeling better?”

“Yeah, thanks for that.” I took a sip of my drink. “We should have a rematch.”

She smiled, the tip of her canines showing. “The next time we fight, your light will dance across the sky.”

Xavier shifted, his aggression bristling.

“You would hurt someone that Samkiel cares about? Harsh. Is that how Ig’Morruthens show love?”

Her eyes flared a shade brighter.

“You know, I’m not good with threats or bargains, and I am even worse at negotiations because, above all, I have a temper.”

A bell rang, and my heart sank because I knew who was approaching. Xavier stilled, his eyes remaining on Dianna, ready for any sudden movement. My heart beat once, twice as the waitress made her way over. I saw a smirk grace Dianna’s face.

“I didn’t know you guys would have company. I am so sorry.”

“Oh, it’s okay.” Dianna smiled and leaned forward, clasping her hands.

The waitress smiled at her. “If you prefer to come inside and eat, we have room. It looks like the sky is going to fall any minute now.” She giggled to herself at her own joke.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Dianna said, the threat inherent in her tone.

Maybe baiting her had been a bad idea.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

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SAMKIEL



“I told you and Vincent several times prior that a gathering is out of the question,” I snapped. Imogen trailed behind me. Logan had given her a tablet, and she was flipping through pictures of the ambassadors.

“And I told you they need it.”

I tossed my hands up and spun. The celestials we passed pretended not to notice any of us. “A gathering is ridiculous at a time like this.”

“It’s not. You need to build back a relationship with every ambassador here,” Imogen countered.

“No, what I need to do—”

“I know. Find her, stop Kaden. I know, but the council is growing restless. If we can convince the mortals everything is okay, I can also convince the council. Do you really want them to make a trip down here?”

“They have no power over me.”

“That is debatable.”

She placed a hand on her hip and glared at me. “If they find you insufficient to rule, they have what they need to hold a god, and then Vincent fully takes over with them at his side.”

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. “They could not kill Kaden or even touch Dianna.”

I turned, storming back into the main office. Imogen followed me inside, the double doors closing behind us.

“They would try, though. You know that I’m not trying to argue. I’m only here to advise.”

“Dude, I said, set my nose, not break it further!” Cameron’s voice bellowed from the conference hall. I turned toward it, Imogen right behind

me. Cameron let out a loud grunt.

“Stop being a baby,” Xavier quipped.

“What is this?”

Xavier dropped his hands guiltily, and he and Cameron swiveled toward us.

“Cameron and I ran into your girlfriend again.”

“Dianna.” Why did her name always feel like a benediction when it fell from my lips?

“Yup,” Cameron said, wiggling his nose into place. “She taught me again that it is a bad idea to bait her.”

“What happened? Where is she?”

Cameron and Xavier exchanged a look before Cameron said, “Okay, so don’t be mad.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

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CAMERON



We stood outside the cafe, the sky roiling with darkness.

"I told you he would be mad," I whispered to Xavier.

If Samkiel heard me, he didn't respond, but the others cut me a glare. Samkiel's whole body grew stiff as he stared at the door. They had evacuated the street and nearby vicinity before we arrived, but even the air felt charged.

"We go in, I do the talking, and no one else moves until I say so." This time, he glanced at me. "Understood?"

I nodded, as did Xavier, Logan, Vincent, and Imogen.

"Yup, definitely mad," I said under my breath.

We followed him, falling into the same formation we had assumed thousands of times. He went in first, something we had all argued against in the past. We had been trained to walk before the gods and protect them, but Samkiel had never been like them, not for one second.

A small bell dinged as we entered, the sound nearly drowned out by the music coming through the speakers.

Dianna swayed her hips to the beat. The waitress from earlier huddled into a corner booth, whimpering softly.

Samkiel placed his hands on his hips, his jacket flaring as he watched.

Dianna spun around, beaming as she placed a piece of fruit into her mouth before hopping onto the counter. She crossed one leg over the other, the hem of her dress riding high as she leaned back, bracing herself on her hands.

"You got my message? Lovely."

Samkiel said nothing.

I glanced toward Xavier, and he nodded.

He felt it too. Something was off.

Imogen and Vincent stood focused on Dianna, their blades clenched at their sides.

Logan peered toward the terrified waitress. She cradled her twisted wrist, her face pale with pain. Logan looked at me.

I raised a brow, and he tipped his chin toward the window. A few birds chirped, nestling in the tree by the window.

“Hostages? This is new for you,” Samkiel said, his gaze never leaving her.

Dianna shrugged. “I had to get your attention somehow. I am sure you have been busy since your betrothed’s arrival.”

Imogen blanched, and I saw the line of Samkiel’s jaw twitch.

“We’re not—” Imogen started.

Samkiel raised his hand, and Imogen closed her mouth immediately.

“And you learned that information from where?”

Dianna glanced down, twirling a piece of her hair between her fingers. “Kaden.”

Pressure weighed on us, and my chest ached as if all the air had fled the room. Silence fell, weighted and nearly painful.

“He came to you?” I heard the cold, deadly rage that laced Samkiel’s voice.

“Yeah, and he told me all about your wife. Kind of sad, given the fact you never mentioned it.”

Samkiel glanced down and nodded before exploding into motion. Grabbing Dianna by the throat, he lifted and slammed her against the countertop. Dianna reached up, grasping his wrist, twisting beneath his hold as she kicked and struggled.

We stood still as he’d instructed, every single one of us stunned. Dianna had seemed so strong before, and now Samkiel held her with one hand.

“Logan,” Samkiel barked, never taking his eyes from Dianna’s. “Take the waitress from here and somewhere safe.”

Logan moved so fast he blurred, reassuring the young woman as he helped her from the booth and out of the cafe. I watched Logan take one last look behind him before he left.

Samkiel lowered his head until his face was inches from hers. “You fucked up, Camilla.”

Camilla?

“You’re not her. I knew the second I walked in. You don’t talk like her, act like her, or smell like her. My Dianna, if she took a hostage, would have fed, not merely twisted a wrist, and the last time she met Cameron, she left him with more than a broken nose.”

My brows shot up. He had a point.

“You also forgot about Dianna’s jealousy. She lit the forest of your island on fire because of a mere kiss. She would be beyond rage, thinking I had a betrothed and had lied to her. Imogen wouldn’t have made it past the front door.”

Imogen’s throat bobbed, remembering the last time the two of them had met.

“Now, where is she?” Samkiel’s voice was lethal.

Dianna’s form shimmered beneath a swirl of green magic, the illusion melting away. She turned into a stunning, curvy brunette with enough power wafting off of her that it made my skin crawl.

“You really do love her,” Camilla whispered.

“Where is she?”

“You’re right about one thing.” Camilla struggled, but Samkiel didn’t let up. “She is enraged. I didn’t lie, Kaden found her, and I don’t know what else he said besides the engagement part, but it set her off in a big way.”

“I am not betrothed to Imogen.”

“She doesn’t believe that.”

Lines of pure silver lit along his exposed wrists and under his eyes. Camilla screamed. “Do you feel that? That’s your organs cooking from the inside out. I should skin you alive for what you helped him do to Gabriella. What you helped them do to her. You helped him take her away, the last person Dianna had, the last person she loved. *You did that*, and I will make you suffer for it.”

Camilla shrieked as power ignited beneath his palm. The windows shook, green energy stretching to protect her, but Samkiel was too powerful, too lost to that blinding need to protect what he deemed his. What little magic flared near Camilla in desperate defiance burned out the second it reached him.

“Where is she?” Samkiel bellowed.

Camilla screamed. “The city!”

Samkiel let up, no longer pumping raw energy into her.

“The city.” Camilla took a shuddering breath, then another. “She only meant for me to distract all of you while she got the map. That’s it. I swear it.”

“The map?”

Camilla squirmed beneath him. “Yes, the one from Drake’s mansion, the one with the tunnels. She didn’t tell me why she suddenly wanted it, but that’s what she is after.”

“It’s back at the conference hall, Samkiel,” Vincent said.

Samkiel let Camilla go, and she sat up, rubbing her throat, the marks left by his hand and power slowly healing.

“I need a plan to catch and contain her. Alone.” He looked at each of us, his mind obviously working on a solution.

“I can help.” We all looked at Camilla. “Please. I want to.”

The disgust that crossed Samkiel’s face even put me on edge. “You’ve done more than enough, and I do not trust you.”

“I can make a spell in two seconds. A sleeping one that will keep her out long enough for you to subdue her. You just have to get it into her bloodstream.”

“You wish for me to poison her?” Samkiel all but roared.

“No, I only wish to help fix what I’ve done, okay? I know I can’t be forgiven, not by her, by anyone, but I’m so tired of this.” Camilla’s eyes glazed over. “I just want to help.”

Whatever storm brewed behind Samkiel’s eyes slowly subsided. “If you are lying to me, if what you make hurts her in any way, I know how to torture you for a thousand years, never letting death touch you. Do you understand?”

The blood drained from Camilla’s face, but she nodded.

“You’ll need to distract her?” Imogen said.

“I can help,” I said. “I just need a clear shot.”

Samkiel rubbed a hand over his face. “No.”

“Oh, come on. You made us take all those archery classes until our fingers bled. I can do this. We can do this,” I nearly pleaded, so ready to shoot something.

“Nothing is piercing her skin. I refuse to hurt her or allow my family to hurt her. End of discussion,” Samkiel said, giving me his death glare.

I decided that it probably wasn’t a good idea to push him right now. “Okay, then. Next plan.”

“What about a gas?” Xavier said.

“Oh, that’s a good one. Camilla, can you make a gas?” I asked, turning to look at the pretty little witch.

Camilla glanced between Samkiel and me, refusing to move off the counter, afraid one touch from him would electrocute her.

Samkiel ran his thumb along his bottom lip and said, “I have a better idea, actually.”

“Care to explain?” I asked.

“I need you all to evacuate the city.”

Vincent jerked in surprise. “Why?”

“Safety precaution. I am going to piss her off.”

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TWENTY-NINE

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IMOGEN



“W hy do I have to come along?” I asked as we landed outside Silver City.

We crossed the street at a light jog, Samkiel’s gaze focused on the guild. “Because I need to test a theory.”

I groaned, preferring when Cameron or Xavier was the test dummy, not me. They volunteered half the time, both of them pure mischief. They enjoyed it.

“Leave when I give you the signal. Not a moment before, okay?”

“Okay. I hope this works. For all of our sake.”

“Me too.”

I’d expected flames, screaming, and burning buildings when we made it back to Silver City. But if there was one thing I’d learned, Dianna was anything but predictable.

The city was empty. Samkiel worried about the power she might unleash, but the entire city? I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. We hadn’t fought or seen anything that could wield that kind of force in so long. But even the thought of it made sweat form on my back. Despite the chill of winter, the long-sleeved shirt I wore stuck to me.

Vehicles sat abandoned on the road. The street lights flared on as we passed beneath them and then died. An unnatural stillness filled the air as if the world held its breath and waited. A small furry animal burst from the bushes and ran across the street. I jumped to the side, raising my sword.

Samkiel placed his hand on my blade, lowering it. “You feel it too?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

It was as if a dark power stalked us. I couldn't determine the source, but I had felt it on the remains of Rashearim. It made my skin crawl. I had watched her emerge from the darkness, and her power had made me hesitate. I never hesitated. None of us did, we'd been trained since our creation to never fear, never falter. We were warriors that scared any beast or monster with our title alone, but we weren't dealing with just any monster.

“What if—”

He shook his head, his tone pained. “Don’t say it. Please.”

My lips formed into a thin line, and I kept that one question to myself. What if we were too late? What if she was already too far gone? I knew Samkiel. He’d risk his life for others, he always had, but what if even with all his power, he could not reach her?

We stopped before the guild, and I lowered my blade to my side. The multilayered skyscraper glared back at us, the windows reflecting the bright rays of the sun before the overcast sky swallowed them whole.

“Imogen, do you remember what I taught you back on Dunn Moran?”

I nodded. “When we were fighting the spiked-tail Naga?”

“Yes. Large predators disrupt the environment. Animals that call a place home will flee for miles to avoid an apex predator. What do you hear now?”

I tipped my head to the side, glancing toward the trees that crowded the sidewalks and the alleyways dividing the buildings. My gaze fell back to him. “Nothing.”

“Exactly. The lack of animals is the first sign.”

“That’s why you knew at the cafe that it wasn’t Dianna.”

“Yes, but also, I know her.” His gaze clouded as if a memory ripped through him as he spoke. “She could never deceive me, no matter how hard she may try. I could spot her in a crowd of millions.”

My heart thudded, and the corner of my lip twitched. I owed Cameron thirty gold coins. Samkiel was still every bit the god I remembered, but so different now. Ever since his ascension, he had slowly slipped away, not just from me but from all of us. Gradually, he rebuilt himself until he was everything his father had wanted him to be. Samkiel became a king unlike any other.

Logan said he had caught glimpses of the old Samkiel over the last months. He had smiled and laughed again. Then she left, and so did a part of him. I loved him as much as they did, and just like them, I would die for

him. We were duty-bound to do so, but it was so much more. The night The Hand landed on Onuna, we made a pact. He was drowning himself in research and the need to find her. We swore that no matter what happened, we would try to bring her back because if Samkiel loved her, she was also ours. He had finally chosen for himself. He hadn't been coerced or chosen out of duty. We would be damned if we lost him like so many gods before.

I cleared my throat. "So, she is here."

"Yes." He glanced at me then. "Stick to the plan."

I nodded, clutching my ablaze weapon tighter before we took the steps two at a time. Samkiel reached the door first, glancing inside before holding it for me. I stepped inside, a small creak following as Samkiel closed it behind me.



LIGHTS FLICKERED, THE BUILDING SEEMINGLY EMPTY. I WANDERED THROUGH the top floor, Samkiel searching the levels below me. The cobalt energy burned reassuringly against my palm; the ablaze weapon held in my other.

I controlled my breathing and heart rate as I searched and scanned, but I couldn't ignore the feeling of being watched the entire time. Every window I passed gave me pause, and I kept expecting to see her reflection appear behind me.

I had passed so many rooms seemingly untouched that I was starting to believe she wasn't here. Maybe she had already been through this building and found what she was looking for. No, we would have known. At least, I hoped so.

I let out a breath and returned to the wide hallway. I think the dead silence was the worst for me. Static filled the air, and I lifted my blade. A flicker of electricity ran through the lights. They tried and failed to turn on, dying at the end of the hall. The darkness stared at me, and I gripped my sword tighter. I waited for her to rush me, cutting me down as easily as she'd cut Cameron, but nothing came. I sighed at my stupidity. It was probably just Samkiel walking the floors below me.

I spun around, my blade stopping mere inches from his throat. I yelped and lowered my sword. “Gods, Samkiel, you scared me!”

He placed a single finger to his lips, shushing me. “She’s close.”

That explained why the lights were acting weird. He must have ridden them up here.

“I haven’t seen or heard anything,” I whispered.

“We have to hurry.” He paused at the end of the hall, and pressed his back against the wall. He peeked quickly around the corner before waving me forward. I stayed behind him as we walked into the main lobby, checking every door and entryway. “I misplaced the map. I think Vincent might have moved it. It’s not downstairs with the rest of the texts.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and I stopped. “How? You kept all of that stuff with you. Vincent wouldn’t touch it. You told no one to.”

Samkiel stopped.

“Did I?”

He turned, a flicker of orange dancing across his eyes before they bled to red. He was so menacing that my blood froze in my veins. If he had been born Ig’Morruthen, they would have slaughtered him the day he was born. Not even an Ig’Morruthen would have allowed something that powerful, that evil, to exist.

“Imogen.”

The Samkiel in front of me glanced up, fangs descending.

The real Samkiel stood at the end of the hall, and even as I spun toward his voice, I knew it was a mistake.

A massive clawed hand gripped my throat, dragging me back against the shell of Samkiel, nails piercing my throat.

THIRTY

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SAMKIEL



“The Queen and King of Rashearim, what are your customs again? Shall I bow? Curtsy?” Dianna said, my voice flowing from her lips, the words laced with a hint of pure malice. “I am truly honored.”

“Dianna. Let her go.”

“What’s the magic word?”

“You don’t want to do this.” I extended a single hand, trying to calm the situation.

“Wrong.” Her grip tightened on Imogen’s throat. “Try again.”

I’d been too slow. Even as I felt Dianna above me, I knew she would reach Imogen long before I did. Now, as I watched a shadow version of myself hold her by the throat, I knew a single wrong word, and she would be just another blue light blasting through the sky. The plan had to work.

“Please let her go. This is between you and me.”

“How about we make a trade? I let her go after you give me the map?”

She smiled. It was unnerving seeing it on my own face.

My heart sank, and not for Imogen.

“We’ve played this game before. Are we bound to repeat this scenario?”

I said, reminding her of our time in the tomb nearly six months ago when Tobias had held her just like this.

“Think you will be faster this time?” Her hand tightened around Imogen’s throat.

Her words cut, and not in the way she presumed. It was just another blistering nightmare that still haunted my damned dreams. The lights above

me flared as power wafted off me. The shine illuminated only me before bursting.

Her eyes caught the movement before landing on mine once more. “Looks like we are both too far gone now, World Ender, but it doesn’t have to end in bloodshed. Give me the map, and you can have your precious queen back. You can go home to your people, beautiful palaces, faithful servants, and leave the killing to the professionals.”

“No,” I snapped. “Unlike you, I will not abandon the ones I claim to care for, so I am not leaving without you.”

The voice that responded was hard and cold. “Then I guess you’re not leaving.”

Dianna pulled Imogen closer, the pressure of her grip cutting off Imogen’s soft gasp. She mirrored my movements, blocking my path to the door. If she caught my gaze, she would realize how close she was to what she sought. I needed her to get away from it. I would have to find another way out. Dianna inhaled deeply, her nostrils flaring, and something wrathful and filled with jealous rage awoke in her eyes.

“Oh, Imogen, have you been a bad girl?” Dianna purred, nipping at Imogen’s ear, her fangs mere inches from her throat. “You smell just like the World Ender.”

Imogen held her own.

“Don’t lie to her.” I pressed. “She can sense it.”

Imogen glared at me, her mouth pressed into a thin line as she realized where I needed this plan to go.

“Lie to me?” Dianna demanded, her voice a horrific meld of my voice and the low growl of her beast.

“I didn’t know about you, but I’m glad you are here,” Imogen taunted. “Otherwise, I never would have realized how much I missed Samkiel, how much we still cared for one another.”

Dianna’s grip on her throat tightened a fraction harder, and her lips pulled back in a silent hiss. So strange to see her expressions on my face, but I could see Dianna through any illusion. I knew her, and exactly where to hit, so I aimed my words carefully.

“Please, I’ll give you the map if you let her go.”

“How about you give it to me, and I won’t rip her heart out? You know, like old times.”

I watched as the shadow version of myself moved his hand across Imogen's chest, Dianna unsheathing her claws above her heart. My soul ached, seeing how far Kaden had pushed her, how far she had fallen. I could hear her laughing at jokes I did not understand. I could see her smile even when the world tried to break her. She had given up everything, thinking she was saving me, her sister, and all the realms. Now she was doing the same thing to Imogen that Tobias had done to her. Kaden had truly destroyed her. I knew she would assume that the pain etched on my face was for Imogen, but it was for her. It was always about her.

I had to act fast.

I took another step forward, and she took one back.

"You already know the lengths I will go to keep those I care about safe." She paused. "I do care for Imogen. Tremendously. And she was right. I did not realize how much I truly missed her until she returned. So, thank you for that. I guess I realized when I kissed you all I thought about was her."

No growl left her throat this time, and I realized with anguish twisting my heart that she had been waiting for me to say such things. It was confirmation that she was nothing special, that she was replaceable. It proved that the devastating words Kaden whispered to her were true. Pure and utter devastation crossed her face, and I had caused it. Agony ripped through me, but at the same time, hope flared like a bright, burning star in my chest. It was pure and more potent than any pain. And it held a blistering confirmation. She still cared for me.

Dianna's grip tightened, and Imogen's eyes went wide.

"It's over, Dianna. This entire city is secure. There is no way you leave here. Not again."

"Oh yeah? And just how do you plan on containing me? Are you really willing to risk your precious family for that? The world? I will reduce it to ash. I may not be able to kill you, but I can tear through them in seconds. Ask Cameron." She smiled as Imogen groaned in her grasp.

"We have Camilla, who was nice enough to place that same poison Sophia had made into this building. A single thought from me and the sprinkler system releases it."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, and you all say I am the one who has fallen so far? The Samkiel I knew would never poison me. Not very heroic." She tipped her head toward Imogen, and fear laced my gut with how close her fangs were to her throat. A slow smile curved her lips. "I'm impressed. You finally gave

up the constant whining and trying to convince me that this isn't me? Do you think I'm still in here now?"

"You have made me very desperate and have left me no choice. Again."

Dianna's hand clasped over Imogen's throat, and she lifted her. Imogen choked, her feet dangling. "The only way you will have me again will be in ashes."

"Never."

Smoke filled the room, and the alarms blared, followed by the sprinklers going off. Dianna jerked and screamed, releasing Imogen. My heart ached that she thought I would hurt her. A simple lie, and she believed it so well.

Dianna would soon realize it was nothing but water. I grabbed Imogen and threw enough power to blast us a few floors below. I heard Dianna's shriek of fury and the roar of flames above us. She had figured it out, and rage had replaced fear.

"That's your plan?" Imogen sneered below me. I had landed to protect her in case the building fell next. It was not her fault, nor would I let anyone in my family get hurt for me. Never again. "Lie and piss her off about us?"

"I needed to see."

"See what? Pure blinding rage?" Imogen asked. I lifted off of her and stood, offering her my hand.

"If she is still my girl."

Imogen's face softened, a corner of her lips curving up. "That was the most insane way to test that theory."

"I've done far crazier things for those I care for." I hauled her to her feet, able to hear the flames roaring above. Smoke and steam poured through the ventilation system as the water from the sprinklers tried to dampen the magical fire.

Imogen glanced down at herself. Her shirt was torn, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage. "She didn't hurt me."

"No, no, she didn't."

"Then she's still in there."

I nodded, my focus on the floor above and Dianna. "Get out of here. Go to the others and wait for my return."

Imogen reached out and squeezed my forearm. "Good luck, Samkiel."

Imogen left, and I shot up, returning to the top floor. Flames bit and chewed at every part of the hall now, the water above unable to stop her

fury. A smile played on my lips. “Now, this reminds me of the first time we met.”

She wiped her face, her hand clenching at the water there. My lie. She growled at me, no longer wearing my form, her wet hair clinging to her cheeks. She didn’t hesitate as she charged forward. One clawed hand swiped at my face as I leaned back, avoiding the strike, and grabbed her wrist when she tried again.

“You lied to me,” she snarled, throwing her body against mine.

“You taught me well, and I would say it was more just a slight trickery.”

Her free hand reached for my face, and I grabbed that too, realizing a moment too late that was what she wished. Her knee came up, connecting with my groin. Pain shot through me, my gut twisting with nausea, and I released her. She spun and kicked me through not one but two walls.

My back skidded across the dry floor. I was in an entirely different part of the building. No flames or sprinklers erupted here. I took a few deep breaths, willing the pain to ease, and bumped my head against the floor.

“Smart, Samkiel, so fucking smart. Teach her how powerful her legs are so she can kick your ass.”

I pushed up as she stepped through the hole my body had made, the forsaken blade in hand.

“It hurts, doesn’t it? To think of someone else touching or being with the one you care about the most.”

Another sharp growl ripped through the air.

“Now, you know how I feel.”

“I feel nothing.”

“Terrible liar, Dianna. You always were.”

She opened her mouth, no doubt with a scathing reply, but she snapped it closed when her eyes focused on something behind me. It was then I realized what room we were in.

The map she so desperately sought was on the conference room table, surrounded by books. She ran toward it, completely ignoring me.

I was on my feet in the next second, reaching for her. She sidestepped my fingers, and I caught air as she spun away. Her hand shot toward the map, and I knew the second she touched it, she would be gone forever. Lightning shot from my fingertips, scorching the parchment.

She stopped, her hands half-raised, watching as it floated toward the ceiling in ashes.

“No.” The words left her lips on a whisper. “What have you done?”

Then she turned to me, her crimson eyes burning with blistering rage, and on a roar of fury, the room burst into flames.



MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS HOW GLAD I WAS I'D EVACUATED THE CITY. IT burned now. Every ball of fire she tossed at me, and I redirected, burst through a wall or window, lighting the city aflame.

My second thought was I had never really counted the number of floors we had in this building until I fell through each and every one of them. My hand swiped the dust from the silver-plated armor on my shoulder. I had summoned it for protection between the first few floors Dianna sent me through, letting it take the brunt of my fall. I couldn't allow an injury to slow me down, not now. Not when I was finally this close.

I pushed from the floor as the debris settled. Electricity sparked in the hole my body had made above me.

“You ruin everything,” Dianna hissed, her lithe form landing in a crouch before me.

“You will have to be more specific, akrai, on what exactly I ruined. Your mood?” I taunted her. “Your panties, perhaps?”

Her brow furrowed, and I saw the shock in her eyes at hearing me call her *my heart* in Eorian. Satisfaction filled me and made the time spent learning the ancient language worth it.

“Don’t call me that,” she growled, lunging forward. My blade blocked hers mere inches from my face. “You egotistical, conceited, arrogant lying bastard.”

“If you’re going to insult me, akrai, you have to do better than that. I have heard far worse from beings who wished to have my head on a spike. You should have heard what they said to me when I ascended.”

“Stop calling me that.” She pushed off, sending me a step back. To her, it looked as though I was eluding her, fleeing, but I had to keep her moving. I needed her closer to the runes.

“Is this us flirting? You yell and toss me through a few stories when you don’t get your way, or perhaps you’ll drop another building on me.”

I twisted from her, sprinting to the end of the hall.

“I am not flirting,” she growled, cleaving her sword through the air toward me. It cut through the wall behind me as I ducked and rolled inside a nearby room.

“I don’t know, Dianna.” I smirked. “It definitely makes me hard.”

She pulled her blade from the wall, stepping into the room. “Shouldn’t your *queen* do that?”

“She does.”

She snarled, all fangs and fury, and attacked, not giving me a chance to respond. Steel rang against the forsaken blade, the room shaking with her ferocity.

The sound seemed to echo through time as if it was what the universe had craved, what it desired. Walls cracked, tables and chairs splintering as one blade missed its target, then the next. It was a deadly, powerful dance of two beings destined to destroy each other since the beginning of it all.

“You’re wasting my time.” She snarled. “Because of you, I have to find another fucking way.” Her head collided with mine, a crack sounding through the room. “Do you have any idea what you have done?”

“No.” I stumbled back, righting myself as she straightened. “Because you won’t tell me why you needed the map.”

“It meant everything, and you took it from me.” Another sharp hit of her blade against mine. “You ruined everything again!”

Rage, powerful and overwhelming, poured from her.

I took a step back, dragging her with me. In her warpath, she paid no attention to where I was leading her. “Again, you must be more specific about which situation I ruined the first time.”

A frustrated growl left her lips as she charged. “It’s your fault.” Another hit. “I was fine. Everything was fine until you showed up and ruined it.”

Ah. So that was what it was, a crack forming in that impenetrable armor. I only needed to apply more pressure, and I would split it wide open.

“I understand that you have to blame someone. Give all that rage an outlet, but blaming me will not bring Gabriella back.”

Her eyes blazed with a thousand burning embers as she snarled and launched toward me. I dodged, the wall behind me shaking from the force of her blade, the strike so powerful it would have cleaved through bone.

And that crack in her armor widened.

Dianna yanked the blade free, taking a chunk of the wall with it. She shook it off and, with one final enraged glare, disappeared. Dark smoke stood where she had been. I was dumbstruck, to say the least, but I remained alert, keeping my blade in my hand. I still felt her.

“Do you like my new trick?” Her voice carried on like an echo. I spun but saw nothing, yet my senses screamed.

“You did this on the ship.” Realization hit. “How?”

A slash rang against my armor, my arm aching with the blow. I looked down and saw the silver bore a new jagged indentation.

“The more I fed, the more I let go of that damaged girl who would give up everything for others. You know, the one you cling to so desperately.”

Another slash, and I spun.

“I have become something truly lethal now. Something so powerful that nothing and no one will ever hurt me again. It’s just a shame I didn’t learn it sooner.”

I thought I sensed her to my right and heard the slight exhale of her breath, but I saw nothing. Another slash came, this time to my back. I twisted and saw her coat flare as it dissolved into the darkness. Impossible. It was as if she were here but not here. And then I remembered. One of the oldest texts my father ever showed me.

“*You are enamored with beasts.*”

Unir’s hand splayed on the table at my side as he leaned over me to see what I was reading.

“*Well, I must pass the time since you will not allow me to spend time with my companions.*”

“*That is your punishment for your reckless behavior.*”

I cut my eyes up at him, one hand propped under my chin as I flipped a page. My father’s eyes remained on the book in question.

“*You went through my personal belongings to retrieve that?*”

I smiled. “Boredom overcame me, and you keep all the interesting texts locked away.”

“*And what did you find?*”

I moved to the side, allowing him a better look at the book.

“Ah.”

“*Ancient beasts long since dead.*” I brushed my finger over a part that I had enjoyed. “*But I’ve never heard of this. What is the inbetween?*”

My father was quiet for a moment as if deciding if he would explain. Finally, he said, “The inbetween is neither light nor darkness. It exists but does not. It is a place out of time and space. Rules do not apply, nor is there enough known about it to explain. I learned about it during my travels. Mostly legends passed down. Some say that long ago, it was where shadows went to hide, but it is that of myth. Nothing of that power lives any longer.”

A touch of sadness filled his eyes as he closed the book and took it from me.

I turned in my seat. “How can you be sure?”

“You question me?” he said, a look of amusement gracing his face as he placed the book behind his back.

“Maybe something slipped past your omniscient rule.”

“You are but a copy of your mother.” The corners of his lips turned up in a ghost of a smile. “You are still so young, with so much to learn. But remember, nothing can truly stay hidden if you listen with more than your ears.”

I closed my eyes and centered myself, my heart rate decreasing as I listened. There, like a string pulled tight, I found her. I felt her through time and space, a heartbeat that matched my own. She walked around me, her footsteps more vibration than heard, as if she perched behind a thin veil. She sidestepped and thrust forward. My blade drove upward, stopping hers, and my free hand whipped out, grasping her wrist, holding her in this space.

Her eyes went wide. “How?”

“Always with the tone of surprise. There is no place in this world or the next that you can hide from me, akrai.”

She twisted in my grip. “You’re pathetic.”

“Am I? Curse me if you want. Throw your hateful words. Whatever you need, I can take it.”

I saw the struggle in her eyes as if she warred within herself. She pulled at her arm, trying to free her wrist.

“How many do I have to kill for you to give up on me?” There it was, a final split in the armor she built so diligently around herself. Her expression twisted, and I could see that she hadn’t meant to respond, the words slipping out.

“You could make a river of blood run down these streets, and I would still try because I know you, the real you, not this version he created.”

She lowered her blade just a fraction and huffed. “You’re wrong.”

“If I’m wrong, then so was Gabby, and I know she wasn’t. She wouldn’t give up on you, and neither will I. We can do this dance until this world burns and the next takes its place, but I will still choose you.”

She stopped.

Her sister’s name had once grounded her but now seemed to be a catalyst to emotions she fought to destroy.

“You want to save me? You want to be like Gabby so badly?” she hissed, all fangs and sharp edges. She twisted her wrist too sharply, snapping from my grip. “Then you can join her.”

Her face crumpled, but not from tears. Anger flashed behind her crimson eyes, pain hovering in their depths. She used the rage, turning it into resolve as she’d been forced to do so many times in the past. Kaden had taught her feelings were a weakness, and now she threw herself into that belief more than ever.

She lunged too hard and fast. My blade connected with hers, shattering from the force behind her strike. I had a mere second to summon another to protect against the onslaught of her fury.

“You’re a fool, and so was she.”

Slam

“You will only end up dead because of me.”

I stumbled and brought my blade up to meet hers, but the power behind her strikes made my muscles shudder with strain. My back hit the ground, and I summoned a second blade, placing it across my front to act as a shield. It absorbed her every hit as she unleashed.

“Dianna was weak.”

Slam

“She was a stupid girl.”

Another world-shattering slam.

“Who dreamed of flowers and happiness in the middle of war.”

A crack formed on my blade, a small tiny fissure that grew with every strike.

“She was too trusting and cared too much. She loved too much, and now she’s gone.”

Slam

“She’s dead, and she’s not coming back.”

I knew then it wasn’t herself she was talking about, but the sister she so desperately missed. Even as she rebelled and fought with blind savagery, I

saw the shine in her eyes. A part of her shattered, and I knew then and there that Drake had been right.

I had reached her.

With a last ferocious strike, she slammed her sword against mine, breaking it. Then she was atop me, her blade in both hands as she raised it, threatening to impale me. Even with my armor, she had the strength to do it.

“I’ll carve that damned heart from your body,” she said breathlessly. “Then you’ll leave me alone.” But she stopped a fraction from my chest, her hands and arms trembling as she panted.

“Do it.” I angled the tip of her blade above my heart. “If you are truly gone, I refuse to live in a world without you, so you’ll have to angle it farther to the right. That’s where a god’s heart lies, and mine already belongs to you, so do with it what you will.”

She glared down at me, her chest heaving.

“You can’t, can you? You cannot *truly* hurt me.”

She growled, her arms shaking as she tightened her grip but made no other movement.

I lunged up. Dianna let out a startled squeak and withdrew the blade. My hands cupped her face, taking advantage of her parted lips to slam my mouth over hers. Her fangs nicked my lip, and I groaned at the pinch of pain. She didn’t stop, but the world did as I kissed her with every bit of longing and desire I had for her. I poured all the desperate need and love I had felt while we were apart into the kiss. I gave her everything to make her see, make her feel.

I heard her blade crash to the floor, and her hands gripped my armor, pulling me closer. The taste of her and the feel of her tongue sweeping across mine were complete bliss. She pulled back slowly, her eyes wide, dazed, and confused. Her lush lips were parted and softly swollen from my kiss, the emerald magic clinging to them.

It had worked.

She sagged in my arms, and I cradled her against me. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I got you.”

“Wha—” She stared up at me.

“I’m going to help you as I promised. Your burdens are my burdens, remember?”

Her eyes met mine, emotions swimming in their depths. Finally, I had reached her, at least for a moment. Her eyelids grew heavy, Camilla’s spell

taking effect. Her heart rate decreased, sleep pulling her under. I cradled her head as it lulled, slipping my arms around her and pushing to my feet.

I stepped into the middle of the room, and the runes on the floor lit, transporting us from the building.

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THIRTY-ONE

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DIANNA. THE GUILD IN ARARIEL.



My head snapped back as I jolted awake. I blinked, and a white room rushed into focus. My feet rested flat on the floor, but heavy steel cuffs engraved with cobalt blue runes and thick chains kept my arms stretched above me. Alright, so I wasn't dead then. I groaned, blinking at the bright lights as I turned my head and tilted my chin, trying to make sense of the large blurry figure in front of me. A guardian from another world? Maybe I was dead. Another blink, and my vision cleared.

Samkiel.

I snorted, rattling the chains above me. "Bondage, huh? I don't remember seeing this in your memories."

"You haven't been through all my memories, akrai, or you'd know of the four-armed beauty of Tunharan. Now that was bondage."

A growl slipped past my lips; one I had no control over. Samkiel's brow rose, and he didn't try to hide his grin as he stepped closer to the ring.

"Does that bother you?"

"The only thing that bothers me is that you and your friends are still breathing." I hissed.

"Terrible liar, Dianna. You truly are a terrible liar."

I jerked against the chains. My limbs still felt heavy, and I was so tired. "I'll rip your tongue from your skull."

"Will you kiss me like that again while you do it?"

I slumped, replaying what I could recall of the last few hours. The map burning, my infinite rage, him and that damned armor, fighting, and that kiss. A kiss laced with magic.

"You poisoned me. I guess we have both changed."

Samkiel kept his hands behind his back as he stared down at me.

“Not poison. It did not hurt. Quite the opposite, actually. It was merely a sleeping spell I had Camilla tweak. She designed it so it could only be activated by saliva, which meant you had to kiss me back for it to work.”

“I think the spell was defective because you are clearly delusional if you think I would ever kiss you again.”

“We can try again if you wish. I could send them away.” He stepped aside, revealing the familiar cerulean bars and Cameron and Xavier beyond, standing guard in their tactical gear. “Would you prefer that? Then see who kisses who first? Or they can stay if you prefer an audience?”

I tugged at my chains and snapped my teeth at him. “Wouldn’t your betrothed be upset if you kissed another woman?”

“There’s my jealous girl.”

“I’m not jealous,” I hissed, jerking forward hard enough that the chains bit into my wrists.

“Very convincing.” Samkiel lowered his head toward me. I pulled back but didn’t get far, his breath tickling the hairs near my ear. “Gods, you have no idea what it does to me to know you care just as strongly for me as I do for you. What’s that word you like to use so much? Oh, yes. You *fuck*ed up, Dianna. You kissed me back, which means my Dianna is still in there, buried under all that grief and hate. I will stop at nothing to have you back again. Nothing.”

Samkiel reached for my hand, slipping the ring off my finger so slowly it sent a tremor through every part of my body. A simple touch from him, and I felt more than I had in months from strangers. I tried to hide the soft breath that left my lips at his touch, but from how he looked at me, heat flaring in his eyes, turning them a brilliant silver, I knew I’d failed.

He stepped back, twirling the ring Camilla had made for me between his fingers before closing it in his hand. My body ached with the loss of his heat.

“I have a guild along with half the city to rebuild and several continents of mortals with questions. Cameron and Xavier will be your guards until I return, and then we are going to the remains of Rasheirim. There, I can hold you, and you won’t be able to hurt anyone, least of all yourself.”

“Am I to be executed then, god king?”

A smug smile curved his damn lips. “You know my name. Say it.”

“No.”

“Then you’ll get no answers from me.” He turned to leave.

“You’re a coward.” I jerked and leaned forward, the chains rattling as they tightened around my wrists.

Samkiel paused at the door, Cameron and Xavier watching to make sure I wasn’t breaking free.

“What do you think is going to happen? You chain me, and what? Even with me here, Kaden is still out there building something, and I think it’s more than just a stupid weapon to kill you. He needs iron, Samkiel, and he has been gathering it for months now. What happens when he shows up with that book? You make one slip up, one mistake, and they’re dead, like everyone else you were supposed to help. Just like your family, that stupid planet, and just like Gabby.”

He turned back to me, a shiver of pain crossing his features.

“You can’t save them. You can’t save anyone. All that power for what? You’re a joke.”

I hoped it hurt. I hoped it made him mad enough that he slipped up and I could escape.

“You can’t hurt me anymore with words, Dianna. I know the heart that still beats beneath your breast. I’ve held it. You might as well surrender now because you cannot scare me away. You never could.”

My teeth ground together, my jaw clenching at his words. I cursed his retreating form, that simple truth rattling me to my core. I knew all along. He would never let me go, and the part of me I’d shut away behind a lock on a door in a house didn’t want him to.

THIRTY-TWO

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SAMKIEL



The door closed behind me. Cameron and Xavier were still there and would stay to watch her. I dragged a hand through my hair and released a breath, the pounding of the headache returning tenfold. Her words sliced at me, but I knew what she was doing. If she couldn't rip me apart with fangs and claws, she would use her words as weapons, but I knew she spoke more of herself than me.

"We sectioned the area off and have it secured for now, but the mortals don't want to talk to Vincent," Imogen said.

I dropped my hand. "Yes, I know. I'll speak to them."

"You okay?" Logan asked, watching me carefully.

"I'll be fine once I return with her to the remains of Rashearim."

They fell into step with me as I started down the hall.

"Where do you plan to keep her?" Logan asked.

"I have an idea. After I rebuild the guild, I will take care of it."

"And the map?" Imogen asked.

"It is back in the destroyed building in Silver City. Once I rebuild, I'll reform that as well. Its ashes are still in that place."

They nodded, the doors sliding open behind me.

"Imogen, return to the council. Tell them what has transpired and let them know she is secure. I will convene with them shortly."

Imogen nodded before turning and heading out.

"What do you need from me?" Logan asked.

"Stay here while I am away. With Vincent across the sea, you are next in command. Dianna is downstairs, and as she is right now, I do not trust her not to try to break free," I said before stepping into the elevator.



WE HAD REPAIRED THE DESTROYED PARTS OF THE CITY, FINISHING THE GUILD last. It was once more pristine as if nothing had transpired. Vincent had dealt with the ambassadors for the most part. They were relieved to learn that Dianna had been captured, and they were now requesting a gathering before we left Onuna.

Steam filled the shower, the water flowing over my head. I closed my eyes, and the image of Dianna's face appeared. It was always the same. The doubt, pain, and anger I had seen in her today would haunt me. It was just one more reason to hate Kaden. He had found her, gotten close enough to talk to her. He had whispered lies to tear her from me, and by the old gods, I wished for his death above any creature in this world or the next.

I opened my eyes, allowing the water to pound the soreness from my muscles. Kaden had told her of the betrothal, but how had he known? Maybe one of the several stolen books, scrolls, or relics contained that information, but I didn't think so. Kaden had twisted the tale, his goal to turn her from me, and he was succeeding. Dianna was on the warpath, untrusting of everyone.

It had torn me up when she'd spit those words at me as if I'd broken the small part of her I had left. Maybe I should have told her, but when? We had been together for such a short amount of time, and it was such ancient history.

I stormed after my father, our guards trailing after us, the sound of their armored boots echoing through the halls. As soon as we passed the chamber doors, I unleashed.

*"That was the announcement you wished to make?" I bellowed.
"Imogen?"*

The doors slammed shut behind us, leaving our guards on the other side. I heard them hit the door, and my hand flicked out. With negligible use of my power, I locked the door, keeping them on the other side. I made sure of it. I needed to speak to him and only him.

My father stopped, the red and gold cloak swirling around his armored feet.

“You must marry, Samkiel.”

“But Imogen and I are not together. Not as you see it.”

He spun. “Well, how shall I see it? No one else spends as much time with you. You keep everyone at hair’s length except for The Hand. No one is good enough for you, but you must marry.”

“Why?” I shouted, the room quaking, trying to contain the combined force of our power. It was a subject he had harped on so many times, and I was losing my damned mind over it.

“Because I will not be here forever to help you. You cannot rule alone. It is impossible for one to carry this much by themselves.”

I heard the sky crack. The cosmic storm was on the verge of splintering, his tone only feeding it. Others would have pissed their trousers, yet I had grown so used to his anger it was, oddly enough, a comfort. At least he’d shown some emotion. His words sank in as I stared at him. I saw the lines beneath his eyes, how tired he truly was. Since my mother’s death, he had seemed exhausted. Fine strands of gray wove through his dark curls and beard. His eyes had grown empty as if I alone was not enough to keep him here any longer.

“The realms must have a king and queen. Gods, Samkiel, even another king, I do not care, but there must be two rulers. There are too many realms to safeguard. One rules above and one rules below. It is how it always has been and always will be. You cannot do everything alone, no matter how badly you wish it. Imogen is strong, smart, capable, and beautiful, and you two share a bond.”

“A bed, not a bond.” I insisted.

“And what is the difference?”

“I do not love her!” I snapped, rain pouring from the sky, my power a shadow of his.

As the words left my lips, the tension withdrew from my father’s shoulders, and he faltered.

“Samk—”

“I do not love her. I know you wish it for me, but it is not there. My heart does not sing for her when I see her, nor would I burn worlds for her, carve out stars, or lock myself away from others as you have if she passed. I do not feel for her what you felt for my mother. I do not share with her what Logan and Neverra have.”

My father instilled fear in creatures carved from nightmares. He made gods quiver in his presence and armies run when he arrived, but he flinched when those words left my lips. I hated how I'd lashed out at him, but I could not control myself. I needed him to see and listen to reason.

"So yes, we seek comfort in each other. We pass the time when you are not shoving lectures down my throat, training for days on in, or gods forbid, lost in battle, but that is all it is. Just time. That is all it has ever been. It is all it will ever be."

His eyes filled with sadness. "There is no amata for you."

"What?" It was my turn for my heart to break.

"I spoke to the fates because your activities have had the High Council concerned."

"What?" It was the only word that seemed to form.

"The council sees a detriment to your rule if you do not marry. So, I sought information from the fates. They said that one was born but did not survive. They are dead, Samkiel. Whoever your amata was to be has perished. It would make sense, given that others would seek to stop the union if you had an equal. Your power alone is far too..."

His words faded as the pounding in my ears took over. I did not remember sitting on the dais or him sitting next to me. His hand came down hard on my shoulder, grounding me as my world tilted on its axis.

"I am sorry, my son, but this could also be a gift."

"A gift?" I reared back. Could he not see he had extinguished any hope left in me?

He picked at the rings on his fingers. They were the same as mine, but solid gold. "Yes, a gift. They'll see a King of Gods in you, whereas I am but a shell of what I once was because she is gone."

My eyes stung, knowing how rarely a mate survived the death of their other half.

"While the thought of having an amata is joyous and fantastic, it is also a curse. So you are lucky."

"How can you say that?"

He looked away as if he were afraid to show me how much pain he was in. "It is a true soul tie. In the beginning, Chaos created us in pairs or more. The mark is a tether that pulls you back to each other. Once connected, it is beyond bliss, beyond ecstasy. Even the hard parts are no longer hard. The days become brighter. Everything is better because they

exist, and when they are gone, the pain is immeasurable. I'd heard rumors of the mate dying when one does, and I never truly believed it, but it is true. You do not die quickly when they are ripped from you. It is a slow, painful death. You die every day you wake, every day you breathe, every day you think. You are empty, a shell of what you were. I try, and I work, and I help, and I lead, but I am no longer here, Samkiel. A part of me left the day she did. So yes, that mark is a deadly cruel thing, and you are lucky."

He stood in one solid motion, the chains and armor echoing in the hollowness of the room. He stopped at the door and, without looking back, said, "I just wish for you to be well. You need someone to look after you if I am not here. You need someone to always be on your side. If Imogen can at least shoulder a portion of the burden, then so be it."

Silence fell.

"When?"

"I have a briefing in several moons, perhaps after that."

I did not speak.

"I am sorry, my son," he said before closing the door behind him.

He spoke of someone able to shoulder the burden of the crown, but I knew Imogen. Even with all her strength and wit, she could not. Only my equal could, and now that I knew my fate, the world seemed to dim.

The storm outside raged on for days.

The water had turned bitterly cold, its chill ripping me from my memories. I swallowed and turned the water off before stepping out. I could hear every voice in the guild. The celestials were working to calm the mortals as they scrambled for answers. I should care about what had happened. Yet, the only thing I heard, the only thing I focused on, was the single, slow, steady heartbeat coming from eight floors below in the cell.

She had asked me once if I had an amata. I'd told her then how unkind the universe was, how cruel it could be. But, hearing her down there, knowing what had changed between us, I knew I was wrong.

The universe was not cruel. It was brutal.

I dressed, summoning clothes and preparing to venture back downstairs. I could give Cameron and Xavier a reprieve if they wished to eat or rest, but first, I needed to give the map to Vincent.

Lights flickered on as I crossed the large living area. A few books I wished to return to the remains of Rashearin sat in a neat stack on the center table, along with the thin strip of gray photos hanging from the edge.

The air shifted, and I spun, my blade already summoned and raised.
“Roccurem.”

“I do apologize for what is about to transpire, but please know it must happen this way. I see no other option.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

Blinding pain exploded in my temples in the next instance, and I fell to my knees. I watched as two large figures walked next to Roccurem, their mouths opening in a swirling empty void.

“You cannot contain me.” I gritted between clenched teeth, fighting that ache in my skull.

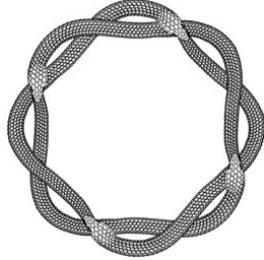
“Forgive me, god king, it is in her best interest, I assure you.”

I went to stand as another blistering sharp pain threaded through my skull. My body hit the floor seconds before darkness claimed me.

THIRTY-THREE

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KADEN



The halls of Yejedin groaned as I walked down the long corridor. I stopped at the balcony edge, gazing into the pit of molten metal below. Another large container of iron poured in, steam rising in waves to the open ceiling. The thick liquid bubbled and spat before consuming the iron. The Irvikuva clamored across the walls, their sharp talons carving away small pieces of rock as they jumped from one ledge to another. Some took flight, screeching and mocking the dead that continued to walk single-file toward the crater in the middle.

“You went to Onuna. Can’t stay away from her, can you?” Tobias said, joining me. I grabbed the obsidian rails, watching them pour even more iron into the pit. It wouldn’t be enough. I needed more.

“She is going to surpass you soon.”

He snorted dismissively. “Doubtful.”

Machines clanged and groaned, molding yet another batch of weapons.

“Your plan worked, it seems. I heard that a building in Silver City almost fell.”

A smile tugged at my lips. “Good.”

“If he has caught her, he will keep her with him.”

My fingers tapped against the railing. “I know. Everything is going exactly to plan.”

“Easier to take them both?”

I nodded. “Exactly.” And I would take them both, even if I had my own plans for Dianna.

“While they are busy, I’ll get more iron,” Tobias said before slipping back into the shadows.

I strode down the hallway, the Irvikuva trailing behind me. I summoned a portal at the end of the hall and stepped through into an obsidian room. Torches protruded from the stone, illuminating a red and gold tapestry on the back wall, a stark contrast to the unrelieved darkness that existed here. A large desk sat beneath it, flanked by stacks of chests. Ancient weapons displayed like art hung in groupings on the other walls. Fabric, the same colors as the tapestry, draped the raised dais in the middle of the room.

I placed my hands on the side of the dais, the shimmering black pool in the center prickling and vibrating. It gave me access to other worlds, connecting me to those beyond this realm. Irvikuva followed me, the portal closing behind them. They settled and perched around the room, looking expectantly at the dais.

“Is it done?” A distorted voice flowed through the inky pool.

“Nearly,” I said, dropping my head.

“The sister’s death caused a fracture we needed, it seemed. I’m delighted.”

I made a noise low in my throat.

“Are they keeping each other busy? He and the girl?”

The girl.

I felt the muscle in my jaw flex and my power mantle. The Irvikuva bristled with aggression and snarled, crawling toward me as if they could sense the threat.

I bared my teeth at them but otherwise ignored their posturing. “Yes, even if Samkiel trails after her like she’s in heat. They are at war with one another. Everything has returned to the plan.”

“Good, to be fair, it’s all your fault, really. You turned her and then decided to care for her. I gave you strict orders, but you decided to listen to your cock instead.” The mirror rippled, the voice neither male nor female but pure, unrelenting power.

My low growl echoed through the room.

The disembodied voice chuckled. “Keep your temper in check. It turns out it was a good plan to keep her around until the weapon is formed. I just wish they would stay apart a little while longer.”

“I told you that was a mistake.” My fingers tapped against the dais. “I didn’t summon him back.”

“They will be drawn to each other like magnets. I’m surprised they stayed apart this long, being in the same realm. But you know they cannot

be together. If they even get close—”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I assure you.”

The voice grew deeper, colder. “You preached that before, yet we all felt it here.”

“Well, I killed her sister, just like you wanted. Things change. She’s more Ig’Morruthen than she has ever been. You saw that as well. They are back to being on warring sides. Her only focus is revenge. She will hunt me down, and once she does, I plan to keep her here until it’s time.” I paused, thinking of how to word my next sentence. “She is strong, my king. Perhaps we can use her for what’s coming.”

The mirror went flat. “Now, Kaden, you wouldn’t be propositioning me to let you keep her permanently, would you?”

“I am merely saying—”

“The ritual ends her. You know the outcome. The realms cannot open without it. Do you plan to fuck a corpse for the rest of eternity?”

“What if there was a loophole?”

Another pause. “You plan for Haldnunen to raise her? For you?”

“No, I can make the ritual take one part of her. The rest would remain. She could be another Ig’Morruthen to ensure your reign. Think of it, of what she is. My power runs through her veins, her entire being. It would be as if you had two of us. That’s more power added to our ranks.”

The obsidian mirror went still, vibrating lightly.

“Hmm. And you think she will listen to you after you killed her sister?”

“She will once she learns the truth.” I shrugged. “Besides, feelings can change after a few hundred years. If she doesn’t listen, we can keep her locked up until she does.”

Another long pause of silence. I chewed at the corner of my lip as the Irvikuva yipped above me, sensing my nervousness.

“I would like more weapons to use against those trying to rebel. Given what she is, it is promising.” The voice seemed to soften and grew thoughtful. Hope flared in my chest.

“It will be done. I swear it.”

“Very well. Open the realms successfully, and you may keep your pet.”

Triumph filled me, and a smile spread across my face.

“Now,” the pool rippled, “do I have my spellcaster?”

I scratched behind my ear and glanced to the side. Fuck. I could not lie. It would be so much worse if they returned and discovered the truth.

“Santiago is no more.”

Silence fell, and I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. The dark material in front of me frosted over. My shoulders tensed, expecting wrath, but a small ripple formed instead as that voice flickered through.

“If he was so easy to kill, then he is useless to me. What of the other one?”

I pondered the question, my clenched fingers releasing the edge of the dais as the tension left me. Other one? My mind raced, and then I paused.

“Camilla?”

“Yes,” the voice purred, “Camilla. Bring that one to me.”

“As you wish.”

I knew exactly how I could get Camilla. It was just a matter of timing it right. I slid a hand over my jaw and nodded. Compared to our last conversation, I felt good about this one. Maybe the broadcast was just what we’d needed for The Order to see I had this under control. Alistair’s death had halted plans and brought fear to the fearless.

My fingers tapped a rhythm against the dais, and I asked, “Where is Isaiah?”

“He should be back soon. I have him taking care of a minor problem.”

“A problem? Is this about The Eye?”

“Worry not. Stay focused. You focus on opening the realms. The Eye is pointless if those do not open.”

I smiled. “Of course, my king.”

“One more thing, Kaden.”

I paused.

“Do not fail me again. We will not wait another thousand years. If I have to rip the realms apart with my bare hands, you will not like the outcome. Are we clear?”

“I miss you, too.”

A slight chuckle flowed through the connection. “See you soon.”

The mirror jumped before going still and smoothing out. I pushed away from the dais and opened a portal. The room I stepped into was an assault after the obsidian room. It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust to the richness of the colors. I sat in the twisted bone chair and propped my feet on the carved, clawed desk. A small coin glinted at me from the desktop. Leaning forward, I grabbed it, twirling the aged metal between my fingers, the ridges worn smooth.

“Not that much. You’ll kill him, and we don’t need a body trail.”

“I did it. This is the first time I fed and didn’t accidentally kill someone,” She practically squealed.

I couldn’t stop looking at her hair. It was inky black and fell in glossy waves past her shoulders. She cradled a man in her arms, blood dripping from her new fangs.

She noticed my focus, and her face dropped. “What? Did I get blood in my hair?”

“Not at all.”

I didn’t feel the encroaching darkness that normally prowled beneath my skin. She’d ingested enough that the beast should be in control when she rose, but the other part of her stubbornly remained. I knew she was accumulating too much power, even given her lineage. I kept waiting for it to backfire and destroy her from the inside out. A part of me feared that, and it had been a millennium since I had felt fear. She smiled as she leaned down, picking up the crumpled man. I kept my hands behind my back. She needed to learn and become stronger, especially if I intended to keep her.

She steadied the man on his feet. He had followed after her willingly, beguiled by her beauty and charm. Now, even as he swayed and his hand covered the puncture wounds on his neck, he gazed at her adoringly. He groaned and tipped his head to the side.

“The compulsion works if you concentrate hard enough. You can not affect their will, but you can convince them they are fine and safe. It is like a suggestion.”

She smiled at me, the wind ripping at the long layers of her dress. Her coat floated around her like a dark cloak. A goddess, I thought. She was a dark goddess, and I had created her. It shouldn’t have aroused me as much as it did, but she pulled at me in a way that even Tobias and Alistair were starting to worry about.

“You’re okay,” she said, forcing him to focus on her. The crimson shine of her pupils glowed hypnotically. “You slipped back here and fell. You were alone and scared and ran back inside. That’s all.”

“I-I fell. I’m clumsy like that.” The man smiled as she released him. He stumbled and ran past me, still holding his throat. I adjusted the flat cap on my head but didn’t have a chance to congratulate her before her lips slammed against mine. It was a forceful yet chaste kiss. I grunted as her arms squeezed me tight. She did not yet realize how strong she was.

“I did it!” she exclaimed, her smile bright.

It took me a moment to even remember what she was talking about. She did that to me every fucking time, sneaking past barriers no one else had ever breached.

“Yes. You did.” I felt myself smile, and shock flowed into me. When was the last time I’d smiled? Certainly long before I’d been sealed away in the pit. “Now you will be able to feed without leaving bodies in your wake.”

She nodded and glanced behind me, tracking the fleeing man.

“I like the way it makes me feel,” she whispered.

“Feeding?” I asked, my hands resting on her hips.

“Yes, I thought I’d hate it, but if I can control it,” a small tremor went through her, “it’s exciting.”

I tipped her chin up. “You will need more practice. You have to be careful not to overindulge. Where I am from, a single Ig’Morruthen could destroy an entire city if they became lost in blood lust.”

“Lust?” she practically purred, running her hands over my chest. “Yes, I feel that, too. Is that normal?”

“Very.”

“I guess I need more practice then.”

Her eyes burned ruby red. She pushed up on tiptoe, her hand cupping the back of my head as she lifted her lips to mine. I wrapped my arms around her, one hand tangling in her long hair. My mouth took hers, my fingers fisting in her curls, holding her in the kiss. I slipped into the inbetween, taking her while I could. I knew I couldn’t keep her, but damn the old gods, I would try.

We made it back to the small stronghold on the newly formed island. We walked into the crumbling building we had been calling home. She flipped a coin, the smell of blood overriding the scent of metal. She smiled up at me and tossed it to me.

“What’s this?”

She shrugged. “A souvenir. For tonight. Something we can remember it by.”

“Why?”

She shook her head. “Where I am from, gifts for those you care about mean something. You helped me and keep helping me. So thanks.”

I curled my fingers tightly around the coin. A flicker of some emotion brushed against me, and the beast inside me hummed. An emotion I no

longer recognized stirred to life, soothing something long broken in me.

I reached out and brushed my fingers along the silken curve of her cheek. "Okay."

She pressed a kiss to my palm, her eyes warm. "I am going to go wash up." She disappeared into the small bathroom. I opened my fingers and stared at the coin.

I felt the darkness near me tear.

"What are you doing?" Alistair glanced at my hands.

"What do you mean?"

"You smell like her."

"That's because I fucked her in an alley. Why would I not?"

"You know what I mean."

The stench of death filled the room as Tobias appeared at my side. "You're infatuated with her," he sneered.

"She is a beautiful girl, yes."

Tobias scoffed. "She is not yours."

Rage erupted in my gut, and I slipped the coin into my pocket. "I made her. She's mine."

"That is not how this works. You cannot keep her. That's not the plan. It never was. You changed her. It's different. How much longer are you going to parade around like this? As if being stuck here isn't important to opening the realms and going home?" Tobias snapped.

Reality slammed its way back in, and my rage eased. Alistair folded his arms but said nothing.

"I know that," I growled, fighting not to sound defensive.

"If they find out you'd rather have your hands up her skirt than find that damn book, you'll wish you thought with a different head."

I felt my eyes blaze. I grabbed Tobias by the front of his shirt and lifted him, my face inches from his. "What makes you think you have any dominion over me? I am your king. Just because you have a crown means nothing to me. The only reason either of you are here is because of me. You have a job because of me, a reason because of me. You'd still be holed up in the Pit if it wasn't for me. Do not forget who and what I am."

Like the rest of the Kings of Yejedin, Tobias hated being outranked, but it was a truth he would accept.

"We haven't," Tobias said, his tone an octave lower as he dampened his temper. "But you seem to have."

I placed him back on his feet, running my hands over the crumpled fabric of his shirt before patting his shoulders hard enough to shake him.

“He’s right,” Alistair pushed. “She’s here for a purpose. We all know it. You made an Ig’Morruthen, so use it. Break her, starve her of affection, and train her to kill like the old ways. That’s the whole fucking point. Not to make her a love-sick fucking mutt. Use her. Make her a weapon so we can kill him and go the fuck home.”

I glared at them until they both looked away and left. Slipping my hand into my pocket, I withdrew the coin, staring into the shadows of the darkened room. They had spoken the truth. It was the simplest truth. I was getting distracted for the first time since arriving in this cursed realm. I knew my purpose, knew what I was supposed to do. They were waiting for me, counting on me to get the realms opened. What was I doing?

This woman woke a part of me I never knew existed with her smile. A spark ignited in my chest at the first touch, the first caress, the first glance. My hands fisted, blood dripping onto the floor as my claws dug into my palms. Tobias, while out of line, was right. She was not mine. I could not keep her. She had a purpose here, and I was fucking it up.

I opened my hand, watching the puncture wounds quickly heal. The blood-soaked coin stared back at me. I was what he made me, and I needed to remind them all of it.

The following weeks turned into months. Those evolved into years of bitter hate, cruelty, and distance. The smiles faded, the laughter died, and Novas grew. It all shifted, but it was that one night that everything changed. It was only then that it truly ended.

“You know, I remember the night I broke her. When it all changed,” I said, still tapping the coin on the table. The tall figure looming in the doorway waited for me to continue. “I remember hearing her footsteps and her voice calling my name. She wanted to talk as she always did about something she cared so much about. Even with her bloodlust, she was this iridescent shining girl. Full of life. And I needed to break it. So I did. I called her in, and I remember her walking into the room and stopping. The look on her face is something I will never forget. I had someone between my legs, my hand gripping her hair as she pleasured me. The color drained from Dianna’s face, but it was more than that. Something bright and precious in her died. At the time, I thought it was for the best. We both

needed a stark reminder of the world we lived in and how we could trust no one but ourselves.”

The coin tapped on the edge of the table.

She turned and ran. I pushed the female away and flowed from the bed, not bothering to fasten my pants before going after her. I grabbed her arm and spun her toward me. Tears turned her eyes liquid and stained her cheeks. A final straw, perhaps.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“How could you!” She tried to jerk away but to no avail.

“I think it’s time we set some ground rules, don’t you? This isn’t a getaway for you. I’m not your boyfriend or whatever you’ve concocted in your head.”

“Let go of me,” she growled from between clenched teeth. “I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not. You know the rules. You work for me, remember?”

“Work for you? Kaden. Why are you saying this?”

“Because I made you, and I think you’ve forgotten your place.”

“My place?” She shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks as her face crumpled. “I thought...”

“You thought wrong. You are nothing but a weapon to me. That’s all you have ever been, and if you want to keep that precious sister of yours breathing, you do what I say when I say. Is that clear?”

Pain flashed through her eyes, her chest heaving.

“And you just fuck whoever you want and treat me like trash? Absolutely not.”

I gripped her jaw. “You belong to me, but in no way do I belong to you. Is that clear?”

She was silent, so I squeezed harder. “Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” She nodded, her body stiff and unyielding. I released her, pushing her away with more force than I should have, but I had to. I had to put distance between us in more ways than one. She rubbed her hand over her bruised jaw as if trying to wipe away my touch. She glanced at me once more, then turned and walked away.

The world came screaming back, pulling me from the memory.

“Everything was different after that night—no more gifts of coins, soft smiles, or laughter. The halls of that cavern grew as cold as the rocks that formed it. She was a weapon then, my weapon. And the rest is simply

history.” I spun the coin on the table and watched it. “The King agreed to let me keep her, which changes everything. I will make her love me again, erase what I’ve done. It will be easier once Samkiel is permanently out of the way. I’ll make sure of it.”

I stood, placed the coin back into my pocket, and strode around the long obsidian desk.

“We just need to meddle a little more with that spell for it to work. Don’t you agree, Azrael?”

The long-feared Celestial of Death stared blankly ahead, his arms behind his back. I patted his shoulder as I strode out of the room.

THIRTY-FOUR

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LOGAN



“**A**re you seriously nodding off right now?” Vincent’s voice jolted me awake.

The large windows in the Guild building allowed every ounce of the moon’s glow in, gilding the room in silver. The time change was fucking with me. We had been bouncing around from city to city, looking for leads, and if we weren’t doing that, I was out every night looking for Neverra. A small flame of hope had flared in my chest when we had caught Dianna. Maybe now we could find Nev.

The mark on my finger was still there, but I checked for it compulsively. It meant she was still alive. If I were honest, it was the only thing that kept me going.

I rubbed my eyes. We were in a large conference room, files, books, and scrolls spread across the table. I was tired of reading and researching, looking for gods only knew what. I stretched my legs slowly, the chair beneath me creaking.

“You need more comfortable furniture here,” I said.

“Well, Logan, not everyone is six foot twelve.” Vincent smirked, a shadow of a line creasing his cheek. In most people, it would be an indication of his age. He looked like he was in his thirties, but he was actually closer to two thousand. He had tied all his hair back, but a few pieces of the silky straight strands fell into his face. Vincent refused to cut it any shorter, wanting to keep the look we’d maintained on Rasheirim, whereas I preferred to blend in as much as possible.

“Funny.” I looked around, seeing that only the two of us remained in the room. “How long did I sleep?”

“I woke you when you started to drool on ancient texts.”

I flipped him off. “Where are the others?”

“Imogen is still at the council. Samkiel just got back from rebuilding a city and is showering.” Vincent brushed his hair from his face, his stress apparent in his disheveled appearance. His expression hardened, his eyes boring into me as he continued. “Cameron and Xavier are on babysitting duty.”

I nodded, rubbing a hand over the fresh fade haircut Samkiel had forced me to get. Funny how the tables had turned. Now he was watching me, ensuring I was not falling apart when we all knew he was hanging on by a thread.

Vincent opened another book, his movements jerky. “Why are they downstairs with *it*? Are we sure that’s safe?”

“Why do you talk about her like that?” I asked, folding my arms.

Vincent snorted under his breath. “Why don’t you? Why is everyone okay with how he acts with her or the fact that she is still breathing after everything she’s done? She attacked our brothers and sisters and stole from us. I feel like the council is the only one thinking smart right now. She needs to be executed.”

There was venom in his voice, and I knew he meant every word. “Dianna isn’t Nismera.”

His shoulders tensed, but he remained focused on the book in front of him. “Damn close.”

I knew he didn’t want to talk about the goddess who created him and then abused him in ways he still couldn’t speak of, but I knew that’s what had been eating at him. He saw in Dianna power and malice, and it sent him spiraling back to the time he spent with that bitch, Nismera.

“You can’t blame her for what happened to you, either.”

“Can you just stop? I’m not.”

“You are, Vincent.”

He shook his head, biting at the corner of his lip, his irritation rising. “You can seriously look at her, see what she does and not fear her? Fear for others?”

“Yes,” I said honestly.

“Gods, if I didn’t see the mark on your finger, I would think she had you whipped too.”

“You know why I can look at her and not fear her?”

He shrugged. "Enlighten me."

"Her sister." I leaned back, folding my arms. "Neverra and I lived with her for months while they were off looking for that book. The stories Gabby told us, the pictures she showed us. Her eyes lit up when she spoke of Dianna and their adventures together. She was mortal once, and the change only affected her physically, not emotionally, not her heart or soul. Gabriella loved her with every part of her. Dianna would have died for her sister, and Gabby's death broke her."

Vincent sighed deeply and tapped his fingers against the book he held.

"What do you think would happen if I lost Neverra? Truly lost her? Do you think I would mourn, cry myself to sleep? Or would I hunt every single person responsible? Make them pay, make them hurt as I do?"

"That's different."

"It's not, not really. It is a different expression of love, but it is, at its base, still love. Pure and simple, grief is a product of love, Vincent. Gabriella was her last living family member, and he killed her. How would you feel if we all died? If you were left with no one?"

Vincent didn't respond. He just looked at the book in front of him while I waited.

"Tell me." I tapped my foot, raising a brow as he glanced at me again. "What would you do if Nismera had taken all of us?"

"She wouldn't. I'd kill her before she could, and if I couldn't, I would do everything in my power to get you back."

"You know why?" I asked. Vincent shook his head. "Because that's love."

"I guess." He shrugged.

I closed the book in front of me and rose. "Are you hungry? We can get something to eat, bring back some for the others, then pack."

He stood, eager to abandon the subject and the wear of research. "Yes."

I laughed and waited for him to come around the corner of the table. I placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it once. At least his mood seemed to improve with food.

"What are you in the mood for?"

As we turned toward the door, we both stopped.

Two creatures stood in the doorway, their mouths opened, forming a lipless hollow in its place. They drew in a deep breath, and everything went black.

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THIRTY-FIVE

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DIANNA



I watched Cameron hit his wrist, causing a small snack to fly across the room. Xavier bent backward, trying to catch it in his mouth. Ancient terrifying warriors, my guards, were tossing snacks at each other like sixteen-year-old boys. I rolled my eyes, trying not to shift uncomfortably, the chains wrapped around me digging into my wrists.

“Dude, that’s five for five,” Xavier cheered happily.

Cameron snorted and ate the handful he had, and Xavier laughed. Their armor was new, formed of a dark material I didn’t recognize. The collars were upright, protecting their throats, and they had blades strapped everywhere. Smart.

“Hungry?” Cameron asked, looking at me as he reached for the bag Xavier held.

“Starved, but I don’t eat that,” I said, my voice cracking. I smiled, my canines protruding. The chains drained me more than I thought they would, and every time I moved, they cut deeper.

“Oh yeah? What are you hungry for? Samkiel?” Xavier asked.

Cameron grinned and shoved Xavier’s shoulder. “Yeah, that whole display was kind of hot. I won’t lie. But I doubt he would ever take you in front of anyone. He seems way more possessive of you than his previous lovers.”

Xavier shrugged. “True.”

I forced a smile as they laughed. They wanted to get under my skin. Fine, I could play that game, too, but I was way better at it.

“You know what I don’t get?” I asked. “You two.”

They stopped laughing and looked at me with identical expressions.

“Us?” Cameron asked with a smirk. “What about us?”

“Do you ever tire of pretending you don’t want each other?”

Cameron’s smile dropped, and Xavier looked like I had punched him in the stomach. His eyes darted too quickly toward Cameron, and he stopped mid-chew.

“I mean, it’s not like Samkiel or the others would care if you two finally took all that boiling tension and did something about it,” I teased.

Cameron laughed and shook his head. “Seriously? Your plan is to goad us over something that isn’t even true? Xavier is my oldest friend, and he has a boyfriend.”

“Oh, a boyfriend,” I mocked, a laugh spilling from my throat. “I’m so sorry. You’re right, completely off limits.”

Cameron stepped closer, holding the sides of his vest. “Don’t try to project the *tension* between you and Samkiel onto us.”

Cameron glanced over his shoulder. Xavier smiled and quickly nodded, but I saw it. I saw the emotions in Xavier’s eyes. I saw the want and need and knew I had hit home. However, Cameron was completely oblivious or in deep denial. I assumed the latter.

“Right, just friends.” I rocked back on my heels, my smile mocking as I looked between them. “Samkiel and I said the same thing, and I still blew him.”

Cameron’s expression hardened in annoyance, his smirk falling flat. “You cannot bait us.”

“Are you sure about that? I baited one of you.” I shrugged my shoulders, looking toward Xavier, who had said nothing.

They stared at me, identical expressions of consternation on their faces. Two dream eaters solidified behind Xavier and Cameron. The warriors sensed them, but it was already too late as they spun to confront the threat. The dream eater’s mouths gaped wide, and they sucked what looked like wispy threads from Xavier and Cameron. It only took two seconds before they fell to the floor, unconscious.

Reggie came around the corner with his hands behind his back. The dream eaters moved aside, and he stepped over the sleeping Xavier and Cameron. Reggie lifted Cameron’s hand and placed it on a pad near the door. The bars dissolved, and Reggie allowed Cameron’s arm to drop before stepping inside. He carried a key I recognized, and I wondered how he had gotten it from Samkiel. He undid one wrist and then the next, my strength

returning in a rush of euphoria. The chains fell in an untidy pile on the floor, and I rubbed my wrists, relieving the bone-deep ache.

“The others are asleep as well,” Reggie said.

“You’re late, and I’m starving.”

“My apologies.” He nodded toward the dream eaters. “They were a little harder to find, given your recent activities, but they owed you a favor.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s pointless now. The map is gone.” I huffed a stray piece of hair from my face.

“It is not.”

“What?”

“I’ll show you.”

I cocked my head to the side but didn’t question his claim. If there were a chance the map still existed, then I would take it. I stepped out of the cell and over the sleeping bodies, following Reggie. The two dream eaters hovered over the two celestials, their eyes rolled back and their hands extended. Cameron and Xavier twitched in their sleep-like state, swirls of wispy magic sinking into their heads.

“How many of the Baku did you bring?” I asked.

“All of them.”

A slow smile pulled at my lips. If they all came, this whole place would be sound asleep and none the wiser of my escape.



THE ELEVATOR DOOR SLID TO THE SIDE ON THE TOP FLOOR, AND I PAUSED before stepping out. The room was a disaster, as if Samkiel had been struggling to maintain control again. I had seen something similar so many times before in the blooddreams. Here, it looked like he’d tried to fix it the best he could several times.

“He is barely holding on, as you can see.”

A wave of guilt hit my gut. “I don’t care.”

Emotions flickered over Reggie’s face. Maybe regret or something else? Fear? I shook my head and skirted the large sofa. Stacks of books and other items covered the tabletop. I sorted through the texts and clutter, looking for

the map. Reggie said Samkiel had restored it, and I knew he would keep it close until he could secure it out of my reach. I tossed a book over my shoulder, then another, ignoring the thud as they hit the floor. I felt Reggie watching me the whole time, waiting. My hand hovered over a thick book, shock rippling through me.

“Why does he have this?” I grabbed the thin strip of black and white photos, drinking in the images.

“I think you know why.”

These were the damned photos from that booth. Something in my chest fractured at the memory.

“*You’re terrible at blending in,*” I whispered, popping another piece of cotton candy into my mouth. Samkiel glared at me. I suspected it was just his go-to expression. “*You know people that go to festivals have fun?*”

“*This isn’t fun. It’s loud, obnoxious, and overcrowded. Why are you making that gesture with your hands?*”

I stopped the random opening and closing of my hand as he rattled off everything that bothered him. “Oh, I am just imitating how often you complain. Listen, I know this isn’t wild drinking games or orgies on Rasheirim, but you can at least attempt to have fun.”

If his fists clenched any tighter, he might have popped a blood vessel.

“How will me having fun make your acquaintance come any faster?”

I shrugged. “It won’t, but it would make me happy.”

Something sparked in his eyes, but I didn’t know him well enough to read his expression. Nearby laughter caught my attention. A couple exited a photo booth and exclaimed over the strip of images the machine spit out before hurrying away, pointing toward a large ride. I smiled, and Samkiel’s gaze followed mine.

“*I dislike that,*” he remarked, eyeing my grin. “*It means you have some idea I will probably not like.*”

My smile only grew, and he opened his mouth to say something. I didn’t allow him to protest before grabbing his wrist and pulling him with me. He didn’t resist like I thought he would. I let go of him as I stopped outside of the booth.

He studied the booth suspiciously. “What is this device?”

I snorted, inserting a few coins I might have stolen. “You’ll see.”

He started to protest, but I shoved him inside and pulled the curtain closed behind us. I spun and nearly collided with his chest. Okay, I hadn’t

considered his size, the small space, and how close we would be. He was damn near a giant, and our bodies were pressed close. I felt the flush travel through my body and turn my cheeks hot. What the fuck?

“You’re so hostile.”

I snorted. “Sorry. I wanted you in here before you could object.”

He looked down at me, and my heart thudded. Yeah, he was way too close.

“What happens now?”

“Well, first...” I reached up. My fingers threaded through his hair, ruffling it. I tried to ignore how soft it was as he frowned at me.

I laughed, my arm half raised as a flash went off, startling us both. Samkiel jumped, almost hitting his head on the top of the machine. I busted out laughing and almost dropped my cotton candy. There was another flash, and he glared at the source of the light. One of his rings vibrated as if he was about to draw a weapon and fight the machine.

I rested my hand over his, covering his rings. He looked down at our hands and then back up at me.

“It’s fine. I promise. It’s harmless. It’s just taking pictures,” I explained calmly.

“Pictures?” The flash went off again, and I smiled brighter. He looked damn near terrified.

“Yes. Look, like this.” I let go of his hand and lifted mine toward his face. He almost flinched back but stopped, his eyes darting to me.

I lightly grabbed his chin and forced his face toward the camera just as it flashed again. I didn’t know if it was the sugar rush from the candy or the great and powerful World Ender’s fear of a small photo booth, but I hadn’t genuinely laughed like this in what felt like centuries. There were two more flashes before the room returned to its dull glow. I placed another piece of candy in my mouth as he stared at me.

“What?”

He shook his head as if he was in a daze. “Nothing, I just never heard you laugh before.”

I brushed my hair back and shrugged before leaving the booth. Samkiel followed. “Sorry, it was just funny.”

“Don’t apologize,” he said as I reached for the pictures that the photo booth produced. “It’s a pleasant sound.”

“My laugh?” I snorted and lifted the pictures. “Yeah, right.”

He didn't say anything, just leaned over my head to look at the pictures.

"Now what?"

I turned and placed the strip of pictures into one of his jacket pockets. Samkiel stayed perfectly still, but I could see the question in his eyes.

"For you to keep. So when you go back to your silver tower with your glowing goddesses and celestial army, you will remember that you made friends with an evil and wicked Ig'Morruthen while on Onuna."

I smiled up at him and took another bite of cotton candy. He was quiet for a second, but another scream from a ride had him turning in startled alertness.

"I see." He adjusted his jacket and took a deep breath before nodding behind me. "What other tortures do you wish to show me in this place?"

My smile was damn near wicked, and I could tell he knew he'd made a mistake by the way he shook his head.

"How do you feel about bumper cars?"

"Are you alright?" Reggie's voice ripped me from the memory and back into the real world. I wiped at the tears gathered in my eyes and the moisture on my cheeks. I shook my head, trying to calm my emotions.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

"Peachy."

My power flared, and I watched the flame eat away at the photos. Our smiling images turned dark, burning to ash. I wiped my hands, the dusty particles falling to the floor. I could feel Reggie's gaze on me, but I ignored him and continued my search. The map sat on the table, underneath the book he'd tucked the photos in as if he'd placed it there for me. I grabbed it and shoved it into my back pocket. Reggie said nothing as I wiped one sleeve across my face again.

"I need my ring."

"Perhaps he keeps it close to him?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, still searching the table.

"Well, it is a part of you, yes? Therefore, I do not see why he would not keep it close to him."

I hadn't thought about that, or maybe a part of me had, and I just didn't trust myself to be near him one last time. I wanted his last memory of me to be this betrayal, this final blow to him and his friends. He needed to just let me go.

Fuck. My heart ached, and I tried to push those damn feelings back down, but they threatened to swallow me whole.

I strode toward the bedroom where I could feel both Samkiel's and the dream eater's power, Reggie at my heels. A massive bed stood in the middle of the room, two large dressers covering a good portion of the walls. A large window looked out over the tops of every building in Silver City and the clouds that rolled in between. It was a room fit for a god king.

Samkiel lay in the center of the bed with four dream eaters surrounding him. Two stood on the right and two on the left, holding hands as they fed. It looked as if they had placed him there. I wondered if the dream eaters had moved him to contain him.

"It takes four of my best to hold the World Ender," the leader of the Baku, Garleglish, said.

I came to its side, folding my arms over my chest as we watched Samkiel toss and turn, a pained expression on his face. My heart twisted, and I had to fight my instincts to make it stop.

"You came," I said. Like all of them, the leader of the Baku was bald with dark-speckled, pale skin. He wore a long black trench coat with a thick hat. "I'm impressed. I never thought you'd betray your precious Kaden."

"We follow those in power, and you, dark queen, are dripping with it." He looked at me when he spoke, and I suppressed a shudder, watching the slit of his mouth move.

I gave him a small smile and stepped closer. He swallowed hard, and I could smell his fear. I liked that. I stepped past him and walked toward the bed.

I ran a hand across the sheets. "Sure. It wouldn't have anything to do with the severed heads I left on your doorstep as decorations, hmm?"

"I would prefer the rest of my family to stay alive, yes."

My eyes narrowed. "Smart."

Samkiel twisted again on the bed, a small moan escaping him. Nightmares. That's what the dream eaters had incited to feed from, and I knew Samkiel had plenty.

"A thousand plus worlds he has seen, yet when he dreams, he dreams of you."

My head snapped toward Garleglish, and he closed his mouth, glancing away.

I knew I shouldn't get closer, but the part of me that remembered the feel of him pressed against me didn't care. The beast inside me seemed to purr as if it wished to say goodbye to the man we both had grown so attached to. So, against my better judgment, I moved and sat next to Samkiel on the bed.

I ran a hand over his face, his skin clammy and pale. A piece of his hair stuck to his forehead as he tossed, and I brushed it away. He calmed, my touch seeming to soothe him.

"This would be a reasonable time to say goodbye," Reggie said. "If this is the path you choose."

"This was always the path." My hand shook as I threaded it through his hair the same way I had coaxed him out of nightmares before. Only this time, I was the cause.

Gods, I was a monster.

Another reason in a long list of many why I couldn't stay and be his. Or he mine.

I leaned forward, not caring about my audience or the pain that threatened to crack my chest wide open. My hand traced the curve of his face, following the path to his jaw. Warmth and the softest prickle of stubble greeted my fingertips. My heart lurched. That damned face. The same face that, against all my fury and bitter rage, I still dreamt of. How could life have been so cruel as to show him to me, tease me with even the slightest possibility of a future, and then spit in my face with a cold and brutal reminder? He and I were not the same. Not an epic, sweeping tale. Not one of the romantic stories Gabby so loved, but enemies. One born from light, the other crafted from darkness.

Samkiel was right. The universe was cruel.

My eyes stung, holding back emotions I didn't want to process. By the time Samkiel woke up, I would be long gone. I didn't know why, and I knew I shouldn't, but I couldn't keep from pressing my lips to his. It was a soft, quick goodbye kiss to the man who, regardless of everything, kept trying to save me.

"Maybe in another life," I whispered before pulling away.

As I lifted my head, I noticed my ring on the bedside table, the intricately designed bone material of the forsaken blades gleaming darkly in the low light.

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THIRTY-SIX

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SAMKIEL



*M*y father's hand landed in the middle of the table. "And focus on other things besides the spoils of flesh. You are king now, Samkiel. You must use something else besides brute force to accomplish your means. Knowledge, my son, is more powerful than what head you can cleave from its shoulders or spear you can drive through your opponent. Always try peace. If you strike first, you can never take it back."

My head tossed from side to side. Some force was keeping me here, keeping me trapped in my dreams. I felt the tiny, serrated fingers digging into my brain, pulling memories from my skull. I was in a room where water dripped off the walls, a thick musty scent filling the air. No, not a room. A cave? I spun, my feet hitting the jagged rock floor. I stepped toward a hollowed-out doorway, an opaque orange glow emanating from it. Beyond, I heard the slam of metal against metal—another battle. I shook my head, the voices calling to me, trying to take me from here. More loud banging came from the hall and the smell of... iron.

I promise not to leave your side...

Dianna. I spun toward her voice and left the dark cave room. I appeared back in Dianna's room at the Vanderkai's mansion. She sat on the lounge, her red gown flowing to the floor. I had made her that dress, and she took my breath away. She was looking up at me, playing with her fingers. It was a nervous tick of hers.

I lifted my hand and extended my pinky. "Promise?"

Pain flickered over her features. "I thought you didn't want to promise anymore?"

“I am allowed to change my mind.” I nodded toward her hand, and she smiled. Yes, that’s what I wanted. I just wanted her to smile at me again.

She dipped her head and held out her pinky. I grasped it like a lifeline. Stay with me, I begged, even though I knew my growing feelings for her were wrong. When she was mad and not speaking to me, it was more than I could bear. My emotions were new to me and slipped my control. I knew she felt the small bolt of electricity just as I did, and I felt it to my core.

“Yes, I promise.”

I took a step forward. I just wanted to see Dianna again, hold her, and talk to her.

“It takes four of my best to hold him.”

I stopped. Hold me? That wasn’t a part of my memories with her. My nostrils flared, and my jaw ticked. Who would dare threaten to hold me? That voice filtered through my brain. It was one I’d never heard before. The scene around me melted away, and then I was halfway across the world in another room. Only this time, Dianna was backing away from me, her hand slightly raised. My own voice caught me off guard. I turned, seeing myself stride in. He walked right through me, the memory playing out.

“You slaughtered hordes of Ig’Morruthens,” Dianna whispered, and I saw the one thing I never wanted to see from her: fear.

“Yes.” I nodded slowly, but couldn’t she tell? Didn’t she know by now that I would never hurt her? Didn’t she know I would allow no one to harm her? She was everything to me. How could she not see?

“Is that what you would have done to me in the beginning?”

My eyes searched hers, my heart aching. Had I fallen so far? I couldn’t lie to her. Maybe in the past. “If it were necessary.”

“Is it necessary now?”

“No.” It felt like she had slapped me. I would have preferred she’d attacked me. “How could you ask me that? You are not a monster.”

Not to me, never me.

A thick buzz filled my mind. My hands went to my head, and I gritted my teeth. Pain, sharp and icy, hit my subconscious, causing the room to shake. Power I had never felt before burrowed deeper into my skull.

“A thousand plus worlds he has seen, yet when he dreams, he dreams of you.”

That voice again. Who was in my head?

I focused like I had been taught, breathing deep and slow. The room still shook as I concentrated, but my body twitched. It was a brief escape, but I was back in my room. The images were blurry, but I saw the four creatures above me. The hollows of their mouths were wide open, and their hands hovered above me.

Dianna walked toward me, her eyes glowing red. She had gotten out? How? I jerked, trying to force my body awake. I needed to move, to get up, but I only managed to turn my head to the side. A figure with a hat stood on the other side of the room, but it was the one next to him that had a familiar feeling rushing over me when I looked at him.

Roccurem.

Yes, he had shown up in my room and tricked me. My head hurt once more, the pain forcing my eyes closed, but I could have sworn Roccurem looked at me with a knowing expression. His six eyes appeared, all opaque white, all glowing, yet no one moved. It was as if only I saw them.

“Not a monster, god king, only broken,” Roccurem whispered in my head.

I was thrust back into my subconscious so fast that it felt like I was falling. I landed on my knees in some dark, empty room and heard a scream so loud, so painful, and full of grief that it shook the world around me. It was every nightmare and fear I had, from Rasheirim to Dianna leaving and back. It all bled together, creating a void inside me. I covered my ears. The screams were ancient and all-consuming, with such despair that they filled up every inch of the hollow space inside me. I screamed along with it, trying to release the pressure. It felt like my brain was attempting to escape my skull, but I kept fighting against the creatures that held me.

“What’s happening to me?” I shouted to the swirling room.

“They are called the Baku, god king.” Roccurem’s voice was far away and distorted as if he hid from them too. From her. “A race evolved from the Deskin, the dream eaters.”

“How can they hold me?”

“They cannot. I am helping them keep you detained.”

“Why?” I shouted, the lights beneath my skin beginning to hum. I felt them rising toward my eyes, my power, thick and heavy, threatening to consume them. I would kill them all.

“For her.”

The lights died, and the room stopped shaking. I looked around the dark empty space, the screams and howls ending.

“For her?”

“I need her to see and feel before the One True King comes. Otherwise, there will be no realm left, even for you.”

My head throbbed as I struggled to my feet. I didn’t see Roccurem or those six milky white eyes. I saw nothing but darkness. One True King? I ground my teeth, the power threatening to rip me back into the nightmare.

“Where is he?”

I would tear Kaden limb from limb for what he had done.

“She is close to finding him.” Roccurem solidified, regarding me and the room curiously.

My heart thrummed. “I need out of this. Dianna can’t fight him alone. Not a King of Yejedin.”

“If she chooses the wrong path, I am afraid she will fight many battles alone, god king.”

Fear ripped at my gut, and my throat constricted when I realized Roccurem would not help me. He was going to let this happen. “Why are you doing this?”

“She must choose for herself without intervention, or her purpose will not be pure.”

“What does that mean?”

“Let her choose, god king.”

“Choose death?” I nearly shouted. “She will die if she fights him. Die, Roccurem.”

“Perhaps.”

Icy fury swept through me, sharper than steel. “Let me out of here, Roccurem.”

“I cannot.”

“If she dies, I will shred you to atoms.”

“I am aware.” He glanced up as if listening to another world. “There is a mortal saying. If you love something, set it free. If it comes back—”

“I do not have time for riddles or technicalities. *Release me.*”

Roccurem’s six eyes opened, and he looked at me. “Love is such a dangerous and powerful emotion. The gods curse it, for it has power. Empires have fallen for it, reduced to sand and scriptures. Worlds have

burned for it, and they will once more. Love has the power to touch even the untouchable. Use it.”

His form shimmered and vanished. I roared in frustration, power hot and blinding shooting from me, lighting this darkened room in shades of silver and white. I dropped my hand and saw that I’d had no effect on this illusion. Fuck. I scanned the space they had trapped me in, searching for a way to escape. I needed to get to her. My breathing became erratic as I ran from one area to the next. No walls, no door, just an endless empty expanse and haunting pieces of memories. Fuck. I was going to lose her. Fuck. I had to think, had to try. I took a breath, drawing air in slowly, then releasing it.

“Do not run off emotions, Samkiel. It makes you careless. Think. Think,” I murmured to myself.

Then it hit me. Dianna’s voice floated through the thick of them. A memory. A way out. Something she had said months ago.

“I believe with enough pressure that anything can break.”

I had already attempted to use my powers to no avail, but maybe I hadn’t used them all.

“Love has power. Use it.”

My hands brushed across my chest, right above my heart. The slightest flicker of flame glowed within me, and I reached for the light. A kernel of power danced across my palm, a small precious piece of her fire. It was the part of her that had crept past every defense or curt word, the part that held me during feverish nightmares. The part that warmed me, forcing me to live again. Her. It was the piece of her I clung to, filled with the hope of what could be.

I unleashed it.

Light, pure and blinding, shot from my eyes. The darkened room erupted in flames as I shot up, shoving past not just the barriers of this room but into reality. The dream eaters jumped back, but it was too late. They screamed as the light from my eyes cut through them, their bodies erupting into ash. Smoke and debris floated through my room. A thick slash, orange embers sparking at the edges, cut through my wall. The ceiling now had a fresh hole, the cold winter air rushing in.

The entire city had gone dark, but I could hear the low hum as the power tried and failed to turn back on. I rose from the bed in one swift motion, needing to find the others but stopped when I noticed the ring on my bedside table was missing.

She'd been here.

I growled, the lights in my room exploding as I portalled out and into Logan's room. Empty. I spun and blurred through the building, breathing a sigh of relief when I found him and Vincent. Logan writhed in pain, the circular mouth of the dream eater standing over him wide open, a vortex of energy swirling within as he consumed the energy he'd ripped from Logan's nightmares.

Vincent lay near him, another dream eater hovering over him. I summoned an ablazed weapon and rammed the blade straight through its skull. In the same movement, I withdrew the sword and flung it at the one that tried to retreat. Their bodies burned in a flash of flames, ash floating through the room.

Logan and Vincent jolted awake. Tears streamed down Logan's face, his chest heaving as he raised a shaking hand and stared at the mark on his finger. I knew what Iassulyn they'd sent him to.

"Samkiel?" he asked, looking between Vincent and me. "What happened?"

"Dream eaters," I said, looking down the hall. "Get up and search the building. Help the others." They nodded and jumped to their feet.

I needed to check on Cameron and Xavier. I needed to make sure she hadn't hurt them in her escape. The whole building seemed to be in a sleep-like state. I passed multiple bodies, but I could hear their heartbeats, the rhythms steady, and I knew they were asleep, not dead.

With every step I took, lights burst overhead. The heavy metal door wouldn't slide open. I slashed at it, the ablazed weapon slicing smoothly but not making a big enough hole. The vibration rang through me as I kicked at it. The lights flickered wildly with each strike, rage spilling out of me in waves. I was panting when the door finally gave way, the hinges screeching when the mangled piece of metal flew into the room.

The cells were empty, the bars to hers gone. I passed Nym, her crumpled form lying on its side. The puncture wounds in her neck told me Dianna had fed before she'd left. Two more dream eaters stood over Cameron and Xavier in the far corner. I raised my hand, energy coalescing at the center of my palm. I focused and then released it. It hit the one above Xavier, blasting him into a thousand particles. The one above Cameron glanced up, his form shimmering before disappearing into thin air. I ran, sliding to my knees next to Xavier. I grabbed his face, gently tapping his

cheek. Cameron rose to a crouch and screamed, not realizing he was no longer trapped in the nightmare.

“Cameron!” I snapped, infusing power into my voice and breaking through his terror.

“What the fu—” He stopped as he focused on Xavier and me.

He scrambled to Xavier’s other side and glanced at me. “Why isn’t he waking up?”

I summoned the blade to my ring before lifting his body and cradling his head. My free hand glowed as I pressed it against his forehead.

“Dream eaters will make you see your worst nightmares, forcing you to remain under enormous pressure while they feed off the agony of your memories.”

I didn’t need to look at Cameron to know his face had paled. We both knew what Xavier dreamed. “Thesovverg cave.”

I nodded.

Sovvergs were long burrowing worm creatures that ate and ripped through flesh as fast as they moved. Kryella had sent Xavier and a few others on a mission soon after he was made, and they had ended up in a sovverg cave. Xavier lost much at the bottom of that damn cave before I found him.

“Wake him up,” Cameron demanded, panic lacing his voice.

I nodded, the power emanating from my hand and into Xavier’s head, sending light into his darkness, guiding him out. “Kryella told me of the nightmares he’d had since that incident. I knew where the dream eaters had taken him.”

Cameron’s hands hovered over his fallen friend. “You saved him before. Do it again.”

His tone caught my attention. There was a strange flicker of emotion buried in his voice. Not just worry, but something deeper. It was a topic no one addressed because Cameron was nowhere near admitting his true feelings. So I dismissed it for now and propped Xavier up.

I called the power back into my hand and lifted him to his feet. His breath came in loud gasps, and his body trembled. “Hey, you’re fine. Xavier, you’re here.” I patted him on his shoulder as his eyes adjusted to the room and reality.

“I saw.” He panted.

“I know, but you’re not there.”

“No,” his voice cracked, a shine filling his eyes, “I saw *her*.”

Before I could address the tear in his voice, Vincent and Logan ran in, skidding to a halt beside us.

“What happened?”

“Baku, a subspecies race of the Deskin. They form nightmares and feed off the pain.”

Xavier pulled away and straightened his knees, letting me know he could stand on his own. Cameron came to his other side, and he waved him away too, but I didn’t miss the look of pain on Xavier’s face. Vincent came further inside, Logan at his heels. I turned to the empty cell behind me, looking at the tangled pile of chains on the floor. There were no burn marks on the wall or them.

“She got out.”

“Not just that,” I sighed and put my hands on my hips, this truth far worse, “Roccurem let the dream eaters in.”

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THIRTY-SEVEN

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SAMKIEL. THREE WEEKS LATER.



Small flakes fell from the sky, slowly coating the world with thick white powder. I stared out at the open expanse from a large palace in Arariel.

The city was aglow as the sun slowly crept past the buildings, yielding to the night. It was all part of the celebration—the lights, the songs, the decorations. It was a time of joy and happiness for them, and they loved to show it. Apparently, they celebrated this cursed event.

People emerged from their homes, excited to see the array of festive lights decorating Arariel. Little shops opened their doors, and holiday music floated on the air. They would do this every night for the next five weeks leading up to The Fall. The sound of laughter snuck through the glass, taunting us with happiness. The mortals were bursting with life, unaware of the dangers threatening them.

I had sent Cameron and Xavier off to do anything else. They had grown tired of the constant research, and their discontent wore on my nerves. I watched three blue lights streak through the clouds like comets. Imogen must have joined them.

Logan appeared at my side and handed me a mask. “It’s for the ball.”

My stomach rolled as I traced the intricacy of the lacy black material. It reminded me of the clothing Dianna loved to wear, but I squashed that thought before it could take hold. “Why?”

“It’s a masquerade ball. The mortals love it,” Vincent said, pacing.

I glanced up, noticing he wore one that matched his suit.

“The mortal council will arrive in two hours,” Vincent said, continuing to wear a hole in the carpet.

“Okay,” I said.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Logan asked, blowing out a breath.
“With everything?”

“Especially with everything.” Vincent stopped pacing to glare at Logan.
“We need a united front, and the Celebration of The Fall is a perfect excuse.
Mortals love gatherings, and seeing us among them may ease their stress.”

“Aren’t you afraid of an attack? It’s been too quiet these last few weeks.
It just feels as if he is winding up for something,” Logan said.

“No.” I was not afraid of anything at this point. All my worries or fears had already happened, it seemed. “Our next plan of action is to find out what other ingredients he needs to make this weapon,” I said, turning away from the pristine view.

“We have read and searched every record. There isn’t much of anything to go on. Whatever Kaden needs, it has to be in the Book of Azrael.”

“Then we are back to square one.” Logan huffed.

“Other than that book, Azrael took his secrets to his grave,” Vincent said, folding his arms across his chest.

“It would appear so.” I looked at Vincent and nodded toward the door.
“You’re dismissed, Vincent. I need to speak to Logan alone.”

Vincent’s eyes flicked between Logan and me before he nodded and walked out. We listened as his footsteps carried him down the hall.

“You’ve been sneaking out after missions. I presume you’ve taken pictures of the map Dianna stole and have been hitting the caverns.” Logan sighed and met my gaze. “And please do not lie to me.”

“I did.”

“What did I tell you?”

He sighed. “Samkiel.”

“No!” The word left my lips in a thunderous roar. The lights flickered, not only in this room but throughout Arariel. The people below gasped and looked around nervously.

“I told you to take others with you. You didn’t. I told you not to go alone. You did. I told you—”

“I love her, Samkiel,” Logan snapped, his hands raising in frustration.
“You know that. She is my entire world, and I refuse to let her stay a second longer with that psychopath. I’ve bedded women. I’ve fought in battle after battle, standing at Unir’s and your side for centuries, and none of it was worth it. She is. So yes, I have been sneaking out. I’ve been looking for her.”

The lights returned to normal, the city shining once more. I nodded and turned away from him. “I forbade it, yet you did it anyway. Defying a direct order from your king is treason. Punishable by death.”

He moved into my peripheral vision and folded his arms. “You plan to kill me?”

Silence fell between us.

“No.” I sighed. “You’re the closest thing I have to a brother.” I glanced at him. “Unir’s famous guard and my friend long before my second. I only wish for you to be safe.”

“I can’t give up on her.”

“I know.”

“Just like you can’t give up on Dianna.”

I turned away from him, looking past the city into the darkness beyond. “Look down there, Logan. Hundreds of families gathered, connecting, laughing, and loving. She lost all that and more. Kaden took her sister from her and, in the process, stole the last link to her mortality. He took her anchor, and everyone expects her not to go mad?”

“Vincent means well. He is just scared. He knows Kaden has the book and worries for you. We all do. Plus, you know he will always be blindly protective of you. You saved him from Nismera.”

“I know.”

I felt Logan’s gaze burn into me.

“You may leave now.” I glanced down, fiddling with the mask he’d given me. “I’ll be down momentarily.”

Logan didn’t move. “You are not the cause of our damnation, Samkiel. You never were.”

A small smile curved my lips. “The war was because of me, Logan. No matter what you or they say, it was because of me. This world celebrates survival because ours fell, and it fell because of me. Enemies older than I gather forces for another war because of me.”

“You can’t take all the blame, nor should you. Wars and battles were a way of life long before you or before your father came into power. I know you have been through a lot more than any of us, but—”

“I was happy.” The words left my lips without me realizing it. “I was happy for the first time in my long existence.”

“What?”

“I know I didn’t seem like it when I first came back. Thousands of years of emotions are stacked inside my head, things I never wanted to share with anyone until her. Then, she came crashing in like she did everything. It wasn’t anything at first. We could barely stand the sight of one another, but somehow, she snuck behind every defense I had and got under my skin. It was the most intense thing I had ever felt. All she did was talk to me, hold me through the worst of my nightmares, and she got in. She is everything I am supposed to protect you all from, and a part of me knows I cannot live without her.”

“Do you love her?” Logan asked, his eyes filled with understanding.

“She is killing, feeding, and becoming everything he ever wanted. She is relentless in her pursuit of vengeance. Apparently, even I cannot stop her. Dianna is what they warned us about. The monster they taught us to fear. She has used everything I shared with her against me, trying to hurt me when all I wished to do was protect her, to save her. She sent dream eaters after us, attacked the council, attacked you all. I have skinned creatures alive for even threatening to harm any of you. The part that makes me ill is that my blood and mind scream at me to think as a king and protector. Maybe I didn’t know her as well as I had assumed. Maybe she showed me exactly who she was, and then....”

Logan tilted his head slightly, listening intently. “And then?”

“My heart and soul scream in defiance because she is the only thing I can think about. The only thing I dream of when I allow it, the only thing in this life or the next I wish to claim.” I felt my eyes sting as I turned to him, his features filled with anguish. “Why do I feel so strongly for her? Why can’t I treat her like any other beast or creature? The time we spent together should mean nothing. Nothing. I have been with countless beings, traveled between worlds, saved thousands, and fought creatures that could swallow worlds. Yet this woman with a fiery attitude has burned me to my very core. I let her in during the worst part of my existence, and now she is in my bones. My every thought, every dream, is of her, and I can’t eat or sleep. I haven’t even been inside of her, Logan, not really, not like Cameron or Vincent suspects, but she’s burned into my soul, my very being. And I hate it. I hate that it’s not simple anymore. I hate feeling so strongly for someone who does not feel the same. Every time a door opens, or I hear heels on the floor, I look for her, and I hate that, too. I hate that I think every dark-haired woman I see is her. She made me smile, made me laugh, and I hate it. I hate

that she made me feel alive and whole for once. Dianna saw me for who I am, not a ruler or king. She made me feel normal, and then she left me. Abandoned me like it meant nothing.”

I sighed and leaned my head against the window, trying to calm my raging heart. Logan stood beside me, studying the view outside the window, giving me time as I rubbed the moisture from my eyes.

“What kind of king or leader cannot contain their emotions?” I finally asked.

“One with a heart.”

I shook my head. “A ruler cannot have a heart. My father made it clear that attachments would only ruin everything. Maybe he was right.”

Logan shrugged. “No, that’s why they are all dead, and you are still here. Their logic was flawed.”

I nodded, rubbing my hand across my face one last time. “My father was right about one thing, though. It’s too much of a burden to carry alone. I tried to save our world, and I failed. I tried to stop her, and I failed. If Dianna dies, I quit. I’m tired, Logan. Let someone else rule. Let Vincent or the council have it. I’m done. It is not as if I was a good king, to begin with.”

Logan scoffed. “You’re wrong. Samkiel, you are the best of them, and I’m not just saying that because I love you or because of the tremendous amount of shit we have been through together. You just have a monumental amount of responsibility. You’re alone like her. All your guides and teachers are gone. You have made the best of the absolute worst situations. Sure, you locked yourself away, but who wouldn’t? You had a crown forced on you at the moment of your birth. Rules and regulations forced down your throat before you could talk. The kingdom and the crown were your life, and you lost that. I don’t blame you. I never have. No one does. And I know Dianna may be beyond reach now, but it’s not hopeless. It never was.”

“How can you be so sure?” I glanced at him.

Logan looked at me as if I’d asked the most idiotic question he’d ever heard. “Because you give all of us hope. You’ve saved every single one of us in one way or the other. I’ve seen monsters quake in your presence. Gods bowed, and the realms rejoiced when you were named our next ruler. You are the very best of them, of us. And you will save her. That’s what you do. You save people.”

A breathless snort left my lips. “Maybe you should be the one giving speeches.”

“I’ll leave that to you.”

“What about being king?”

Logan laughs. “I’ll leave that to you, too.”

The sun finally set, and the snow began to fall. A bustle of noise filtered through the floor as guests started to arrive. “You should go get ready for tonight. I wish to be alone before Vincent forces me to mingle the entire night.”

Logan’s hand clamped on my shoulder, and he squeezed. “I think you’ve been alone far too long.”

We said nothing else, lost in our thoughts. Perhaps neither of us should be alone at the moment. So we stayed there, watching the sky empty itself as the world spun.

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THIRTY-EIGHT

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LOGAN



I didn't fully understand why Vincent demanded we attend this event, but if it helped the mortals feel safe, so be it. Vincent had called the new and old ambassadors from every continent, and his Arariel palace was becoming crowded. When the new ambassadors and their families showed up, the commotion in the large gallery was almost deafening.

An hour passed, then another. I shook hands, gave half hugs, and forced a smile so long my face hurt. I pretended to laugh with Marissa, the newest secretary of the Encaus ambassador, but my gaze remained focused on Samkiel. He towered over the crowd. I smirked but sympathized with his discomfort with the many compliments and flirtations tossed his way. Even from here, I knew he was ready to shred the all-black suit he wore so no one would speak of it again.

Samkiel had turned down advances from people I knew were married and joked awkwardly with them when they realized he was serious about not taking them up on their offers. I knew it was Vincent's doing. Vincent wanted Samkiel to move on, to be how he once was, but that Samkiel died when Rashearin did, and a part of me thought even before then.

I moved a tad closer to the back door as Samkiel pretended to laugh at what someone had said, Vincent at his side as they mingled with the mortals. He did it so carelessly that no one would have guessed at the near detrimental break he'd gone through upstairs an hour before.

I sipped my drink, only half listening as Marissa continued on about structural plans.

“... the funding alone to set these cities to rights is draining us dry. Why, the number of sinkholes I’ve had to deal with lately—”

“Sinkholes?” Liquid stilled in my throat, the word rattling around in my brain.

She watched me through her green mask, the intricate design and color matching her dress. “Yes. We evacuated the city of Pamyel because one formed beneath our factories. The risk of chemical spills was too high.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Why haven’t we heard about any of this?”

She gave me a confused look. “You have. I sent the invoices to Vincent. He closed off the area, helped us clean it up, and even repaired the affected homes. Of course, this all happened at the same time the female assailant almost destroyed a city, so I’m not surprised it wasn’t at the top of his communications.”

Vincent may not have thought much about it, but I had nearly memorized that damned map Dianna wanted so badly. I had explored many of the areas on it, hoping to find a clue that would lead me to Nev, and one of those damned tunnels went right under Pamyel.

“*Look where the world opens.*” Drake’s dying words played over in my head.

Blood thrummed in my ears, my heart kicking in a gallop. I had to leave. Now.

Marissa continued to speak, but my focus was on the room. Imogen laughed playfully with a mortal, her hand grazing his arm. I had seen her, Cameron, and Xavier enter the main hall a few minutes ago, and I knew they had probably raided Vincent’s whiskey cabinet. Cameron was dancing with some blonde. I could just see the top of his head and his hand holding his glass, the familiar silver rings on his fingers catching the light.

I nodded once more at Marissa as she prattled on, rubbing behind my ear as I listened, but my focus remained on finding the others. A few seconds passed before I spotted Xavier’s dreaded mohawk. His laughter boomed through the room, the force of it rocking him back.

Now was my chance.

I gulped the last of my drink, glancing toward Vincent and Samkiel again. Vincent was forcing Samkiel into yet another engaging conversation with another set of ambassadors who fawned all over him.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said to Marissa.

Marissa smiled back and nodded politely before turning on her heel and heading toward another small crowd of mortals.

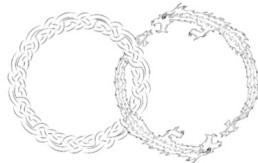
I tried to move casually but as quickly as possible, not wanting to draw any attention as I made my way to the nearest exit. I waved and smiled at a few mortals but kept going. If I was going to make it out before anyone suspected anything, I needed to do it fast.

With one last look over my shoulder to ensure Samkiel's back was to me, I snuck out of the room. I ran for the elevator as soon as I was through the doorway.

Inside my room, I stripped off the suit and tie before slipping on some black pants, a shirt, and a matching zip-up hoodie. I grabbed my phone off the circular glowing pad by the nightstand, having left it in my room to charge. The screen lit up, and I looked down to check the time. Neverra's and my face stared back at me, and my heart threatened to rupture. She smiled and leaned in close, her face squished against mine. It was one of our many lunch dates. Nothing special about it except I was with her. How many times had I lain awake just staring at the screen as if I could summon her back through it by sheer will alone? I'd have given my own life just to see her happy, see her smiling again.

I put my phone in my pocket before pulling my hood up. I raised my hand and studied the Mark of Dhihsin. The act had become almost a compulsion. It remained, which meant she did too, and that was all the hope I needed.

"I will find you. I swear it."



SNOW STILL FELL, EVEN IN PAMYEL. I COULDN'T TELL IF IT WAS FROM THE weather change or Samkiel finally unleashing his hold on his emotions. Regardless, the icy cold powder covered everything. I walked through the vacant town, the only light from the few street lights still working. Marissa was right. It was a ghost town. No lights flickered in the abandoned homes. It was silent but for the tiny creatures scavenging for food. I reached down to check my phone once more. The cavern entrance was up ahead, just past a half-built building. Brightly colored tape flapped in the frigid breeze, circling the large fences that contained the area and kept people out.

Lifting the tape, I ducked beneath it and approached the fence. A chill ran up my spine, and I paused. I spun, the rings on my fingers thrumming in anticipation. No one lurked nearby, and the only heartbeat I heard seemed to come from a small animal scurrying through the bushes. I shrugged, settling my nerves before turning back and lifting my hand. Blue power poured from my palm, melting the edge of the fence. I called the light back and walked toward the cavern entrance.

Lights bounced as two vehicles approached. I dropped into a crouch, my feet skidding on the small rocks. The tires crunched as they came to a stop nearby. Fuck, had The Hand followed me? I ducked behind the building and looked around. I didn't see or feel any of my brethren or Samkiel.

I leaned around the corner and saw several large trucks. People were filing out of the back, but the way they moved was all wrong. Then the smell reached me. Oh gods, the smell. I knew that smell. Once you have experienced it, you never forget it. I didn't know how it was possible, but these people were not alive anymore. They were moving, but they were dead.

I kept low, covering my nose with my hand to smother the smell, and watched. Each person carried what, at first, I thought were random pieces of metal and junk, but as I looked closer, I realized they had objects made of iron. Slowly rising, I moved around the building, keeping out of sight. If they were moving iron, it stood to reason that they were part of Kaden's legion and could lead me to Nev.

I watched as they walked fearlessly into the black maw of the cavern. After the last one disappeared, I waited two minutes and moved. I stayed as low as possible, concentrating on containing my power within. It was a trick Samkiel had taught us so we could sneak up on unsuspecting opponents. With a deep breath and a prayer to the old gods, I stepped into the hole.

I stayed close to the wall, not daring to use the blue flame to light my way. I could see even with the pitch blackness, just not as well as if I had a hint of light, but the sound of their footsteps was easy to follow as they descended deeper into the smothering darkness. The smell was overwhelming in the close confines of the cavern. How long had these people been dead?

Water dripped from the stalactite tips, and the deeper I went, the hotter it became until it felt like I was walking through a tropical storm. We

walked for what seemed like days before the cave finally split into two tunnels. They dropped steeply, leaving what looked like a sheer cliff between the two. I stayed near the wall, watching the people split, some going left and others right. I crept closer, carefully testing each step, and peered over the edge. Both paths led to the same place.

The cavern below was not natural, obviously carved out of solid stone and filled with rows and rows of iron pots, old kitchen appliances, and thick metal bars. Not even a hint of light reached this deep, but the dead formed a semi-circle and stared at the massive pile as if waiting for something or someone. Tiny rocks fell from my boots as I stopped at the edge, but those below didn't move or make a sound. They gave no sign they could hear me or were aware of anything around them. They stayed absolutely still, their heads bent at an odd angle like they were listening.

This could be just the lead we needed and another step closer to finding Nev. I had to return to the surface, where I had a signal. I had to tell Samkiel and the others. Stepping back from the ledge, I turned and froze. Twin red eyes glared at me from the hollowed-out darkness. I tried to summon a blade, but she was too quick. A hand wrapped around my throat, and she shoved me hard enough against the wall to crack it. My back scraped against the stone as she dragged me up with barely any effort. I grabbed her small wrist and squeezed.

“Hello, handsome,” Dianna purred. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’m starving.” Her fangs descended, and she lunged forward, plunging them into my neck.

THIRTY-NINE

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LOGAN



Dianna leaned her head back, my blood coating her fangs. She licked her lips, her grip tightening on my neck. “Where are the others?”

“I’m alone,” I choked out.

Her mouth turned down as she looked at me. “You’re alone? That’s stupid.”

She shoved off me, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. I sagged against the wall, grabbing at my throat as it healed. Samkiel had told me of the blooddreams and Dianna’s ability to rifle through memories once she had consumed someone’s blood. Would she be able to see the way Samkiel missed her?

She turned her back on me and stepped to the edge, looking down into the dark cavern. “What are you? A scout?”

“No, I’m looking for Neverra,” I replied, rubbing my throat as I came to her side.

“Still?” She snorted. “Won’t give up, will you?”

“You’re here for the same reason I am. Because of someone you love.”

Her head swung toward me, and I stepped back. Power rippled off of her, making my skin crawl. I had faced monsters of all shapes and sizes, but she made me want to hide.

“And Samkiel would let his strongest and most trusted ally search alone?”

I swallowed, the pain in my throat nearly gone. “He doesn’t know.”

Dianna tipped her head and folded her arms as she regarded me. She clicked her tongue and shook her head. “Look at you. All grown up and disobeying orders. I’d be impressed if you weren’t in my way.” Her eyes

darkened, and she grinned, revealing the sharp and deadly edges of her canines.

“In the way of what?” My question seemed to catch her off guard, and she paused in her attempt to intimidate me.

Instead of answering, she stared at the dead below, who stood frozen. Before I could push at her for answers, the room erupted. Every dead mortal lifted their head in unison, a thick hollow scream vibrating from their throats. I covered my ears, and Dianna’s face grew grim. Her hand shot out, hitting me in the chest and pushing me away from the edge of the cliff.

“Time to go home, Logan.”

I ignored her, and she pushed me deeper into the shadows until we could just barely see what was happening below. Finally, the screams stopped, the cavern falling so silent you could hear a pin drop.

“What was that gods awful sound?” I whispered, my voice sounding overly loud.

“A beacon,” she whispered. The floor beneath the mortals shook. Particles of dust, iron, and embers spun, forming a perfect circle. It slammed against the stone wall, the outer rim bursting into flame as the middle coalesced into darkness.

“A beacon for what?”

“Not what. Who.”

As if on cue, a man stepped through. His energy felt ancient and unmistakably Ig’Morruthen. His dark hair was cut close to his head, and his ebony skin gleamed in the light of the fire. He wore a buttoned-up black jacket with silver studs at the collar. A long drape of light fabric cascaded over his right shoulder, seemingly out of place against the tough, thick material that made up the rest of his outfit. I knew what that garment represented—royalty. This was a King of Yejedin, and I recognized him from Samkiel’s description.

He was known as Tobias on Onuna, but on Rashearin, we knew him as Haldnunen.

Now I knew what that swirling portal was and where it led. I knew without looking at Dianna that she knew as well. This had been her plan all along. She would wait until a portal opened and find a way in. She did not know about the realms or how the portals worked. If she went down there, she would be stuck, or worse.

The portal widened, and terrifying clawed monsters squeezed their way through. They mantled, announcing their presence with sharp cries before launching into the air. Their thick, leathery wings beat, carrying them higher. Rows and rows of teeth snapped above the heads of the mortals.

Dianna grabbed my arm and shoved me against the far wall. She raised her finger to her lips, and I felt the world shift slightly. A dull, hazy film slid over the world as if we stood just beyond it, looking at it through a warped window. She kept her hand on mine, and I saw what looked like waves of darkness circling first her and then me. She faced the cavern and pressed her back against the wall beside me. One of the massive creatures landed right where we had been. It walked on four taloned feet, lowering its nose to the ground and sniffing.

Its nostrils flared as it focused on the spot where she had been standing. It wasn't just sniffing out of curiosity. They were still looking for her. It folded its enormous wings against its body, its long powerful tail swishing behind it. Its head snapped up and toward us. My hand flexed, ready to call an ablazed weapon forward and cut it in half. Dianna's hand gripped mine, and I looked at her. She shook her head. I felt the air move, and suddenly the beast was in front of us.

Its elongated snout and turned-up nose pressed to the ground, sniffing inches from our feet, and I could smell the hot, heavy scent of the creature. Its jaws opened, and a long, thick, dark red tongue swiped at the ground. The whites of its eyes shone, tasting something it liked. Its head jerked up, and it exhaled in our faces.

Since the moment of my creation, I had been trained not to fear. I had seen monsters that could swallow cities, but Dianna's hand tightening on mine and her single step forward were the only things that kept me in place. The creature stood upright, towering over us and walking a few steps closer, its tail dragging behind it. It stopped and leaned forward, its head tipped to the side as it sniffed the air above us. The hollow curved ears flickered as if listening for our heartbeats. I grimaced, its breath smelling of flesh and blood, the sour stench making my stomach churn. I felt Dianna's talons elongate and press into my knuckles. She was ready to kill it, but to do so would only alert the others. I squeezed once, and she took a step back. She didn't glance at me, but she didn't advance either.

A whistle cut through the air, and the beast turned toward the sound. It spread its leathery wings, and with a powerful downward thrust and a gust

of air, it flew up and over the chasm. Dianna let go of my hand, but we remained in that shelter made of smoke and shadow. I stayed close to her side as we moved to the edge. The dead mortals and all the iron were gone, and Tobias was nowhere in sight. The last few beasts shot through the portal, and it started to close.

I blinked as the world suddenly cleared, the haze over my vision disappearing. I turned to ask Dianna what was happening, but she was no longer at my side. Frantically, I searched for her and saw her sprinting toward the slowly closing portal. I leaped from the ledge, landing in front of her so hard my knees felt the impact. I gripped her shoulders and shook her, probably harder than I should have.

“Are you insane?” I whispered, unsure if they were still close enough to hear us. “You can’t go in there. You don’t know where it leads or what happens once it closes.” And Samkiel would kill me if you disappeared forever. I didn’t speak that last part aloud.

Dianna glared at me and groaned in frustration before rolling her eyes. She grabbed my wrists and hissed, “Go home, Logan. She is probably dead anyway.”

“No, and don’t say that.” Against my will, my gaze darted to my hand and the mating mark. Neverra was still alive.

She twisted against my wrists hard enough that I felt the tendons strain. I hissed as she tossed my arms from her.

“What is with you Rashearim men?” she demanded, stepping around me and toward the slowly closing portal. “You can’t let anything go, can you?”

“You’ve never been in love, have you?”

Dianna grimaced when I stepped in front of her again, her lips forming a thin line. She placed her hands on her hips, more than frustrated, but I knew she wouldn’t hurt me. Some part of me knew it.

“Listen, this portal is a one-way ticket. You go in, and you’re not coming out.”

“Obviously,” she said, her tone so matter-of-fact it took me by surprise.

“You knew.”

“Of course, I knew.” She rolled her eyes and waved her hands at me as if shooing me away. “Now go home.”

Everything clicked then, a sudden, horrifying realization washing over me.

“That’s why you didn’t bring the others with you, the witch and the fate. You weren’t planning on coming back, were you? That is why you keep pushing Samkiel away. Why won’t you let him help? This is a suicide mission for you.”

“If I’m right, this portal will take me to Kaden. It was never the plan for me to come back.” Her eyes bore into mine as she tried to step around me, and I countered, blocking her way. “Go home,” she snarled from between clenched teeth.

“What would Gabby say about your suicide mission? Or Samkiel, for that matter? Dianna, you can’t leave him.” Fear swept through me. I knew what she was to him and what her death would do to him. He was already slipping, retreating back into himself.

“*You lost me long before Rashearin fell.*”

My heart thudded in my chest.

“He’s not mine to keep.” She snapped. “And if you were really his best friend, you’d make him forget about me and marry her.”

“Imogen?” I scoffed. “You’re a selfish, godsdamned fool.”

She struck at me. I blocked it, catching her fist against my palm. She swung again with her free hand, and I caught her wrist. My muscles strained as I held her. She was unnervingly strong, but I was furious with her. We stood, glaring at each other, locked in a standoff.

“How could you do that to *him*? After everything he is risking for you, doing for you! Do you even realize how much he cares for you? You know what he has lost, and you want to add to that pain?”

“You know nothing of me!” She threw her head forward, connecting with mine hard enough to make me see stars. I reeled, my grip loosening enough that she was able to twist and flip me over her hip. I hit the ground, and all the air left my lungs.

“Bullshit.” I coughed. “Gabriella told Neverra and me everything. The way she spoke of you... She looked up to you and wanted to be strong like you because you feared nothing. You’d die for those you care for. She admired you and loved you so much. Now look at you. Just giving up without even trying and wasting her sacrifice like it meant nothing. You’re pathetic now. She would be embarrassed.”

Dianna fell on top of me, her fist connecting once, then twice with my face. She gripped my collar and pulled me up. Her fangs descended, her eyes bleeding red.

“You say her name again, and you won’t have to worry about finding your soon-to-be-dead wife. I’ll send you to her myself.”

She shoved me to the ground before standing and stalking toward the portal.

I half sat up, wiping at my already healing lip and nose. “If you don’t take me with you, I’ll go straight to Samkiel and tell him. I’ll tell him where you are and what your plans are. Then he will rip this place apart to get to you, and any plan you think you have will be ruined.”

Her nostrils flared, and her jaw clenched as she turned back to me. “Are you threatening me? You know, I could just kill you? Right here, right now.”

“Do it. We’re not scared of you. The Hand is not afraid of you. None of us are. You wouldn’t actually hurt us because you’d hurt *him*. Deny it all you want, but I see it. Everyone does. I know you care about him at least that much.”

A sick smile graced her face. “Are you sure about that? I gutted Cameron.”

“You missed every major artery and organ.”

Her eyes narrowed. “The dream eaters?”

“Nightmares are a part of everyday life.” I shrugged as I got to my feet, knocking the dust off me.

“I stabbed Samkiel. Repeatedly.”

“And saved him from a sinking ship. And let’s not forget about the kiss that got you caught. Listen, we can go back and forth, or you can let me come with you. Or, as I said, I tell Samkiel just where you are. I’m sure it would take him no time to get here, and I doubt he will let you escape twice. Decide, Dianna. Your portal is closing.”

She took a deep breath, looking over her shoulder at the portal growing smaller and smaller. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous that she would just knock me out and leave me here, but I hoped, no damn near prayed, my words got through to her.

Finally, she sighed. “Tattletale.”

I smiled. It was a small victory, but I would take it.

“Fine. But don’t get in my way, and don’t expect me to save your ass, you know, *again*. You go down there with me, and you’re on your own.”

“Fine.” I nodded.

“Fine.” She didn’t wait to see if I followed as she strode into the portal. I knew following her in there with no plan of escape was a bad idea, but this was the closest I had gotten to Nev, and I wouldn’t waste it.

“Samkiel, forgive me,” I whispered and slipped inside, the portal sealing behind me.

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FORTY

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DIANNA



Mountains far larger and jagged than I'd ever seen rose in every direction, thick smoke rolling between the craggy peaks. I watched as the last of the mortals dead walked from the cavern and into a castle carved from the mountain. The caves reminded me of those below Novas. Beasts circled high above, stretching and flapping their wings but staying close to the citadel of rock.

I glanced behind me and stopped, turning back to force him deeper into the cavern. "Logan. Your skin," I hissed. His tattoos cast his skin with vibrant cobalt, the thin lines leading to even bluer eyes, marking him as a celestial.

"I cannot control it in some realms, and Yejedin must be one of them."

"Fine, stay here, and I'll kill Kaden."

"Like fuck you will." He grabbed my arm, and I fought the urge to rip his off.

"If you grab me again, Logan," I hissed. "I will knock you out and leave you in this fucking cavern."

He let go but didn't back up, not this time. "You're not going alone. I already told you that."

"Well, you can't come. You're glowing like a freaky blue nightlight. Every monster living here will spot you. You will only be in the way."

"Maybe. But only if we walk through the front door."

"Okay, well, what other way is there?"

He looked beyond me and down. I followed his gaze and groaned to myself. "Oh, you have to be kidding me."

"Nope."

I felt my lip curl, the smell from the river below crawling toward us.
“I’m not jumping into that.”

“Okay then, the front door it is.”

He started toward the castle. This time, I grabbed his arm, stopping him.

“You’re a pain in my ass. I should have killed you the second you showed up,” I hissed and moved closer to the edge of the embankment. “Would have saved me a lot of time.”

But I hadn’t, and I knew why.

I like Logan and Neverra. They’re my friends.

Gabby’s words were always in my head, acting as my moral compass.

“Let me go first. Samkiel would—”

“Rule number one of this short-term partnership. We don’t mention his name or even talk about him.” I gave him my most intimidating stare.

He smirked knowingly, utterly unaffected by my death glare. “Why? Does his name bother you? You said you don’t care about him. Seems weird that it would be an issue if that is true.”

My eyes narrowed into slits, and I shoved Logan into the river. I watched with satisfaction as he hit the water and went under, but I sighed when I could still see the blue glow beneath the current. When he surfaced, he looked up at me and flipped me off. For the first time in months, I smiled.



WE FOLLOWED THE WALLS BENEATH THE CASTLE, TRYING TO STAY OUT OF the murky water. Our clothes clung to us, and my hair stuck to my face in slimy tendrils. We had emptied as much water as we could from our shoes so we wouldn’t alert anyone with the squeaking. I could use the heat I wielded to dry us off, but smelling like this place was a great cover to help us stay undetected until I was ready.

“You hear that?” Logan whispered.

“Yes.” It sounded like grinding metal and a thousand machines working above us.

“He is building something. That’s why he needs the iron.”

“Yes.” The only question was what.

Logan suddenly stopped and went still. Shock and something primal and impossible to define moved across his face. His eyes dropped to his hand.

“I feel her.”

“What?”

“Nevera. I can feel her. Here.” His skin glowed so brightly in the darkened hall I squinted from it. He spun in a tight circle, his breath coming in short pants. His eyes focused behind me, and he sprinted away, nothing but a blazing cerulean light in the gloom.

“Fuck,” I said and chased after him.

I caught him by the sleeve and spun him around. Samkiel’s best friend, his steady second-in-command, was gone. The territorial, possessive, celestial warrior stood in his place.

“Let me go,” he snapped, his blue eyes glowing as they bore into me. I tossed him against the nearest wall and pressed my forearm against his throat. He struggled, attempting but failing to break my hold. He was damn near feral as he tried to free himself, but I had been feeding enough that even The Hand wasn’t an issue.

“Think before you go charging into gods know what.”

“She’s here,” he hissed. “I have to get to her.”

I pressed him harder against the wall, the stone behind him cracking. “And you will, but if you run in there without thinking, you will alert everyone and get us all killed.”

“What if—”

“Logan.” I tried reason, pulling on that sliver of hope I used to carry. “If she has been alive this long, a few more minutes will not matter. Think. What did Samkiel teach you?”

I hated saying his name, hated hearing it. It made the aching void in my chest stir, and I couldn’t afford to be distracted by that grief right now. I needed to be lethal, and the memory of him made me soft and weak. But if I allowed Logan to run in there, he could ruin everything for me.

“You have to control your emotions, just like he taught us. Think first, not on instinct or drive.” The dull, empty ache began to pound. “Breathe. Center. Focus. Core. Okay.”

I took a deep breath, making sure Logan watched me as I inhaled through my nose and held it before releasing it through my mouth. I moved

one hand in the now familiar pattern from the top of my head to my chest before pushing back again, just as Samkiel had taught me. All the while, I held Logan's gaze, willing him to listen. "Now, you do it."

He leaned his head back and relaxed. I let him go, and he took a deep breath, running through the small centering ritual before he pushed away from the wall. The frantic need left his eyes, the lights on his skin easing to a soft glow. I could still see the need to follow the pull, to run blindly in his search for her, but now he had a handle on it.

"Better?"

He nodded and took another deep breath. Satisfied he had himself under control, I turned and headed back the way we'd come. I lifted my hand, summoning a flame to help guide us as Logan fell into step beside me.

"He taught you that, too?"

I said nothing for a long while, trying to keep that empty ache from dragging me under. And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

"Yeah."

"It was a mantra his father taught him."

"I know."

I felt Logan's eyes bore into the side of my face. "When did he teach you?"

"It doesn't matter." I shook my head, needing to change the subject. I didn't want to talk about anything that would derail me from my mission. "What happened back there? It was like you were a whole different person."

He glanced at me and seemed to understand that I didn't want to continue to talk about Samkiel. "I can hear her, feel her when we're close, but what you saw back there, in its most basic terms, is my need to protect her. I would do anything to accomplish that. It's an instinctual reaction. My body takes over, and I have no control."

I frowned and tipped my head. "At all?"

Logan shrugged, taking in the narrowing of the cavern walls. "We had a fight one time, like every couple. I don't even remember what it was about, but we were in the kitchen arguing, and she didn't realize she had her hand so close to the burner. I placed mine beneath hers before she could make contact. Mortal flames don't hurt as much, but I would never let anything happen to her. Not if I could help it. I'd do anything for her. That protectiveness is one of many perks of the mark."

“You mean the Mark of Dhihsin?”

He nodded. “I can feel her now that we are closer. She’s cold and alone and hungry.”

“Can you hear her thoughts?”

“Yeah. We share everything. That’s why it has to be a soul tie for the mark to appear. The closest equivalent in your language would be a soulmate, mate, or fated love, the one person who is your equal in every way. That’s how the old gods spoke of it. The mark appears once the bond is completed and only disappears in death. It was a crime punishable by death to kill someone’s soul tie, but that didn’t stop it from happening. It was a convenient way to kill both. The surviving mate wouldn’t physically die at first, but they would eventually succumb to a broken heart. They just... stop.”

“Oh.” A shudder of disgust went through me as we ducked under a hanging slab of rock. “It sounds terrible.”

“It’s a bond on every level, and in every way, two beings can connect. Have you ever heard of the story of Gathrriel and Vvive?”

I shook my head.

“It is the first recorded incident of the mark. When chaos first erupted, everyone fought for their place in the realms. Gathrriel was a powerful warrior wounded in battle and on the edge of death when Vvive found him. She swore on her blood, body, and soul, praying to the Formless Ones, the ones before creation, to save him. That was when the mark appeared. It was the first soul tie, and it sealed them together in every way possible. She saved him that day, saved the world, really. Dhihsin was the child of Gathrriel and Vvive, hence the name. It was a way to honor their love and one of their greatest joys after the challenges they’d faced. Some of the gods discounted the mark and thought it defied nature.”

Logan glanced at me as if this story was a legend passed down like a bedtime story for fools in love.

“That was the beginning. Your life becomes their life, and your power becomes their power, and so on. Sometimes I feel as if...” Logan paused, looking at his hand and the mark on his finger. “I hope I am keeping Neverra alive. Some of us share the same life force. Maybe I’m healing her. I don’t know.”

I glanced at him as he flexed his hand. “Maybe you are.”

I didn't know why I wanted to give him that bit of comfort, but perhaps that was what he needed to hear because he glanced at me and smiled.

We were quiet for a while, his words playing over in my head. To love someone so much, you create a mark that transcends time. Gabby would have eaten it up. What would it be to have that perfect person designed just for you? I knew Gabby loved that stuff. She loved watching it and reading about it. Gabby loved love, or maybe just the idea of it.

On the other hand, I had seen love up close and personal. Kaden taught me it was just a dream made by children. Everyone lied, cheated, or sold out their so-called loved ones for the right price. It wasn't real in my world, but maybe it was in Gabby's. She'd wanted a soul tie. She'd told me as much, and maybe that had been Rick for her. He was just a mortal, yet he'd fought to the death to keep her safe when I couldn't.

"You didn't know all of this?"

Logan's voice pulled me from my thoughts as we crawled over a slab of overturned stone. Water dripped from the ceiling, and the humidity continued to grow.

I shook my head, keeping my eyes forward and putting one foot in front of the other. "How would I know? They don't exist for creatures of the night." I kept my face expressionless, feeling the beads of sweat running down my back. "I will never have a mate."

Even if by some miracle I did, it was probably Kaden. Another way for the universe to laugh at me and mock my miserable soul. He was just as cruel as I.

"Everyone does," Logan said, "and they always find each other."

I snorted, "I'm sure they do."

"I am telling you the truth, Dianna. It doesn't matter the distance or time. It's inevitable, even if it takes a thousand years or more."

"Please." I rolled my eyes so hard I was afraid they'd get stuck. "Don't tell me you think Samkiel's my mate."

Logan shrugged. "I don't. We all know his amata died, but you two are something."

"We're not, trust me. You're just as confused as him to think otherwise. Samkiel and I hated each other the moment we met. We only managed to get along because we made a blood deal while I held you hostage. Then we were forced to work together to keep my now-dead sister alive. Remember?"

Logan's smirk grew a fraction. "Uh-huh."

"Besides," I went on, "I was just the first action he got after locking himself away for a thousand years, so of course, he is a little bit obsessed, but that doesn't make it real."

Logan stopped, and against my better judgment, I did, too.

"Logan, I swear if you charge after her again, I will knock you unconscious," I groaned, turning toward him.

Logan just stared at me, his arms folded.

"What?" I sneered.

"Gods, you seem so physically strong, but you bury your emotions deep so you don't have to feel anything for him, for anyone. Does it help? The lying to yourself part? Or does it make it worse?"

A fireball flew from my hand, hitting him in the shoulder. It bounced off his shirt and fell to the ground with a hiss. He laughed.

I glared, not seeing even a single mark.

His eyes caught mine as he brushed a hand down his shoulder. "Samkiel made us fireproof clothes after the incident at the Vanderkai's mansion."

A growl vibrated behind my fangs. "That's fine. I can rip your throat out with my teeth."

Logan squared his shoulders and placed his hands on his hips. "Oh, so it doesn't help then."

"Oh, you can't be fucking serious, Logan. What future do you see for us, huh? Even before the killing? A good fuck here and there, maybe, but long-term? I'm not like you or them or even him."

"Ah, so you have thought of a future with him?"

"That's it." Talons replaced nails as I growled. "I'm going to kill you."

Logan held a hand out, stopping me as I advanced. "Just answer me this. It's not like anyone's gonna know, anyway. This is a suicide mission, *remember?*"

I narrowed my eyes at him as he emphasized the last word.

"Just tell me if you've thought about it, even for a second."

Light flared from beneath a door so deep in my mind I flinched. The door shook and rattled, screams echoing through my head. I clenched my hands so tight my claws drew blood.

"I didn't, okay?" I snapped at him. "Just drop it."

His lips twitched. "Okay."

"And stop smiling like that. It's fucking creepy."

He laughed. "Okay."

Turning back to the tunnel, we said nothing for a long moment. The only sound was our feet moving across the stone ground. Flames danced in my hands again, lighting the way. The silence didn't last long, broken by the whirring of machines and grating of chains.

I held my hand up, stopping Logan. I extinguished the flame in my hand as we arrived at the mouth of the tunnel. Heavy footsteps came from above, and we moved in unison, pressing against the wall.

"Can you do what you did before? Where they can't see us?"

I shook my head. "Maybe for myself, but it took too much power with you. I'm still learning and need all the extra I can muster to kill Kaden."

Logan nodded and peeked around the corner. He kept pace with me, both of us hugging the wall. We continued on the winding path beneath the building until the noises and footsteps drew closer. A square wooden door was carved into the ceiling above us, and I noticed several others down the path. There were no steps or stairs, which told me exactly where we were. Sewer. I swallowed my disgust and tried not to think about it.

"That's our way in." I pointed up, and Logan grimaced.

"Is that what I think it is?"

I nodded. "Listen, you and I have both disemboweled creatures. This is nothing."

Logan didn't look convinced.

"Okay, I'll go first. Just give me a boost."

"Absolutely not." Logan jumped, taking the cover of the hole with him.

"Rashearim men!" I cursed, clenching my fists. "Always the fucking heroes."

Logan's head appeared in the hole he had made. "All clear."

He lowered his hand to help me, but I swatted it out of the way and jumped. He scrambled back out of my way. I landed in a crouch and stood. Logan leaped to his feet, brushing gods knew what from his pants, and looked around.

We were in the middle of a dimly lit stone room. Even with the heat of this realm, this room felt cold and desolate, but I didn't have long to think about it. Something grabbed me painfully by my ponytail, yanking me off my feet.

"Trespasser!" a voice roared behind me.

"Dianna!" Logan yelled.

My body hit the stone wall, and pain took my breath away. I heard Logan groan as he crashed through the wall next to me.

I gasped, trying to catch my breath. A giant creature stomped toward me. Its arms, chest, and legs looked hewn from stone with a face made of the same. Hollow pits took the place of its mouth and eyes. It roared at me, and I jumped to my feet, summoning the forsaken blade. It threw its fist at me, but I ducked and brought my sword up. The creature's arm fell to the ground with a thud. It roared its fury and charged. I sidestepped, extending my blade as it ran past. The ground shook as it dropped to its knees. There was a moment of silence, and then its head rolled to the side and fell to the floor.

The hole in the wall shook as Logan jumped into the room, his tattoos glowing vibrant blue.

“Dianna, you have to—” He stopped, his blade half raised, and watched as the decapitated creature turned into a heap of dirt and rocks. “Oh, you got it.”

I frowned at Logan. “What are you doing?”

“I was going to help, but you didn’t need my help.”

I shrugged. “Golem, right? Go for the head.”

His brows almost connected as he placed his hand on his hip. “How did you know that? They are ancient. Way before your time.”

“I read about them in a book.”

I didn’t tell him which book or that it was when Samkiel and I first broke into the council library. There was no way I would have wasted that opportunity. I’d researched every monster I could find when we weren’t sneaking looks at each other.

Logan and I strode to the door. I called the sword back to my ring and peered around the corner. The hallway was empty and sweltering hot. I motioned to Logan to follow me but to stay low.

We could hear the machines but no footsteps rushing our way. I thought someone would have heard the fight, but it seemed I was wrong. The hall curved to the left. We rounded the corner and stopped, straightening to our full height.

The hall led to a balcony. Beyond the steel railing, orange and red sparks shot upward. We weren’t in a mansion, a castle, or a home, not by a long shot. No, we were in a factory.

Overhead, massive metal wheels turned, grinding against each other, and pipes of all sizes covered the walls. Logan and I leaned over the balcony railing. Below, several large, worn oval cauldrons bubbled with something that looked like lava, but it glowed orange and gold. Tiny winged creatures tapped and nipped at each other, communicating in a language I didn't recognize as they manipulated the pots.

They seemed too small for the task, but they tipped and moved the pots around as if they weighed nothing. The tiny creatures dumped the molten liquid, and it rushed down a narrow passageway to fill giant molds. The small beasts pulled a lever, and a heavy metal plate slammed down. When it lifted, a ghoulish creature lifted a black blade, shimmering with a sickly blueish tint with a serrated tip.

Weapons. That was why Kaden needed the iron.

"It's only one ingredient." Santiago's voice rang in my head.

"He's making weapons," Logan whispered, shaking me from my thoughts. "Enough for an army."

My breath hitched as I watched the conveyor belts carry sword after sword out of sight.

"More than an army." I turned to Logan. "This is the part where our little partnership ends."

"What? No."

"Go find Neverra."

He looked at me like I was the crazy one. You would never know he had been charging headfirst into battle earlier. "I will, but we can do that together. There are way too many creatures here for us to split up."

I raised my hand, keeping my voice as low but serious as possible. "Logan, stop. I am not your friend or teammate, and I am not part of your little celestial family, but your family needs you right now. This is my problem, and I have to end it." I reached into my pocket, pulling out a small obsidian stone. I grabbed his hand and placed it in his palm. "Find her and use this."

He glanced down at the small stone in his hand. "What's this?"

"It's something Camilla made. She said it could create a rift, but only for a little while. I think she hoped I would change my mind after I killed Kaden, but I never planned to use it for me. I was going to send Neverra back. If he were going to kill her, he would have already."

Logan's face scrunched as if he couldn't believe what I had said.
"Why?"

"Gabby liked you both. You were kind to her and protected her when I couldn't. You gave her a home. I owe you." I didn't lie this time, and I hoped my voice didn't break as much as it felt like it did.

"You were going to bring her back to me?" Logan nodded, closing his hand around the stone. "Gabriella was right about you. You are amazing." He leaned forward, grabbed my face, and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

I pushed him away. "Ew. Don't get emotional."

He snorted as I wiped my cheek. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to destroy it all."

Logan didn't move, but I could see that he was torn, his protective instincts being pulled in two directions. He looked past me, his eyes going distant and his expression twisting as if in pain. He reached out and gripped my shoulders. "Be careful, Dianna." He ran past me, his footsteps fading down the hall.

I turned back, watching as more of the dead, controlled by Tobias, emptied another shipment of iron into the cauldrons. I took a few steps back and stretched out my arms, inhaling deeply. I pulled on that kernel of power deep within me, the part I had been feeding and fueling for months now. The part I saved and honed waiting for this exact moment, and I let it burn. Dark mist swirled around my feet and crawled up my body, scales replacing my skin. As my form grew, my arms shifted into wings. Thunder cracked, rage and ruin unleashed.

Light illuminated our small room in Eoria. The storm hit just after our parents tucked us into bed. I craned my neck to see out the window, watching the light dance across the sky. I loved it, and Ain hated it. She hid under her covers, jumping when another large crack echoed across the sky. I jumped out of bed and hurried to her side.

"It's so loud." She curled up even tighter.

"Dada says it's the season for it."

She yelped as another loud boom cracked. "Don't you get scared, Merka?"

Thunder ate up the sky outside. "Yes, but you know what I do?"

"What?" she whispered, her voice small.

"I imagine a room with all these doors where I can lock the scary monsters away. Then I'm not scared anymore. I imagine a stronger version

of me locking the door and taking over. I pretend I am that, and then I can do anything.”

Rain beat against the roof, and she trembled harder. My hand reached out, moving the strands of her hair from her face as she glanced at me. I still remembered when Mama had her, how much smaller she was then. I remembered Mama asking me to watch over her, too, because I was a big sister now.

“It will be okay, Ain. I promise. No thunder will get you.”

She swallowed, hugging the covers tighter. “It’s not thunder. Dada said it’s the gods fighting.”

“He doesn’t know everything.”

She peeked out at the growing storm. “What if they are coming for us?”

“Don’t worry.” I said, her gaze snapping back to me “I’m here. I won’t let anything happen to you, and if they try to get you, I’ll kick their butts.”

“You can’t say that word,” she whispered, but I heard the giggle.

“I won’t tell if you won’t.” I tugged on her blanket. “Now, come out of there.”

Lightning flashed in the room, illuminating us both. She slipped her small hand out and extended her pinky.

“Only if you pinky promise to keep me safe,” she said.

I linked mine with hers and slipped into bed next to her. “Pinky promise.”

Fire erupted from my throat, blasting a hole through the roof. I launched my body into the air, my tail whipping behind me, propelling me up. My form was larger than before. Every kill, every drop of blood had created the damned beast Kaden had so desperately wanted. And the one he would soon regret.

The balcony railing fell, crushing all beneath it. Wounded creatures screeched, their cries following me. The steam and smoke billow around me, my wings forming eddies in the air. This was the place he hid, the place he held her. I threw my head back and roared before tucking my wings close and plummeting toward the ground. I would leave nothing but ruin in my wake. Flames made of wrath and agony blasted from my throat.

I incinerated the factory and everything inside it. Creatures covered in flames ran, but there was no escaping me. A few attempted to fly away, but they fell from the sky, screaming. I was fury and desolation. Vengeance and hate. Beginning and end. I was death incarnate. Smoke billowed up in a

dark, hateful cloud. My wings beat against it, propelling me higher. I circled and passed. The sound that left me surpassed my mortality, past my grief and pain. It was a hollow, beckoning, wretched challenge that shook the world.

A war cry.

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FORTY-ONE

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LOGAN



I ran down the corridor, dodging falling rocks. Dianna had finally unleashed her rage. Every cell in my body shook with the force of her power, my skin glowing in response. Every roar had my rings vibrating, urging me to protect myself. The compulsion to flee was nearly overwhelming. I wondered if even the old gods could hear her screams. She burned incandescent with vengeful rage, all that anger, hate, and pain finally given a voice. Samkiel had to feel it even from here. How could he not? She was powerful, pissed, and set on destruction. I feared nothing would stand in her way. I needed to find Neverra, and fast.

Cobalt energy lit the darkened hallway as I spun around a corner and then another, the bond between us growing stronger with every step. I felt it like a cord pulling me back to her. The golems that emerged from the walls to attack me did not slow me down. With quick efficiency and minimal fuss, their heads flew, and they collapsed.

Another massive quake pulled the floor from beneath me, and I landed on my ass. Again, the air shook with her catastrophic roar. Yejedin wouldn't last at this rate. Nothing would.

Rolling to my feet, I continued down one hall, then the next, the cord pulling tighter. My feet barely touched the steps that curved down into the belly of the castle. I felt her like air in my lungs, and I burst into the chamber with her scent in my every breath.

Chains hung from the wall, securing several corpses in various states of decay left here to rot. My heart stopped as I saw her, and time didn't exist anymore. They'd chained her arms above her head, her wrists bruised and bloody beneath the cuffs. Neverra's chapped and bleeding lips told me she

needed water desperately. Her head lifted, and the effort it took had bile rising in my throat. I didn't remember moving, but I was suddenly before her, my hands cupping her sunken cheeks.

"Nev. Baby?"

Her bloodshot eyes finally focused on me. Shock, disbelief, pain, and then when she recognized that the pull of the bond she felt was real, laughter and tears. She broke, and I did too. She tried to reach for me, but the chains were too tight. I summoned my weapon with a twist of my wrist and swiped the ablaze blade above her, careful not to hurt her anymore. I caught her as she slumped against me. She grabbed at me, and I lifted her, carefully holding her against me, so careful not to break her.

"You found me," she choked out, the cavern trembling around us.

I couldn't help the silent sob that escaped me. "I will always find you."

I didn't know how long we sat there just holding each other, and I didn't care if the place caved in with us in it. All I cared about was that she was back in my arms.

Finally, I managed to put enough distance between us to look at her, and through her torn clothes, I could see cuts and bruises. She didn't seem to have any life-threatening injuries, but she'd fought. She always fought.

"Let me heal you." I held out my hand, the Mark of Dhihsin glowing. She nodded once and placed her palm against mine. We closed our eyes as the marks connected, and I willed strength from my body into hers, my power becoming her power.

The familiar tingle hit me, and a weight lifted as our souls collided and merged. I opened my eyes to watch her body fill out, the cuts heal, and the perfect color return to her cheeks.

My body swayed, and I let go of her hand to brace myself against the wall.

"Logan." She grabbed at my arm. "You gave me too much."

"Never." I took a deep breath. "Never too much."

She straightened and stood effortlessly, helping to steady me on my feet.

"You're weak now."

"I'll be okay," I said, squeezing her arm. "I'll be okay now."

She smiled and slid her hand over my chest, unwilling to lose contact with me. The room shook again, and she looked up. "What's happening?"

Another roar split the sky, and small rocks rained from the ceiling.

"It's Dianna. I think she is working through her problems."

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FORTY-TWO

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DIANNA



Fire lapped and bit at the sky. I'd demolished every single structure that jutted from the cliffs and ground, leaving nothing in my wake. I didn't know what this place was, but it had been here a long time. Far vaster than I could imagine, a world of its own, with abandoned architecture and half-built strongholds. I didn't understand the scope of it until I was airborne.

My thick wings beat against the sky as I banked, flames tunneling from my throat and toward the creatures fleeing both on the ground and in the air. They screeched and writhed, fear emanating from them as they saw me coming. I reveled in it. The ones that didn't meet my powerful jaws and serrated teeth met flames and damnation instead.

Kaden would have no weapons, no help, and no one left here. I would make sure of it. He'd taken everything from me, and I planned to do the same to him. I soared over a destroyed keep, gliding through a plume of billowing smoke. As it cleared, I saw a large citadel with twisting turrets and glowing embers inside. It curved and bent, the power radiating from it beckoning me forward.

Kaden.

It had to be.

My wings beat harder, cutting through the air.

A massive form erupted out of the half-fallen factory below. Its thick serpentine body coiled and arrowed toward me, the large gaping mouth and twin fangs aiming for my throat. I dodged, but with one snap, those powerful jaws clamped onto me, dragging me down.

A roar ripped from me, blood staining my scales as we fell out of the sky. We crashed through the broken infrastructure of the factory and hit the ground hard. The jaws released me, and I bounced to the side. My form dissipated, scales becoming skin, wings becoming arms. Blood spilled down my shoulder, but that seemed to be the worst of my injuries.

“You dumb cunt!” Tobias roared. His large body recoiled, and he was no longer a massive beast but a man. “Do you have any idea what you have done?”

I pushed to my feet and stumbled. I hissed, reaching for the tear along my neck and shoulder. If I had not seen him, he could have ripped my throat out.

Tobias smiled, watching the blood spill from beneath my hand.

“I don’t know why you’re smiling.” I snapped. “You can’t kill me, remember? You tried before.”

“You really are stupid, aren’t you? I never meant to kill you in that damn temple. I only meant to get the book and you, but you wanted to play hero for your new boyfriend.”

I took a step and faltered, feeling the blood continue to pour from my wound. Why was I so weak? Why wasn’t I healing?

Tobias’s eyes raked over me. “Hurts, doesn’t it? Not healing.”

“What did you do to me?”

“Nothing. You are the one who charged head-first into Yejedin, thinking you are invincible. We can only be mortally wounded in our true forms. We are the weakest at our strongest. Nature’s little failsafe.” He smiled. “This will make keeping you here for Kaden so much easier.”

Only mortally wounded in our true forms. The words rang in my head. That’s why Roccurem told Samkiel he resurrected nothing. It would take more than that to kill me.

I smiled, squaring my shoulders and ignoring the blistering pain. “Great. I’ll make sure your corpse is blowing away in the wind by the time he gets here.” I called the forsaken blade to my hand and pointed it at him. “And then I’ll take his head next.”

The smug look of satisfaction came roaring back to his face. “You won’t last.”

“Only one way to find out.”

“Even Samkiel’s grandfather couldn’t kill me. So, what makes you think you will?”

“Call it arrogance.”
Tobias smiled and attacked.

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FORTY-THREE

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DIANNA



“Is that truly all you got?” he asked with a laugh.

Several stacks of old iron beams lay against the walls, pieces sticking out at odd angles. They had so much here. They must have been collecting for years, not just months. My arm swung out, and I caught myself on the half-ripped grate. I pushed myself up, cursing the entire way as my shoulder raged. It had stopped bleeding, but the twin jagged gashes remained. My body ached, but I would not let Tobias kill me.

“You know, I won’t lie. Seeing you rip through everyone on Onuna made me hesitate. It made Kaden hesitate, too. We really didn’t think you had the balls to kill every single person involved. Especially Drake. How bad did it hurt to know that not a single person ever loved you?” I heard another piece of metal go flying as he looked for me. I just needed a second to catch my breath. The gash across my waist burned, healing way too slowly.

“I wish I could have watched your face when you saw how little you meant to those you thought cared for you. I wish I could have seen your face the second Kaden snapped that bitch’s neck. She was a waste of space just like you.”

Rage shivered through, but I clamped down on the emotion, not allowing it to take me over again. First, I had to keep Tobias talking and keep him moving. Second, I needed him pissed enough to change forms so I could gut the bastard. The burned remains of my wrath covered the room, broken metal, wood, and machinery offering tons of weapons. Tobias would use them, but so could I. I had to think.

We were in a factory, and factories required chemicals and flammable fluids to work. A smile pulled at my lips, and I shot from my hiding spot. The force of Tobias's power hit me like a blow, and I knew he was right behind me. I dove beneath a conveyor belt and heard his boots hit the top of it a breath later. His footsteps sounded like a drum above me, and I scooted quickly along the floor, grabbing lines along the way.

"This is kind of sad, Dianna. I expected more."

His fist burst through the belt in front of me, and I rolled to the side just as he intended. He jumped down and dragged me out by my ankles. Tobias lifted me and grinned as he dangled me upside down.

"You were really going to hide from me the entire time?"

"Who's hiding? I was just stalling." His eyebrows rose, and he cocked his head.

I held out my hand and dropped the several caps that had plugged the chemical lines beneath the conveyor belts. Tobias's eyes widened, and he only had a second to react before flames shot from my hands and toward the open pipes.

There was a hiss and then a loud boom before a fireball blossomed in the factory. The blast tossed me, Tobias, and every creature in the factory, sending us flying in all directions.

I struggled to my knees, my ears ringing. The explosion took root, flames roaring at the sky. What remained of the roof crumbled to the floor. Twisted machinery lay in pieces around us, smoke clinging to it. The entire framework of the building groaned, walls buckling and collapsing. The destruction was not limited to just one room but everywhere the pipes crossed.

I coughed, struggling to take in enough air.

"You've gotten stronger, Dianna, more vile," Tobias said from behind me. I turned, watching him walk through the smoke. Burns covered his body, and I could see his skeleton beneath tattered flesh, see a part of his skull. He bent his neck to the side as if loosening a muscle, and his wounds closed, leaving no trace of injury behind.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't impressed. You're so resourceful, but you've stopped nothing. We can rebuild, the end will come, and you will never leave this place."

Tobias held one of the iron-made swords. Broken, jagged points lined the razor-sharp edges, and its dagger-like tip was missing.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I said.

He barked a laugh. “Oh, you came here to die, then? So desperate to join her?”

“Let’s not pretend I didn’t die the second she did.” I spat blood on the ground and tried to push myself up but slipped.

“Can’t get up, can you?” He snickered. “I told you. Hurt in your true form can be debilitating. But I will give you credit. It was a valiant attempt, even if it was a stupid one.”

I said nothing as I tried to push myself up again, my shoulder screaming.

“Seek revenge for the sister that was not even of your blood.”

“What does that mean?” I sneered.

Tobias moved with lightning speed, his knee connecting with my skull, flipping me onto my back. He knelt on my wounded shoulder, and I heard my bones crack, pain ripping through my body. I gritted my teeth, swallowing my screams. He leaned closer, gripping the damaged blade.

“You’ll see soon enough.” He smirked at me. “I cannot wait to kill your boyfriend and leave this world when the realms open.”

He drove the blade into my gut.

“Oops. It’s okay. I didn’t hit anything vital.”

He withdrew and slammed the cold iron into my side. Part three of my plan, act like a delicate flower but be the thorns instead. If he thought he had a hand up, he’d talk, like they all did, so I gave him his precious window. I could take the lashes, the bruises, I could bleed bone dry if it meant I still won, still finished him and Kaden.

“Ouch.” He looked my body over. “I think I hit a kidney there.”

“If you’re trying to hurt me, you’re doing a shit job,” I gritted between my teeth.

A feral grin lit up his face. He twisted the blade at a sharp angle, but I wouldn’t scream or give him the satisfaction of my pain.

“I can drain you enough that by the time Kaden gets back.” He lifted the blade driving it into my gut next. “You won’t be able to fight at all. Then you can sit and rot until the equinox comes.”

There we go.

“Oh, the equinox?” I grunted. “When is that again?”

His eyes burned a shade brighter as he growled. He twisted the blade in my abdomen, and I couldn’t hold back the scream this time.

“You’re a fool, just like the old gods, to think you could outsmart us. You will die just like them, just like her. Alone. You have no family any longer, no friends. No one to help you.”

He twisted the blade so hard I saw stars, and this time, I reached for it.

“I wouldn’t say that.” A feminine voice spoke.

Tobias turned toward that voice and screamed as an ablaze weapon ripped across his face.

He threw himself off me, cursing in a language I never heard. Neverra, whole and unbroken, stood at my side, holding her sword high. Tobias’s blood dripped off the end of her blade, defiance, and retribution burning in her cobalt eyes.

Logan appeared above me, yanking Tobias’s blade from my midsection.

“You were supposed to leave,” I hissed as he dragged me to my feet.

Logan looked at me as if I had grown three heads. “I think you’re in desperate need of new friends if you think we would ever leave you behind.”

Call it lack of blood or exhaustion, but I almost wept at his words and the support they gave me. Support I didn’t know I needed.

“You are all fools!” Tobias hissed, blood dripping from the open gash that ran from his jaw to his temple. “And now you will see why Primordials trembled, and gods bled. I will kill all of you and suck the marrow from your bones.” The ground began to shake.

“I hope you two are up for a fight,” I said, holding my bleeding side. “Because things are about to get a lot worse.”

Tobias’s form shook and bent as did the world around him. A thousand broken and reanimated corpses pushed through overturned steel and rubble, clawing their way free. The scent of death filled the destroyed factory as scales replaced Tobias’s skin, and he grew to almost fifty feet tall. He hissed, exposing fangs longer than my body. The large serpentine beast coiled and bellowed, his army of dead answering him as all eyes turned toward me.

“You are arrogant, like your World Ender, Dianna.” His lipless mouth turned up in a wide, serpentine grin. “And you will die like him, too.”

I raised my blade between us, every bit of defiance that burned in my soul reflected in my voice. “You first.”

The room erupted, and he charged at us.

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FORTY-FOUR

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LOGAN



My blade blocked Tobias's massive tail. He hissed, and the crown around his head flared in anger. The dead he'd reanimated, even the ones with broken and missing limbs, screamed as they charged.

I rolled away, and Neverra leaped forward, cutting at the snapping jaws of the great beast.

"You move like Samkiel," Tobias bellowed at Dianna. "He taught you something when he wasn't trying to get between your legs?"

"I swear, you all have a bigger hard-on for him than I ever did!" she screamed back, chopping two of the burned undead creatures in half.

She was skilled, but blood loss had slowed her down. Neverra took one look at her and her blood-soaked clothes when we first arrived and rushed in head first. Now I knew why. Regardless of Dianna's cockiness, I could feel it too. Her power, normally so bright, full, and violent, was dwindling. It was no longer a burning blaze but a smoldering ember, and Tobias wanted to extinguish it.

"You really think you can kill me?" Tobias asked, his baleful glare sweeping over us. "You are no gods." His massive tail whipped toward us. Neverra leaped out of the way, clinging to the wall nearest her. "You. You are nothing."

The cerulean lights on my skin glowed a shade deeper, and I strode across the floor toward Neverra. The dead fell in pieces beneath my sword, my fury a cold, controlled thing now. Flames roared behind me, the heat scalding. Tobias screamed in pain and then roared, Dianna pulling his attention back to her. I landed right under Neverra, catching her as she jumped down.

"I'm okay," Neverra said, pressing a kiss to my lips before wiggling out of my arms and summoning her blade.

Tobias tossed a large stone at Dianna. It crashed against the wall, the remains of the building shook, and debris rained all around us. I pulled Neverra into an alcove and curled my body over hers, protecting her from the metal and wood pelting us. The dust was so thick it was almost blinding, and every breath had become a struggle. This place wouldn't hold. Not with him acting like a battering ram.

"I told you to leave," Dianna hissed, and my head snapped toward her. She was next to us, having moved so fast I hadn't even seen her. She kneeled, peering from the makeshift shelter we'd found. Blood trickled from her head, making her inky black hair even darker. The rocks he'd tossed hadn't missed completely. She looked rough, her shoulder mauled and the stab wounds on her side still open. With the way her blood flowed, I could tell she wasn't healing, her body burning through her powers to keep itself going.

Fuck.

Tobias roared and slammed his tail against the wall. The undead swarmed through the building, searching for her.

I grabbed her sleeve, turning her toward me. "We can't beat him. You're too hurt, Dianna. We need a god. We need Samkiel."

"No." she snapped, her eyes blazing. She jerked away from me. "Just let me think."

"Think?" I shook my head. I already knew the outcome. "We don't have time to think."

Dianna raised her bloody hand, telling me to shut up, but remained focused on Tobias.

Neverra shifted against me. "Dianna. We need a plan. Logan drained a lot of energy healing me. We can help but—"

"No!" she snapped at Neverra, her eyes wild and feverish. "I can do this. I *need* to do this."

I knew what she meant and how important this was for her, for the sister she'd lost, but we were up against a King of Yejedin with no god in sight. No matter how strong we were, it took a god to defeat a king. We needed Samkiel regardless of what she wanted or how she protested.

I knelt, rocks biting into my knee. "Dianna—"

Neverra cut in, not giving Dianna a single inch. “You can’t do everything alone.”

Dianna’s head whipped toward us, something primal and devastating flashing across her features.

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FORTY-FIVE

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DIANNA



I could do this. I didn't need Samkiel or anyone else. Even as the familiar thoughts echoed through my mind, a part of me whispered back what a liar I was.

You can't do everything alone, D. I winced, Gabby's voice drowning out everything else.

That's what she'd always said, and Neverra had just thrown it in my face. The same way Samkiel had on that damned boat. I took another shuddering breath, my body and lungs burning. No, I couldn't do this right now. I had to think, had to find a way. This was my path, and I was destined to walk it alone.

I watched as Tobias's massive body slithered across the stone floor. I had to think, had to figure out a way to hurt him. If only... It hit me then. I remembered something Samkiel had taught me back at Drake's when we were training.

"Remember, everything has a weakness."

I rolled my eyes and leaned against the bo staff. Annoyed was an understatement, but it only seemed to amuse him. He had wanted to train every day since he apologized. I think, in his own way, he was trying to make up for how he'd sided with Drake and Ethan, but I was still hurt and wounded, even if I had no right to be.

"Dianna, are you even paying attention?"

I tilted my head. "To you? Hardly ever."

Whatever amusement had danced within his eyes disappeared, replaced by a somber expression.

I stood upright and grew serious, leaning the staff against the wall. The quicker this was done, the quicker I could... what? Go to my room to sulk and avoid him? Mature, Dianna, real mature.

“Okay, everyone has a weakness. You know, except for you gods with immortality.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t have a weakness.” His gaze held mine. “Give me your hand.”

My fingers curled into a tight fist. I relaxed my hand immediately, but I knew he’d seen. I didn’t know why his stupid comments hurt me so much, but they had. Ignoring the flicker of pain in his eyes, I held my hand out. He grasped it and lifted my fingers to the thin scar at the hollow of his throat. I felt him swallow as if my touch affected him, but I knew that couldn’t be right. Samkiel did not want me, and who could blame him?

“Everything has a weakness, even gods. I got this scar from a hateful goddess long ago. If I weren’t immortal, it would be a weak spot.” I pulled my hand back, and he took a step away, forcing a smile. “Makes it easier to cut my head off, I suppose.”

I clasped my hands together, holding in the heat from his touch. “You probably shouldn’t tell evil Ig’Morruthens things like that,” I half-joked, glancing back up at him.

“Well, when you see one, let me know.” He flipped my staff toward me with the end of his, and I caught it reflexively.

“What about the giant scary beasts from your past? Even them?”

“Especially them. If they are soft, it’s an illusion to make you think you can get close to them. You will need to strike at their eyes to kill them. If it’s a scaled beast, they usually have a soft underside where they bend or move. The trick to killing them is getting close enough before they rip you to pieces, but as I said, they have a weakness nonetheless.”

The world came rushing back, and I truly looked at Tobias, studying him. He stood, his mighty body coiled and his eyes glowing as he spotted me. He threw his head back, the spikes of his crown quivering as he laughed. His heavy body hit the ground, readying for a charge. But I’d seen my target. Beneath the thick plates of scales, I’d seen a pure orange glow—a soft spot. Triumph blossomed in me.

Tobias came at me, and I leaped out of the way. Logan and Neverra shouted my name, but I waved them off. Tobias collided with the far wall, more stones falling from the ceiling. He shook his head and hissed, taking a

moment to recover. This building was too small for his size to be an asset. Two reanimated winged corpses descended on me, and I dispatched them quickly, sending them back into the arms of death.

The undead attacked Logan and Neverra. If I'd thought Xavier and Cameron were a deadly duo, they had nothing on Logan and Neverra. Every move between these two was as effortless as a perfectly choreographed dance, familiar and beloved to each of them. They bounced off each other, their swords striking, leaving bodies in pieces. Now I understood, seeing it with my own eyes, why The Hand were so feared. All of them together, plus Samkiel, would make a deadly force.

"What are you doing?" Logan shouted at me. I stood, ignoring the tremble in my legs and the demands of my body to feed it.

"I have a plan," I shouted back, and Tobias's massive head swung toward me, weaving hypnotically from side to side.

"I'm going to hold you here until Kaden returns and then make you watch as we cut those celestial bitches limb from limb," Tobias hissed as he coiled, preparing to strike.

A new plan surfaced in my head and one I needed to thoroughly piss him off for.

I shrugged, my shoulder screaming. "You can try, but I figure they'll last longer than Alistair ever did."

His eyes tightened into thin slits as those lips curved back. He let out a deep sibilant hiss and charged me head-on, mouth agape.

"Dianna!" Neverra shouted as I leaped at Tobias and was swallowed whole.

FORTY-SIX

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LOGAN



Horror gripped me as I watched Dianna run toward Tobias, her sword clutched in her hand. He slithered so fast across the stone floor I could feel the vibration beneath my feet. My heart skipped a beat as Tobias opened his massive jaws and engulfed her. Neverra and I faltered, watching his scaled throat constrict as he worked to swallow her whole.

He turned his reptilian gaze on us, his eyes blazing with triumph. He hissed, his lips pulling back, exposing fangs sharp and vile. His intent was clear. We were next. His long body slithered toward us almost lazily.

Neverra looked at me, love shining from her eyes, and I nodded at her. Neverra was my only peace; if we died here, at least we'd die together. I had found her again, and that was all I ever wanted. She smiled at me and raised her weapon. My amata knew my heart, and I was never alone.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“And I, you,” she responded, the words filled with everything we didn’t have to say.

We turned as one, silver armor flowing over our bodies with a single flick of our rings. We raised our weapons, ready to advance. Tobias stopped, his jaw going slack as if caught by surprise. He raised his massive body and writhed. His hissing turned frantic as he looked from his midsection to his side and back. Then we saw the bright ember glowing in his belly. A sword pierced his tough skin, followed by a scream so loud it damn near shook through every realm. The blade thrust out, glowing bright and hot as it moved from his center to his head, splitting him in half.

Neverra and I gaped, watching his giant body fall like a felled tree, the ground shaking with the impact.

Dianna stood at the very center of the gore with her arms outstretched, feeding power into the flames consuming the corpse. When nothing but ashes and embers remained, Dianna tipped her head back, her chest heaving like a warrior savoring the aftermath of a long battle. I saw it then. Saw why Samkiel loved her so damned much, even if he refused to say the words. He risked his crown, his throne, and the damned world for her because Dianna was a queen worthy of any king.

She wiped the viscera from her brow and smiled at the sky. The remains of Tobias floated around her on the wind before escaping through the open ceiling. She called the sword back into her ring and glanced at us. Samkiel wanted an equal, and by the old gods, they had delivered.

Neverra caught my eye, sharing every thought I had through our bond, and nodded in agreement. She was our queen now. If Samkiel chose her, we would gladly follow her through every realm and back.

Dianna's brow furrowed, her face and body covered in blood and gore, the ash and soot sticking to her. "What are you wearing?"

I looked down at the silver battle armor covering me from head to toe. With a flick of my ring, my helmet disappeared. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Neverra withdraw hers as well.

"We were going to help."

"I got it." Dianna shrugged, her lip curling in disgust when a piece of entrail fell from her shoulder. She kicked it aside and said, "Also, remind me never to do that again. That was disgusting."

Before we could laugh, the cavern shook. A roar pierced the atmosphere, so loud and thunderous it forced us to cover our ears.

Dianna's head whipped back, her eyes growing brighter as she scanned the sky. Her lip curled back in a soundless snarl. Even covered in wounds, her body near exhaustion, she squared her shoulders.

Kaden had returned.

The air groaned beneath the weight of a thousand wings. Kaden had brought those beasts Samkiel had told us about, the ones we had seen back in the cavern. My stomach sank, and my hopes with it. There was no way all of us would survive this. Yes, I had healed Neverra, but she was tired, and I had depleted my power to the point where I could barely stand. Dianna, even with her rage sustaining her, was burning out.

"Dianna," I said. Her head was still back, her gaze tracking the roar of the swarm of wings. "We will stay if you wish it."

Dianna didn't even look at us as she spoke. "Parties over kids, time for you to go home."

"Not an option." I read the sadness and regret in Neverra's eyes, but she only squared her shoulders. "We either leave with you or stay with you."

Neverra knew if we stayed, this would definitely be the end for us. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it. When I looked back at Dianna, her eyes were fixed on our joined hands.

"Seriously?"

"Deathly," I said.

Neverra nodded. "Whatever you decide, we are with you. We will stay and fight, and we will lose together, or we can try to find a way out before it's too late. But regardless, we will do it together."

Her face tightened. "You'd stay?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. Neverra nodded.

Dianna looked at us in disbelief. "Even after everything?"

"Friends don't abandon friends," Neverra said, a small smile softening her face. "And you definitely need new ones."

Dianna's chest heaved as Kaden let out another war cry. I knew she was weighing her options. The one creature she had hunted for months was finally within her grasp. The vengeance she longed for or us. She didn't know us, not like Gabby had, and she owed us nothing. So we would wait for her decision. What we wouldn't do was leave her. She had been abandoned and betrayed too many times in her life. Neverra squeezed my hand in agreement. Either we all left, or we all died.

"We won't abandon you, Dianna," Neverra said gently. "We are not them."

Dianna looked at Neverra, her fists clenched and her breathing labored and harsh. Kaden howled, and the beasts answered him. Dianna's eyes scanned the open sky again before closing tightly. One breath and then another, Kaden drawing closer with each. Minutes turned into seconds, the sky darkening from the horde he'd brought with him. The noise was deafening, but I heard Dianna whisper, "I'm sorry." Then she opened her eyes and said louder, "We're leaving."

FORTY-SEVEN

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SAMKIEL. A FEW HOURS LATER.



A flock of birds sang, heralding the day. The sun was bright as it rose, casting the world in a mirage of colors. It kissed the mountain tops and gilded the trees, waking animals and beasts alike.

Rashearin pulsed with life, laughter, and music as everyone prepared for their day. The city celebrated another victory, having again fought back the encroaching darkness.

I heard the castle staff begin to stir and leaned against the balcony railing, the tips of my hair tickling the sides of my arms, my bloody armor discarded at my feet. I stared at the three-headed lion, and the symbol of Unir and his power, our power, glared back at me.

Unir's heavy, armored boots pounded the floor, several guards trailing him. He didn't need them. He didn't need anyone, but they stayed and obeyed like always.

"I am surprised. Usually, you would be down there, celebrating with your friends. Are you ill?"

I shook my head and straightened to my full height.

He towered at my side, taller even than me. The gold and gems braided into his hair sparkled in the sun. I saw the stag, my mother's symbol, the one she had made for him, still resided amongst several others. That one was special and always would be, no matter if it tarnished.

"I remember the jewels you wore, like the back of my hand. I remember you never let hers tarnish, and I remember how you used to fidget with it when stressed. Just as I remember, this is only a dream, and you but a memory."

The shadow of my father smiled. “Wise, far wiser than you have ever been.”

“Why am I dreaming about the day after the battle of Hovuungard?”

The guards behind him shimmered and disappeared. The darkness on the walls nearest us grew thicker, waiting patiently to pounce. He ignored them and pointed toward the horizon.

“A thousand plus worlds, Samkiel, and I have seen them all. You are now at the center. Your name is a war song now. The World Ender, they call you, but you are so much more than that.”

I shifted and stepped away from him. “I am a king built of fear, not love or respect. You made sure of that.”

“I helped you.”

I scoffed. “I believed that at first, but Mother died, and you grew distant and cold. You pushed too hard, but I bent, and I killed. Now my dreams consist of nothing but battles, death, and chaos.”

“And of her.”

The darkness grew closer.

“Why do you haunt me now, King of Gods?”

“We have sent warning signs. You have not listened.”

My brows knitted together, and I faced the shadow of my father fully. The darkness grew an inch closer.

“About her? Dianna?”

He shook his head. “It’s not enough. Not to stop her.”

My heart thudded in my chest. “Dianna?”

“She is too strong now, too powerful. She will eat worlds and burn through them, and you alone are not enough.”

I concentrated, trying to control the dream, my jaw clenching with the effort. The memory turned to premonition, and the darkness crept closer. Shadowy tendrils shaped like hands crept higher, closer to Unir, closer to me, reaching and grabbing, but none of us moved. We couldn’t.

“What you have? What you are, it’s not enough. Not alone.”

“What are you—”

His arm shot out, a blade made of gold ramming through my midsection. Pain, blistering and hot, raced across every part of me. I looked up at my father. His face changed, but a single flash of familiarity flickered through my subconscious as he yanked the blade back.

“You are alone. You will die alone.”

I grasped at my stomach, silver blood pooling and leaking past my fingers. My back bent, and a bright silver light erupted from my chest, my eyes, and my very soul. It shot up and hit the atmosphere. The sky cracked and burst, an ancient beast clawing toward the open gate. I felt them, heard their song of damnation, and the promises of death mixed with the screams of those begging to be saved. Beneath it all, a laugh, dark, feminine, and purely lethal.

My body bent, every bit of energy drained from me, and my skin stained with my own blood.

“You are not my father,” I croaked. The shimmering image of my father knelt before me.

“I am not.”

The darkness finally reached me, but it was too late. I was already gone. I felt the pull of Asteraoth and knew death would be a kindness to me but not to the world left behind. Hands wrapped around me, pulling me down, down, down. The shimmering face of my father just watched and grinned.

I took a last look at the world around me as gates of swirling light opened. Shadowed forms stepped out dressed in armor, thick and sharp. Weapons and beasts snarled at their heels while others shot into the sky. I wanted to stay and help. I had to for my family, friends, and the world, but it was too late, and the void smothered me. It was such a strange feeling to be covered in darkness but warm at the same time.

“Stay with me.”



MY BODY JERKED, FORCIBLY WAKING ME FROM MY NIGHTMARE. I LIFTED MY head from the desk and brushed away a piece of paper stuck to my face. When had I fallen asleep? I had left the party the first chance I got, excusing myself and coming upstairs.

I'd stared at that map, thinking I could look there, maybe follow a trail, but I had no idea where to start. Unable to shake the unease of the dream, I leaned back, my hands sliding over my midsection. I lifted the white shirt I'd worn to the party, but my flesh was still whole with no new wounds,

only scars from battles long past. I closed my eyes and took one shuddering breath, then another. Sweat drenched me, and I shook. It was a nightmare, but so much more. Another vision, only it felt so real.

She is too strong now, too powerful. She will eat worlds.

He meant Dianna, and I did not know how to reach her now. But I knew I couldn't stay here and do nothing, pretending the world wasn't at stake while the mortals asked for parties and reassurance.

"Samkiel, forgive me."

A voice whispered in the wind with a message only I heard. I was on my feet the next instant.

Logan.

I portalled and appeared in his room between one breath and the next. My body formed with tendrils of electricity sparking beneath my skin. His room was empty, his bed made, and his bags untouched. I left and reformed in Vincent's room. He shot up out of a dead sleep, the lights flickering. The female ambassador in bed beside him grabbed the sheet and slid farther beneath the covers.

"What is it?"

"Logan." That was all I said before I left the room and went to wake the others.



"WAS IT THE DYING CHANT?" XAVIER ASKED AS I PACED IN FRONT OF THE abandoned mine entrance. We had searched from Nochari to Kashuenia and well into the following day but found nothing. Nothing but empty mines, the same as before, but I knew he had been revisiting these places, looking for Neverra.

"No."

He sighed, brushing the dirt from his sleeves. I thought there had been something at the last place. I had felt this wave of energy hit my gut as if something roared inside me for a split second. It felt like a portal opening or an alert, a sense of awareness telling me I was close, but it vanished as soon

as it happened. So we left and went in search of Imogen and Cameron. They exited the mine covered in grime, calling back their ablazed weapons.

“Nothing,” Imogen said, stopping and looking behind her. “I don’t feel or sense anything remotely celestial.”

A sharp ring cut through the silence, and every eye turned toward me.

“What?”

Cameron nodded toward my pocket. “Are you going to get that?”

I glanced down, realizing the sharp ring was coming from the phone in my pocket. Logan had forced me to get it so I could communicate with everyone. What if he was gone, too? What if I couldn’t get him back or save him like her, like my father? My chest burned, but I pulled the phone out. Vincent’s name flashed across the screen. I answered and demanded without greeting, “Did you find Logan?”

The line was silent for a second, then Vincent said, “No, but we have a bigger issue, I think.”

“What?”

“Just get back to Silver City. Now.”



CAMERON, XAVIER, IMOGEN, AND I REFORMED IN THE MAIN GUILD HALL IN Boel. Voices murmured from behind the thick wooden doors. I stalked forward, my feet barely touching the ground. My power thrust before me, pushing the doors open so forcefully that they cracked.

“How can you not know where she is?” Vincent demanded. He turned to look at us, and shock forced me to a stop, the others slamming into my back. They recovered quickly and fanned out on each side of me. I blinked, unable to believe what I was seeing. What was Roccurem doing here?

“God king, you have returned from your wasted adventure, it seems,” Roccurem said.

I snapped. Call it lack of sleep, burning nerves, or that I was close to losing another person I cared for deeply. The lights above me burst one by one as I stalked toward Roccurem.

“Abandoning your realm. Treason. Aiding and abetting a known fugitive. Treason. Disregarding your king’s orders and commands. Treason.” I stopped, towering over him. “All punishable by death under the Council of Hadrameil.”

“Yes, under your father’s rule. I do not follow your father any longer.”

“No, you follow me.”

“No, I follow her.”

My control snapped, and my hand whipped out. Runes appeared beneath him, binding him to this room. He could no longer leave until I allowed it, and if he had anything to do with Logan’s disappearance, I would lock him away for eons. The lights flickered, drawing everyone’s attention to me, but my rage echoed in the sky. Not in this room.

“I promise, my liege, I am merely here to help,” Roccurem said. He stepped closer, but not by much.

“Help?” I scoffed, a bitter laugh escaping me. “Similar to what you did when I had her, and you unleashed the dream eaters on us? That sort of help? You are a traitor and liar, and I will not tolerate it.” I rubbed a hand across my face wearily. “Why have you ignored me? I tried to summon you after the dream eaters, and you blocked me. You keep secrets that could help me save her. You—”

“Your judgment of me and my intentions are not misguided, but the chemical imbalance in your brain when it comes to her overrides your logic, god king. Anyone in this room can feel the waves of power wafting off of you, begging to claim what’s yours. She is an integral element for what is to come, as are you. I am merely a vessel from the ones far older and far larger than you.”

“Where is she?”

“I cannot speak of that.”

All the windows burst simultaneously, allowing the wailing wind to enter. It raged, tossing the contents of the room. Papers and small objects spun into miniature tornadoes. Thick clouds rolled outside, lightning flashing and thunder cracking the sky.

Energy pulsed, shooting through me, and lightning flared in the room, tickling my hands, arms, and soul.

“Samkiel,” Vincent warned. But it was too late.

Tendrils of electricity licked across my face and coalesced in my eyes right before darkness blanketed the city, every light for miles bursting.

“Where is she?” I thundered, my voice matching the pitch of the growing storm outside.

“I cannot say.”

The ground shook, a quake forming deep within Onuna—a fissure in the world. The floor burned beneath my feet, turning the carpet black. Car alarms blared outside, and buildings swayed. I didn’t remember moving, but my hand gripped his throat, and I lifted him high into the air. The runes on the floor faded, and Roccurem’s form wavered, smoky stardust dancing off his body in tendrils.

“Godsdammit, Roccurem, tell me!” I did not care that my voice shook or that the tornadoes that spun from my power forced everyone to seek shelter. A natural disaster, a force of nature, was what my father’s guards would whisper of me, and now I understood why. Electricity jumped from my knuckles to his skin, blisters forming where it touched. They healed, but I knew they hurt all the same.

All six of his eyes opened, white and staring at me. “I cannot. No matter what you threaten or how you torture me. It must happen this way, or there will be no future for you or anyone. I forewarned you. Her choice must be her own. The path she determines shapes the world, and you nor I can intervene.”

“Why?” I bit out. “Because fate dictates it?”

“You are right where you need to be, god king. I only apologize for what else you will lose.”

Blind rage hit my gut at his threat, and the world shook. I adjusted to keep my balance and finally noticed what I was doing. I willed my power back, afraid I had caused a natural disaster that I could not fix, but Onuna still spun. The tornadoes died, and the shaking stopped. The silence that followed was nearly deafening. I took one breath, then another, pulling every bit of my destructive nature back into myself. The clouds dissipated, and the rising sun burnished the room. Everyone stood, looking at me with wide eyes.

I released Roccurem.

“Roccurem, if she dies....” I swallowed the growing lump in my throat and tried not to sound quite as foreboding as I felt.

Roccurem’s head jerked back as if something far away from this world had screamed his name. His form bent, his body melting into a swirling

mass of energy and stardust. He stepped back, the darkness pulsing and his voice resonating all around us. “And the world will shudder.”

My chest heaved, and my hands shook, his words hovering in the air. I reached for his retreating form but stopped when my instincts flared in alarm. Something was coming. A current anchored in my skin like a thread in the universe snapped taught. It yanked, and I looked up in the direction of the pull. The beginning vortex of a portal formed in the ceiling, flames defining the circumference. Screeches raged above, resonating through space and time. Adrenaline surged into my system, and I had a split second to realize what was happening before the Irvikuva exploded from the portal. They poured into the room in a flurry of red eyes, wings, and claws.

The Hand summoned ablazed weapons as one, bright lines flaring to life on their skin. After centuries of working together, they did not need a command from me. Cameron cut the head off the Irvikuva stupid enough to target him with one powerful swipe. Imogen leaped and flew through the air to cut two of the beasts in half. Xavier threw the circular blades he carried, gore showering us like rain before they returned to his hands.

I summoned my blade amidst the chaos, but Logan fell at my feet before I could enter the fray. My heart skipped a beat as Neverra landed on top of his bloodied and bruised body with a grunt. Neither looked at me, their eyes wide and transfixed, locked on the portal. I looked up, feeling her before I saw her.

Dianna.

I dropped my sword and rushed forward, catching her falling form. Her body jerked at the landing, her hair spilling across her shocked face. She was filthy, covered in bruises and cuts, some still open and bleeding. The scent of her blood made me feral. She was battered, dirty, and pale, so pale.

“You caught me?”

It was a whispered question as if she couldn’t believe it.

“Always.”

I looked up at the closing portal, aching to get through and finish this. Only the weight of her in my arms kept me grounded. Crimson eyes stared back, focused on her with wrathful hunger.

Kaden.

Seeing where she had landed, no more Irvikuva dared venture through. They stayed by their master, their wings tucked tight and jaws snapping.

Kaden didn't move. He remained still, staring at her until, with a snarl and a twist of his lips, the portal closed.

I inhaled deeply and glanced at Dianna, tightening my grip when I realized she clung to me. Relief washed over me, the feel of her in my arms a soothing balm to the ragged wounds formed by thinking she was gone. I went to one knee, supporting her legs against my thigh so I could brush back the strands of hair clinging to her face.

"I didn't know where else to go," she said, her gaze still focused on where the portal had been. Pain twisted her features right before her eyes rolled back, and she fell slack in my arms.

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FORTY-EIGHT

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LOGAN



Her nails dug into my chest as she rode me hard and fast, a feverish pitch to her rhythm as her hips rocked against me. My hands stayed above my head as she'd asked. Hands clenched to the mattress edge. I knew she needed control after having none for so long, and I gladly gave it to her. She could have the very soul from my body if she asked. I tried to keep my hips still, struggling not to push up into her, but it was growing increasingly difficult. Every muscle in my body begged me to fuck her. Not yet, not yet. She leaned back, gripping my thighs as she bucked faster against me.

“Logan, baby, touch me, touch me.”

My body exploded into action. Her permission was all I needed. I sat up, driving my cock deep, eliciting a harsh scream from her. Oh, thank the gods. My hands cupped her ass, lifting and slamming her back down to meet my thrust. My mouth captured hers, tasting her cries of passion. Her hands caressed the back of my neck, pulling me closer.

I felt her clench around my cock as I dragged my mouth from hers, damn near screaming myself.

“Come with me, baby,” I groaned, the words pouring from my lips before reaching between us.

A single brush of my thumb along her clit and Neverra’s body shook, her head falling back, as she chanted my name. Her back arched as her orgasm ripped through her. The bite of her nails into my shoulders made me groan, her pussy clenching so hard around me I damn near saw stars.

We collapsed, still entangled in one another. I wrapped my arms tight around her, afraid if I let go, this would be just another dream, and I would

wake up alone. I knew she felt the same when she tucked herself closer.

I kissed her sweat-drenched forehead, eyelids, cheeks, and back again. “I missed you. I missed you. I missed you.”

She snuggled closer, burying her head into the curve of my neck, and I heard her sniffle. “I missed you, too.”

It was quiet for a long moment, both of us trying to convince ourselves that this was real. It had been a few days since we’d returned. We had stayed up here, barely taking the time to eat or sleep, just being with each other and reconnecting in every way possible. No one bothered us. I doubted they would until we came downstairs. Not that I had any urge to leave this room. No, I wanted to take her, leave, and never return. That part scared me. I would never abandon my family, but I couldn’t endure that again. The thought of losing her had damn near destroyed me.

Her legs wrapped around me tighter, and she pressed a kiss to my neck, her hands roaming across my back.

“What are you thinking? Your heart is racing.”

“Running away and never coming back.”

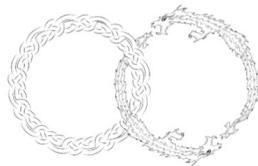
Neverra looked up at me, brushing her lips along my jaw, her breath soft and warm against my skin. “Logan.”

“It’s been so bad, Nev. So bad.” I felt the tears prick my eyes, and I finally let them fall. Her fingers caressed my cheeks, wiping them away. “I swear we’re losing Samkiel. Dianna has been on the warpath. Not that I blame her, but I think she was the only thing that made him less catatonic. We have no leads. The mortal ambassadors need coddling like children. I have this sick feeling that whatever is about to happen is only the beginning, and above all that, I lost you.”

Neverra cupped my face and kissed me. She pulled back just enough to whisper, “You didn’t lose me. I’m right here.” She placed a kiss on my forehead, then my lips, whispering against them, “We will never be apart again. I promise.”

I cupped the back of her head, my hand fisting in her hair as I deepened the kiss. My cock hardened again, and I flipped us, hovering above her for a moment before thrusting deep. I needed to claim her once more. “You’re whole, and you’re safe, and you’re here, and you’re mine.”

Her nails dragged down my back as I thrust again. “Yes, yes, yes.”



AFTER A FEW MORE HOURS OF BEING LOST IN EACH OTHER, WE TOOK A shower and decided it was time for us to leave the room. Regardless of how much I wanted to lock Neverra away and keep her to myself, I knew the others were waiting to hear exactly where she had been and what she had seen.

We walked toward the meeting hall, and Neverra gripped my hand. I could hear the others talking, and I squeezed her hand before pushing the door open. The room fell silent, all eyes locking on Neverra.

“About time!” Cameron yelled as he stood and rushed over. He grabbed Neverra in his powerful arms, ripping her hand from mine. She laughed as he placed a kiss on her cheek and spun her.

“I missed you so much. I don’t even care that you smell like Logan’s—”

“Hey!” I snapped as he set her to her feet.

She barely got a breath in before the others rushed over. Their joy and relief at having her back were nearly overwhelming. I saw the tears Neverra and Imogen wiped away as they pulled back from their embrace. After her, they turned toward me, embracing me as if they had been just as worried about me. I returned it and even laughed when Cameron swore he’d kill me personally if I left him.

“I missed you all,” Neverra whispered, her smile tear-soaked.

Samkiel, worn and looking beyond exhausted, approached, and the others parted to make way for him.

“Neverra.”

Her voice broke. “Hey, boss.”

I expected him to start immediately questioning her, gathering information. I thought he might ask how she was at most, but I never expected what he did next. Samkiel studied her face, and then he hugged her tightly, his massive arms swallowing her small frame.

Neverra laughed, caught off guard, but the sound turned into soft sobs. She leaned into him, accepting the safety and comfort he offered. We all stood frozen, everyone in the room shocked. Samkiel, although he risked his life for us, was never affectionate. He didn’t say the words ‘I love you’

to anyone. He hadn't truly hugged anyone since his mom died. Yet, here he was, holding Neverra like he'd lost a part of himself when she'd disappeared, and I suppose, in a way, he had.

"I missed you too," she whispered when he pulled back enough to press a kiss to her forehead.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice husky with emotion.

She glanced at me before nodding. "Yes. I'm okay."

"Good," Samkiel said and stepped back.

Neverra returned to my side and wrapped her arm around me, leaning against my side.

Samkiel glared at me, anger born of fear moving behind his eyes. "That was completely reckless. You understand that?"

I nodded.

"You could have died."

"I know, but she is worth it. You knew I wouldn't stop or rest until I found her, regardless of rules and obligations. I know to disobey orders is an act of treason amongst us, and if you—"

"I am glad you are okay," he said, cutting me off. This time it was my turn to be shocked as he embraced me next in a hug. I smiled against his broad shoulder as he squeezed once then let me go. And just like that, it was over. He turned and strode back into the main room. Everyone took a deep breath and followed.

Imogen linked her arm with Neverra's on her free side, just like old times. She leaned her head against Neverra's shoulder, whispering, "Ugh, I missed you so much. You left me here with Cameron and Xavier. I almost didn't survive."

"Hey! I heard that, Imogen!" Cameron yelled.

Neverra laughed, and I could feel her relax with the normalcy of the exchange.

Inside the conference room, boxes were stacked against the walls, some still open and half-packed with books, scrolls, and papers.

"Are we leaving?" I asked.

"Yes," Samkiel said, taking a seat at the head of the table. "But first, I have questions. I need to write this down, but we will keep it to ourselves. Is that clear?"

We nodded, and Neverra took the seat closest to Samkiel. We all sat as he opened a large folder and grabbed a pen before looking at us.

“Haldnunen is dead.”

A hush fell across the room, and Cameron released a small whistle.

“You killed a King of Yejedin?” Samkiel almost dropped his pen.

“No, Dianna did.” I sat up straighter. “You should have seen it, seen her. She moves like you, Samkiel, but she is deadlier. What all have you taught her?”

His throat bobbed, but I saw the look of pride cross his features. He was proud of her, even if he believed it was reckless. “Not a lot. I only perfected what she already knew.”

No one said anything, as if shock was the only thing they could master. Not even Cameron could muster words.

Samkiel looked at Neverra, and his tone gentled. “I am going to ask you questions, but if it is too much for you at any time, we can stop. Understood?”

Nev nodded, but I felt her hand on my thigh. I placed mine over hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze. I knew she needed the connection to remind her she was real, this was real and we were all here.

“What can you tell me about where you were? What happened?”

Neverra sighed and gripped my thigh tighter but said, “It was just a normal day. Gabriella was growing restless, stuck in the penthouse. Logan had left with you, so we decided to have some fun. We would have breakfast, get those fruity little drinks that fizz, and see Rick. I know I shouldn’t have, but I had snuck him over a few times so they could hang out, and this time was no different. With Dianna gone and busy, I think she was just lonely. Anyway, we were getting ready and singing this song she was obsessed with. Then, there was a knock at the door, and I went to answer it. I didn’t even know who he was, but I knew from his energy that he was a vampire. He said his name was Drake and that you’d sent him.”

I watched a vein throb in Samkiel’s temple, and he folded his hands across his lips. I had seen him make that face before, and I remembered how the creature who had caused it lost its head. Rage, pure rage, and I could feel it coming off him in waves.

“I barely had the door opened before Gabriella rushed forward and hugged him. They were old friends, or so I thought. He told us where you and Dianna were and what had happened. We told him where we were going, but something felt off. I tried to ignore it. I thought you had sent him. Gabby knew him and seemed to care for him. I trusted it....”

Neverra stopped and closed her eyes, swallowing hard. Her hand clenched on my thigh, and her entire body shook as she tried to control her emotions.

“Neverra, do you need a break?” Samkiel asked, and I had never respected or loved him so much.

Neverra shook her head and took a couple of deep breaths. Then, she opened her eyes and cleared her throat before continuing. “We left together and met Rick at the coffee shop. We were in line, chatting as we waited to order. I didn’t sense or hear him, but suddenly, Kaden was there. It happened so fast, too fast. I woke up in chains in Yejedin. Gabriella was chained next to me, and she was crying. Rick lay on the floor a few feet from us. He was dead, marks and scratches covering his body as if he’d fought.”

I squeezed Neverra’s hand, our bond rousing with her distress.

“We were down there for a while, just us two. I tried comforting her, but she was lost in grief about Rick and only cared about Dianna and me. She was sweet. I tried everything I could think of to keep her distracted and calm while we sat and waited. The truth is, she helped me as much as I did her, but that was just Gabby. She was good to her core. We were down there for hours, maybe a day? I couldn’t tell.”

Neverra stopped and sniffled, reaching up to wipe at her face.

“That’s enough for today, Neverra.” Samkiel had stopped writing and started to close the book, clearly not wanting to upset her more.

Neverra reached out and stopped him. “No, you need to know. I need to say it, and you need to write it down.”

She inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. I poured strength through our bond, letting her feel my love surrounding her.

“Kaden came. I thought he would take me too, but he only took her. She never came back, and I knew the worst had happened. Yejedin shook, Samkiel. It shook, and it wasn’t Kaden. I know that with my whole heart. I know it sounds crazy, but I swear I heard Dianna scream, and then something shifted in Yejedin. The creatures watching me felt it, too. They seemed nervous and scared. I sat down there for I don’t know how long. They brought me food, but I refused it until I couldn’t any longer. I remember hearing what sounded like machines. It sounded like a metal factory, and I could smell iron and blood in the air. Some days it was so hot

I expected lava to fill the cell. I don't know what he is making. I never got a look, but from what I heard and felt, it sounded like there was a lot of it."

"She's right," I cut in. "There were so many weapons, and if Kaden is creating them for an army, they outnumber us, even with all the people on Onuna."

Samkiel shifted in his seat, and the chair groaned beneath him. "Okay."

Neverra squeezed my hand. "He's heartless, Samkiel. I mean that with my whole being. He feels no remorse for what he has planned and doesn't care about who is in his way. Kaden only cares about her. He will come for Dianna. I heard them talking about how they need her for something. I can't remember what they called it, but I think it started with an E? I don't know. It was so loud with all the machines and the creatures there."

I rubbed my hand over the small of her back in a small act of comfort.

"Thank you, Neverra," Samkiel said, closing the book and standing.

Neverra nodded and took a shuddering breath. The rest of us got to our feet to stand with him.

"We will return to the Council of Hadrameil, where we will remain. Anything spoken here is not to be repeated. I will be the spearhead when speaking to the council and relaying all that has taken place. Understood?"

Everyone nodded.

"Good. I need you all to pack. Vincent will have his team take over Silver City while we are away. I have already lifted the curfew and ban, given that the threats, for the most part, have been eliminated—"

"Where is she? Dianna?" Neverra asked. "How is she?"

Samkiel stopped mid-speech and lowered his head slightly.

"She is, umm, in modern terms, healing. She's still asleep."

"Still?"

"Yes." He glanced at us, his lips twitching just a bit. "It has been over a week since you all returned."

Cameron shot me a wicked look. I shook my head and gave him my best hard stare. Xavier snickered.

"A week?" Neverra squeaked. "Why didn't you tell us or come get us? I would have helped sooner."

"You and Logan have already helped enough. Besides, your time together is more important given the circumstances."

"I want to see her. I need to tell her something."

Samkiel seemed almost hesitant to oblige but finally nodded. “Perhaps when she wakes.”

Neverra nodded, and that was that. We all filed out of the room behind him, Neverra reaching for my hand again. I noticed how the others kept an eye on her, as if they, too, were afraid she would slip away if we blinked.

“Are you hungry?” I whispered to her.

“Gods, yes.”

My smile reached my ears. I called after the others, “We’re going to get something to eat. We will meet you all there.”

They nodded and waved, continuing to follow after Samkiel.

Once out of sight and halfway to our room, I asked her, “What do you need to tell Dianna?”

Neverra glanced at her hands, and I could feel the sorrow eating at her through our bond. “Just a message her sister left.”

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FORTY-NINE

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SAMKIEL. REMAINS OF RASHEARIM.



S unlight bathed the new floor I'd made a week ago when I'd first returned to the remains of Rasheirim with Dianna in tow. We were in my home, except it was no longer in a state of decay. I had remade the entire place. The holes created by powers I couldn't contain were gone, and the overgrown foliage no longer threatened to reclaim the land. I'd modeled the interior after the places she had stayed and enjoyed. Dianna would remain here until I figured out what to do with her, and I wanted her to be comfortable.

The council would want her head for all she had done. They cared not about grief or pain, but I refused to give her to anyone, let alone them. The meeting with The Hand went well. Everything Neverra told us would stay sealed within my journal. My gut screamed that something moved beneath all of this, something I hadn't seen yet, and trusting anyone outside of The Hand made me uneasy. My chest ached at the recollection of what Neverra had gone through, but the worst part was that I felt it was all my fault. I'd trusted the Vanderkais and sent Drake right to her, to them, and it had cost Dianna everything and almost cost Logan the same.

“You caught me.”

The words she's spoken to me after falling through that portal whispered through my head. She had returned to me, and I had caught her. Ethan had warned me back in that over-cumbersome mansion not to make her fall if I had no intention of catching her, and as I watched her sleeping form, I realized somewhere along the way that catching her and keeping her safe was my only intention.

“Guilt wafts off of you in waves but undetected by mortal eyes,” Roccurem said from behind me.

“You are lucky I have not disintegrated you yet,” I snapped.

“I assure you. I have the best intentions for you, Dianna, and the realms. In as much as I am allowed to interfere, I will do what I can for all of you.”

I sat on the edge of the oversized bed, watching her as she slept. Her hands rested on her chest as it rose and fell. She was clean, her clothes no longer a mangled, tattered mess. I had healed her as soon as I could, but she had not moved much in the last week.

Roccurem looked down at her, once again in his mortal form, his hands clasped behind his back.

“What’s happening to her? What’s wrong with her?” The words tumbled from my lips against my will. I already knew and was unsure why I needed to hear it from him.

Dianna shifted and resettled, a strand of hair falling across her cheek. Eagerly I reached out to tuck it back behind her ear, my touch barely a whisper against her skin. I cared for her more than I wanted to admit to myself, and I had even told her. The words had left my lips of their own accord. I knew I shouldn’t because it would cause more harm than good, but I couldn’t control it, nor did I know if I wanted to.

I caressed her temple the same way she had done for me those long and bitter nights. I knew she was an Ig’Morruthen, a creature built for pure and utter destruction and my sworn enemy. The entire world knew it now, but at this moment, she resembled nothing more than an innocent woman whom Kaden had tried to turn cruel.

“She has overused her abilities to the extreme. Simply put, she is burned out.”

My hand hovered over her forehead once more, barely an inch above. Light danced from my palm, but no swirling black mass followed. No fire rose to greet my power. I had done this so many times over the last week, and the results were always the same.

“How long do you think?” I lowered my hand. “Has this happened before?”

“I have not heard of such things, my liege. Powers like yours, like hers, are not common. We don’t know how they work or even why. It depends on her. She expelled an extreme amount of power even to open a portal from Yejedin. Even at her age of a thousand years, power of that magnitude must

be taught and trained. She has buried so much under grief and rage and has not processed it since her sister died. It may be days. It may be months, years, or never again.”

Sighing, I stared at her sleeping form. “I healed her wounds thinking she would wake up, but it’s been days.”

“It is not a physical ailment but an emotional one, and I am afraid Unir’s gifts cannot heal that.”

I studied her face as her brows drew together, reacting to whatever dream she was having.

“I feel it best for her to stay here. Until she is better, at least, and until you and the council have made your final judgment. She will be safe here. No one knows of this place except The Hand, and they would rather cut their own throats than betray you.”

“Still an advisor to the gods, Roccurem? Even after all this time.”

“Yes, it appears so. I will admit it is peculiar to see you so enamored with one living being. It would seem it took a fiery temptress to tame the untamable.”

Tame. Is that what Dianna had done to me? It seemed such a small word for what I felt. She hadn’t tamed me. She’d healed me without even realizing it.

“You can return to the council, Roccurem, and let the others know I’ll be there after she wakes.”

“Are you going to tell her of your dreams?”

I looked at him. “No, and they don’t need to know either.”

“Even if it is a premonition of your inevitable demise?”

“Even then. If it is to happen, I need them ready.” My eyes returned to her, always to her. “All of them.”

He didn’t speak for a minute, and I knew he was scanning to see what outcome my decisions would make.

He didn’t move. “She will be furious once she learns.”

My nightmares plagued me day in and day out. My essence ripped from my body as my light bled into the sky, the gates opening with armies more vast than ever before. Stepping through into another realm, and that damn frost that chilled me to the bone.

“Roccurem, it is not your place to worry over what she may or may not feel. Go back to the council halls.”

“Is that an order, god king?”

I gave him a stony stare. “Did it sound like a suggestion?”

“Very well.” He nodded once, taking a last look at Dianna before disappearing in the swirling starry mist.

It was ridiculous to be jealous. Logan had said that I did not make my feelings clear enough when she and I were together, something I intended to correct as soon as possible. I also knew she had shared her time with mortals during her grief. Not that I judged, but it hurt. Some part of me shattered when I found out she had shared her body with another after our time together. It was not a feeling I was used to.

Mortals shouldn’t bother me. I knew I was much more accomplished than them when it came to sex. It wasn’t until her that I started to question myself. I’d felt nervous and on edge since the beginning. Her words alone often made this weird fluttering feeling hit my gut. It was something I had never experienced. She got to me unlike any other.

Roccurem’s intentions didn’t seem nefarious, but it seemed I was a selfish bastard with her time. Even at that damned vampire mansion, I wanted it all. Her laughter, her smiles, and all of her attention. Selfish indeed. I wanted to be the one she turned to, not him, not mortals. Me.

As soon as the air settled from Roccurem’s departure, I leaned forward, resting my forehead against hers. “Please wake up. I don’t care if you hate me, are angry, or yell and scream. You can wish death upon me, but I need you to wake up. I need you here with me.”

FIFTY

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DIANNA



“We have to go. There are more coming!” Neverra yelled.

We began cutting a path through the Irvikuva that had reached us. I had never seen a horde as large as this one. They swarmed, blanketing the sky and diving at us as we escaped the burning factory. We ran down steps and through hidden tunnels, trying to find our way back to the cavern where we had entered.

I stopped, my side, my shoulder, my whole being burning. Logan and Neverra flanked me, their weapons at the ready. I tried to catch my breath, but I was weak, and my body was failing. How could I kill Kaden and make him pay for what he’d done to her, to us, when I could barely even stand? Hate and anger ran through my veins. Here I was, running down another tunnel, only this time away from him. Something inside me cracked. No. I wouldn’t be her anymore. I wouldn’t.

“Where is the stone?”

Neverra and Logan looked at me, their skin glowing with celestial blue. The Irvikuva were all around us. They loved the hunt and were closing in.

Logan slid a hand into his pocket. His eyes went wide, and his face turned grim. “Uhh.”

“Logan!” I practically screamed. “You lost it?”

“What stone?” Neverra asked.

“Dianna had Camilla make a stone to transport her out. She gave it to me, so I had a way to get you out, but I guess it fell during battle.”

Neverra turned slowly and looked at me, her head tipped to the side. “You were going to save us?”

I rolled my eyes and pushed between them. “Let’s not make a big deal out of it. Without that stone, we’re stuck here with no way out. Not that it matters because we are also hopelessly lost!”

“There has to be another way,” Logan said, desperation filling his voice. He looked around as if there might be a secret door somewhere that would lead us back to Onuna.

I placed my hand on my head and turned in a slow circle, afraid to stop moving.

Neverra grabbed Logan’s arm. “What about a portal?”

“I don’t think Samkiel can hear us from here, Nev.”

The cries of the Irvikuva grew louder. Neverra lowered her voice and nodded at me. “Not him, her.”

“Me?” I looked at her in disbelief. “In case you all got hit on your heads very hard back there and forgot, I can’t open portals to other realms.”

Logan’s face lit up as if he heard whatever Neverra didn’t say out loud.

Neverra stood shoulder to shoulder with Logan, hope glowing in her eyes. “No, but you have Kaden’s power, and he can make them.”

I tried to ignore the way she said those words so casually. It burned my gut to know I carried pieces of his power and how they sought to make me like him. Worse was the suspicion that maybe I had always carried the seed of the bloodthirsty monster, and all his power had done was awaken it.

“You can do this, okay?” Neverra’s hand on my shoulder pulled me from my dark thoughts. “You are equal parts him and yourself, and from what your sister said, you are stubborn and determined when you have your mind set on something. So set it to this, and we won’t need some magic stone. We just need you. We need you, Dianna, just like Gabby did. So there’s no dying today. Not for you, not for us.”

“Well, I failed her, so—”

“No! No, you didn’t, and you won’t fail us either.”

Her words soothed the part of me that so desperately needed absolution.

“Even if I have the power, I don’t know how.”

Logan rubbed at his chin. “Samkiel always told us when training with his father that you have to picture where you want to go in your mind. Think of a door leading to a place you want to go. You open it not with your hands but with your power. Visualize it and want it more than anything.”

“That sounds stupid,” I scoffed. “I don’t even know where to take us.”

“Yes, you do.” Neverra met my gaze. “Think of the one place you would feel safe. Where we all would be safe.”

Logan nodded, and I got the impression they were having a secret conversation. “Think of home.”

“And quickly, please,” Neverra added.

The lines beneath her eyes shone brighter, but her gaze had focused past me. I realized just how quiet the cavern had fallen and turned to look. Several pairs of bright red eyes glared at us from the end of the tunnel, their mouths wide with large, gaping smiles. The Irvikuva screeched and clawed their way toward us.

“Run!” Logan commanded in the same voice I imagined he used on the battlefield.

We barreled down the corridor, every muscle I had screamed in protest as I pushed my body past its limits. Our feet barely touched the ground as we ran. Logan threw a ball of cobalt energy at the same time I launched a fireball. The tunnel shook as they collided, vaporizing the Irvikuva at the front of the horde and setting nearly a dozen more aflame. They screeched and fell, only to have the ones behind trample their corpses. It helped, but it wasn’t enough.

We rounded a corner and emerged into a large cavern. I skidded to a stop, Logan and Neverra flanking me. More red eyes emerged from the darkness. We stepped back, but the Irvikuva behind us rounded the corner. They gathered in the opening but didn’t attack. We were trapped.

“Damn,” I breathed, actually looking at where we were. Now I know why the ones behind us had stopped. They didn’t need to move us anymore. They had been herding us, and we were right where they wanted us.

A slow hum filled the cavern, the song one I had grown to hate. Heavy footsteps landed against the stone, and the Irvikuva parted.

“Bravo, Dianna. You made it to Yejedin. I am so proud of you. Unfortunately, this is where your journey ends, pet.”

That voice. A chill went through me, goosebumps erupting over my skin. Kaden stepped from the shadows, and I saw red. Blood pounded in my ears, and the beast inside me roused, focusing on her prey.

I would rip him to pieces. I took a step forward, and Neverra and Logan moved with me. Reality snapped back into place.

“Oh.” His shoulders shook in mock fear. “They seem protective of you. Even after all you’ve done? How precious.”

Neverra and Logan flicked their wrists, and armor crawled over their bodies. They were protecting me. My heart ached.

"That's what families do," Neverra said, a blade spinning into her hand. "And you all are a poor excuse for it."

Kaden sneered at her. "Oh, the whimpering bitch has a mouth now?"

Logan raised his blade and pointed it at Kaden. "And you're about to lose yours for talking to her like that."

Kaden's laugh contained genuine amusement. "Please, put those away. You are insulting me, thinking you could actually fight me and win."

"Only one way to find out," Logan said, gripping his weapon tighter.

"We were just leaving," I said, stepping in front of Logan and Neverra, drawing Kaden's full attention. Even if my strength was waning and parts of me ached and rebelled, I couldn't let him take them.

"But you just made it home."

"Well, you know what they say. Home is where the heart is, and you kindly ripped mine out."

"Such poetry. I miss that."

I weighed my options: keep him talking and try to summon a portal or create a big enough distraction to get us all out. I settled on the latter. It would take every bit of strength I had left to do what I had planned. A part of me didn't care if I burned up and died, but I wanted them to survive.

Flames erupted on my hands, illuminating the cavern. I hadn't noticed the Irvikuva on the ceiling until then. We were so completely outnumbered.

"Let's be reasonable here," Kaden said, taking a step closer, his hands still in his pockets. "I can feel it. All you've used, all you've done incorrectly. Power, even as great as ours, has limits. You won't last a second, Dianna."

I shrugged. "Well, like Logan said. Let's find out."

I shot one hand out in front and the other behind me, trying to build a wall of flame on each side of us. I just needed to hold it long enough to figure a way out for them. The fire roared, filling the tunnel in both directions. Irvikuva screeched and burst into flames when it touched them. Body parts fell, their remains charred and falling to ash as I unleashed all I had left. Logan grabbed Neverra and knelt beside me, covering her body with his own, but they remained untouched by flame. The wall of flame surrounded us, reaching higher and ripping apart the rock ceiling, crushing more of the beasts.

You will have a choice. One you must make. Choose out of selflessness, and the path is set. Choose vengeance, and well, the outcome will be devastating.

Roccurem's voice echoed in my head.

I glanced at Logan and Neverra. They remained still and focused on me, their hands clasped and waiting for orders. They were prepared to stay, to die, for me. The need to save them warred with the part of me that raged and clawed, begging for vengeance.

There was no way I could kill Kaden and save them. I had to make a choice: the revenge that I so desperately craved or the lives of two people Gabby had loved.

They're my friends.

Gabby's words whispered across my subconscious. For Gabby, I would try. It is the choice she would want me to make. I hadn't saved her, but I could save two people she loved.

I glanced back at Kaden, and something inside of me snapped.

A lock on a door in a house rattled, and I let it open a fraction.

"This is it, Dianna, your defining moment. I'm right here. A target for all that rage and hate you've been drowning in. I am what you have been hunting, so come and get me!" Kaden shouted over the noise of the flames and tumbling cavern. He was stalling, looking for an opening. I knew if he reached me, I'd never leave. I knew it with every fiber of my being. "You won't get another chance. This is it."

I dropped the wall of flames behind me and focused my remaining power, imagining where I wanted to go. Where was the safest place I knew? Space ripped, and Kaden's eyes widened, the whites showing as he realized what I was doing. I tore a portal in the fabric of Yejedin, and a wound inside me I thought I had closed split wide open.

"I guess I'll never know then."

I turned toward the light that spilled from the portal and pushed Logan and Neverra through. Kaden roared, and I felt the air move as he rushed toward me. I fell.

It was mere moments, seconds, if any. I didn't land on a hard surface or a road or another world. Instead, Samkiel caught me, cradling me against his powerful chest. His familiar scent filled my lungs, and something in me that had wound too tight eased.

I had fallen, and Samkiel caught me.

I'd wanted to take us somewhere safe, and the portal had led me straight to him. Truly, though, where else did I have to go?

I glanced up through the portal and saw the cavern full of blood-red eyes glaring back at me. Kaden's expression, horrible and filled with wrath, was the last thing I saw before it closed.

I wept. I had failed her.

Again.

I made a choice that wasn't Gabby.

Again.

And I hated myself for it.



MY EYES OPENED TO A LIGHT-FILLED ROOM. I SAT UP SLOWLY AND LOOKED around, running my hands through my hair, gathering it away from my face. The room was enormous and familiar, although I was sure I had never been here before.

My eyes went wide, recollection washing over me. It was the room from Samkiel's dream, only clean and whole. There used to be holes in the walls and ceiling from where he'd reacted violently, fighting his nightmares. A column marked each corner. Intricately designed, they soared, twisting and curving, before spreading like vines just short of the ceiling. It was larger in reality than in his dreams—an enormous room fit not just for a king but a god.

The area hollowed out for the closet disappeared behind a wall, seemingly curving away from the room. Two large dressers flanked a carved doorway tall enough for Samkiel to walk through without having to duck. Groupings of overstuffed chairs took up one side of the room, and soft fur throws draped over the backs. My heart had been pounding since I woke, my body already aware of what had taken my mind some time to understand. I was not on Onuna anymore. I was on Rashearin.

My head throbbed, and I cradled it in my hands, memories colliding. I fell through a portal, and he caught me. Had I been so far gone again that he'd fed me? Was I in another blooddream?

I threw the covers back, having to almost crawl to the edge of the bed to get off it. It could easily fit eight people, and from the feel of it, it was brand new. A sheer white nightdress swirled around my bare feet, the woven lace and crisscross design across the bodice definitely the fashion of Rashearin. I was clean. The blood and gore of Yejedin washed away. I wondered if he had bathed me and felt a blush scald my cheeks.

As I strode out of the room, the floor was cool beneath my bare feet. A hall opened before me, and I moved toward the staircase leading to a lower level. There were no noises or whispers as there had been in his other dreams, but I couldn't shake the fact that I wasn't alone. I turned around, expecting to see someone behind me from the chill that went up my spine, but there was nothing. Deciding it must just be a result of waking up in a strange place, I turned and started down the steps. I trailed my hand along the dark gray wall to steady myself. I picked up the edge of my dress and stopped on the bottom step.

"Fuck." The word escaped me on a low breath.

I was so wrong. I wasn't in a house. It was a godsdamned castle. The ceiling soared so high that I had to lean back to see it. Chandeliers hung a few feet away from each other, glimmering in the sunshine that spilled from the open window.

If this was a blooddream, what was I supposed to see?

The air shifted behind me, a tendril of my hair caressing my cheek. I spun and met a wall of muscle, my nose an inch from the realm's best chest. My gaze traveled up the strong column of his neck, caressing the hard line of his jaw, before staring into the clear beauty of Samkiel's eyes. He looked exactly how he did on Onuna, not Rashearin. He wore no armor, no long wavy hair, or shrouds of guards around him.

"Why is this still happening?" My heart thudded in my chest, and dread filled me, forcing me to step back. "I don't want to dream of you anymore. I can't," I said, my voice shaking.

His head cocked slightly to the side as he stepped forward. "You dream of me?"

I winced a sharp pain radiating through the center of my head. I grabbed it and stumbled. A solid, warm hand grasped my elbow, holding me up. I felt his touch. Heat radiated from his palm, and I knew I wasn't dreaming.

"Dianna?"

I tried to focus on him, but his form kept shimmering.

“You’re blurry.”

My head lulled back, and I teetered right on the edge of consciousness. I braced for the pain of falling, but my body never hit the floor. Strong arms wrapped around me as the now familiar darkness slowly claimed me again. I would be lying if I said it wasn’t pleasant for the brief moment I remembered it. Samkiel’s embrace was so warm, so comforting. I had been cold, lonely, and lost for so long. The last thought I had before unconsciousness claimed me was how at peace I felt, and that truly terrified me.



YOU WON’T GET ANOTHER CHANCE...

Pain sliced through the side of my head.

... fell in love with him while Kaden took your sister...

I groaned and rolled over, covering my head with a large pillow.

... remember that I love you...

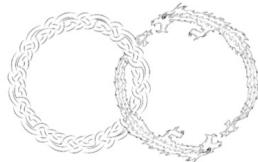
My head pounded.

... seek revenge for the sister that’s not even of your blood...

Voices whispered, begged, and screamed in my mind.

You are running out of time.

I swore, tossing and turning. If I could just make it stop. I heard heavy footsteps, and then the bed sank next to me. A sharp pain pierced my brain again, and I whimpered. A large, warm hand settled on my forehead. I stilled, the dull ache melting away, leaving a soothing calm over my whole body. I sighed, feeling as if I might survive this, and fell back asleep.



A HOT BEAM OF SUNSHINE ACROSS MY FACE PULLED ME FROM SLEEP. I stretched and sat up, my eyes half closed. My eyes shot open as I

remembered where I was. This wasn't a dream. I leaned forward, rubbing my hands over my face. At least the voices were gone, and my head didn't hurt. What was happening to me? I lay back down on my side, the silk sheets wrapping around me.

My eyes focused, and an ache formed in my chest, the room spinning around me. There, in an intricate silver frame, was a picture of Gabby and me at the beach.

My breath faltered. I had promised her we would visit this beach again after we'd found the book. It was the only picture Kaden had allowed me to keep in Novas. I grabbed it and brought it closer, my finger tracing her smiling face. I felt my eyes prickle, but my lips tightened in anger.

I needed answers, and staying in a bed on a world not my own would not get me them. With the picture frame in my hand, I rolled out of bed. A breeze entered the room through the large window, sunlight dancing across the floor. I strode toward the door, my bare feet making almost no sound. Voices from below caught my attention, and I stomped down the flight of stairs, the long nightdress dancing behind me in my fury.

The voices grew. I recognized Samkiel's, and the feminine one belonged to Imogen.

Without my permission, a memory clawed its way to the surface of my mind. Pain tore at me, ripping at my heart and mind. I stopped short, grabbing my head with another wince. The night I'd gone to Kaden only to find him with another. That had been the first night, but there had been another and another after that. He had taught me that love was not meant for creatures like us.

I forced anger to replace my pain and squared my shoulders, gripping the picture frame against me a fraction harder. I marched down the steps, not caring if they heard me coming. If this wasn't a dream, I wanted out of this place and off this world. My head swam, but I ignored it and stayed upright, striding across the open foyer.

This wasn't just a home but a damned palace. It was so massive you could fit a thousand people or more in here, and they would still have room to move about, unbothered by each other. The walls were no longer crumbling, and they glowed with a warmth missing in the desolate space he had lived in before.

Light poured in through a massive window to my right, casting a golden glow over the assortment of chairs and the large lounge sofa in the middle

of the room. A fireplace took up nearly one wall, and thriving potted plants added spots of color and freshness.

I stormed past the living area, my ire only growing at the beauty of this place. Their animated conversation slowly died when I entered the kitchen. It was an odd meld of Onuna and Rasheirim styles that somehow worked. Imogen was removing various fruits and goods from a bag while Samkiel rested across the island, a soft smile on his face as she said something I didn't care to hear. How easy would it be to go back to that? What they had was what he needed, what he deserved, not me, pain, or darkness.

His eyes met mine, and he slowly stood up, worry creasing his brow.

"You're awake. How are you feeling? Does your head still hurt?"

"What is this? Where did you get it?" I waved the picture frame in the air, ignoring his question.

Imogen stopped placing fruit. She stilled, her body tensing, probably remembering what had happened the last time we'd met. Would she protect him as viciously as I had? Jealousy sliced through me, and I growled at the unwelcome reaction.

He lifted one finely formed brow and sipped whatever he was drinking before saying, "Novas."

Imogen's eyes shifted between us, and she took a step back.

"You went to Novas?"

"Yes. I searched for you everywhere."

I lowered the frame before realizing what I was doing.

Everywhere.

The words rattled through my subconscious. He went back to that damned island looking for me. "You have to be kidding me. Is this supposed to make me feel something? Because it doesn't," I snapped.

"I merely wished for you to be comfortable and a picture—"

"A picture of my dead sister will not bring me comfort."

He turned toward Imogen, who resembled more of a scared fawn in headlights than the warrior celestial I knew she was.

"Imogen, thank you for the food. I will be at the hall shortly. Please inform the others to be ready."

She nodded and bowed, a smile making her beautiful face radiant. My lip curled. She was gone in a flash of blue light, leaving me alone again with Samkiel.

“Sorry to interrupt you and your girlfriend. Or should I say your wife? Betrothed? I can’t keep up with all the lies.”

A line in Samkiel’s jaw ticked. “She is my advisor because you killed my last one.”

“Sure, is that what they call it on Rasheirim?”

Samkiel lifted his cup to hide his smile, but I saw it. “As I have said, Imogen is not my girlfriend, betrothed, or wife. You would know more about the failed betrothal if you spoke to me instead of my enemies.”

“I don’t care.” I slammed the picture on the countertop.

“You’re in a ripe mood. You must be feeling better,” Samkiel said. He placed his cup down and leaned forward, placing the remaining fruit in a basket.

“You know what I’m feeling?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Enlighten me,” he said, seemingly unconcerned with my ire, which just annoyed me more.

“Like I want to leave. Take me back,” I demanded.

“No.”

I sighed, throwing my hands up. “Gods, that’s still your favorite word!”

I stormed out of the kitchen and down a hall, thinking I’d find an exit, but I ended up in another large room. This one contained a large desk piled with scrolls. Paintings decorated the walls, and books neatly lined the shelves. I slammed the door and turned back, stomping through this cursed palace, determined to find a way out. I opened door after door, finding nothing but storage closets and spare rooms. One door opened onto an outside patio, but a high wall contained it.

A growl of frustration echoed from my throat, and I strode back toward the kitchen. Impatiently, I pushed a loose curl off my cheek and glared at Samkiel. He leaned against the long island, biting into a fruit with a stark green interior.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Let me out of this godsdamned place,” I snapped, lunging forward and slamming my hands down on the counter.

“No.” He watched me and took another bite, his posture relaxed.

My eyes flicked to the doorway near the large fridge. A shadowed hall lay beyond. That was why I couldn’t find an exit. It was behind him. My gaze met his as he stopped mid-chew.

“Don’t.”

I ran.

I heard the fruit hit the counter and his heavy steps behind me a second after I raced out of the kitchen. A flash of light lit up the dark hallway, and he was in front of me. His arm shot out, trying to stop my escape. I ducked under it and made it another inch before powerful arms grabbed me from behind and swung me around. He pressed me against the wall and leaned his body in close, his large hands gripping my wrists and pinning them on either side of my head. His breath washed over my cheek, his scent surrounding me.

I blew a strand of hair from my face and snarled up at him. “I will rip your throat out with my teeth if you don’t let me go.”

“I was right the first time I saw you. All teeth, claws, and fury. Definitely a riztoure beast.” He leaned closer. “Pure hellcat.”

I cursed him in Eorian.

Amusement filled his gaze, and he moved closer, his body fitting against mine as if we were made for each other. He tipped his head, exposing his throat, the corded muscle and bronzed skin a temptation. My mouth watered with a hunger I hadn’t felt in a while.

“Go ahead. Try.”

“What?” I asked, licking my lips.

“Come on. Do it. Don’t tease me by saying things you don’t mean.” He took a sidelong glance toward me. “That’s not you, Dianna.”

I struck as quickly as any viper, my mouth clamping on the strong column of his neck. Teeth met skin, but my fangs did not descend. I swirled my tongue against his throat and sucked, feeling his pulse quicken. I arched against him, the throbbing heat between my thighs demanding more of him. My headache evaporated, and another ache took its place—a hunger I refused to feed. My mouth left his throat as I pulled back, licking my lips.

“Can’t do it, can you?” The same words he had said when we fought. Bastard. His voice was husky as if he also struggled with this burning need between us.

“Shut up,” I snapped, ignoring that the words came out breathlessly. “What did you do to me?”

Samkiel let me go and took a measured step back, anger replacing lust. “It’s quite insulting that you automatically assume I would ever do anything to hurt you. Especially something so heinous as stripping your powers.”

My throat and other parts of me went dry. “My powers are gone?”

“Possibly. In mortal terms, you burned yourself out.”

My hand fell to my chest. “Is that possible?”

“This is the first time I have seen it happen. I am still researching.”

My mind flashed to the books piled on the desk a few halls away. Had he been researching a way to heal me? To help me?

I turned inward, reaching deep, searching. Samkiel was right. I felt no spark. The warmth I normally felt when I called upon the fire was absent. I stared at him, the soft shine of moisture from my mouth still visible on his neck, along with a small discoloration where I’d bitten too hard. A jolt of pleasure coursed through me as if a part of me liked seeing my mark on him. I quickly extinguished that thought too.

“I want Roccurem.”

That was the wrong thing to say.

His powerful shoulders squared, and his expression turned grim. “No.”

“You can’t keep him from me.”

“He is not yours to *keep*. He is not a pet for you to order about. If you need help or have questions, I will help you,” Samkiel hissed at me.

“I don’t want you,” I spat.

Samkiel recoiled, pain flashing in his beautiful eyes, darkening them. “Regardless, you cannot have him. He is no longer available to fulfill your needs,” he said.

I may not have had teeth or claws as before, but I still had venom. I scoffed, folding my arms. “Is that what burns you? You think Reggie has been taking care of all my little naughty bits?”

That was also not the best thing to say.

The sky darkened, and the wind howled, giving voice to the rage he refused to release. I felt his energy brush against me, and a part of me reveled in it. The feel of his power wrapping around me did not incite fear but set my blood alight with need. He was a god made of storms and war, and he was magnificent. And I hated it.

“You know, at first, I assumed you stole Roccurem for your own pleasure. You’d never touch Camilla after what she did, so logic dictated it was him. I’ll admit that I was jealous. I am man enough to tell you how much that burned a hole in my gut to see you so casually replace me, but then I learned it wasn’t for that. No. You just couldn’t stand being alone with your thoughts. I get that. I am the same way. But I have learned,

Dianna, that no one can pull you out of this until you are ready. Until then, we are nothing but crutches, and that is not what you need to heal.”

“I’m not asking for anyone’s help. Let alone yours,” I spat.

“Oh, trust me, I am very well aware,” he snapped. He didn’t back down. He never did. If anything, he liked every bit of fire I had and relished that he could make me burn brighter.

“My sister died, Samkiel. Don’t think that anything I did had to do with you.”

“This isn’t about her. I stood with you the entire time, Dianna. You knew that.”

I pushed from the wall. “You were only going to hold me back.”

“Yes, from yourself.” He shook his head at me, his arms wide and his expression unforgiving. “What has this gotten you? The revenge, the death, what has it done? It hasn’t brought her back. We both know that nothing will.”

My hand whipped out to slap him, but he caught my wrist. “*I hate you.*”

He stepped closer and leaned in until his nose was an inch from mine. “I. Don’t. Care.”

“Let go of me.” The words came out a whisper, and I wasn’t sure if they were a command or a plea. I didn’t know if I wanted to kill or kiss him, and I hated wanting the latter for even a second. My heart pounded too fast and hard before settling into a slower rhythm, syncing with his.

His thumb slid over my wrist before he gently released me. “I would have followed you anywhere, Dianna. All you had to do was ask. Instead, you used me. You used every single bit of knowledge you had on me to hurt me, my family, and my friends. You threw things I confided to you back at me without a moment’s thought. I have been stabbed, tortured, and nearly decapitated. All in service to my home and kingdom. But nothing has hurt me as you have. Nothing.”

I lowered my gaze, unable to face his pain. “If you want an apology from me, you won’t get it.”

“I don’t. I can take your anger and hate. All I want for you is healing. I know the path you are on, and as difficult as it is, the only way out is through. And if I have to be the one who shows you that, then so be it because I will not sit by while you tear yourself apart.”

His words ricocheted in my chest, leaving me breathless and tearing at my already wounded heart. My eyes burned, a dam threatening to break,

releasing emotions I'd done my damndest to bury. I hated him. How dare he make me feel by just being in his presence? I hated that the words he said were like a battering ram against the wall I'd so painstakingly built over these last few months. I hated that I cared so godsdamned much. So I did what I always did and reacted like a venomous snake, all fangs and lethal bite.

"So what? Are you going to keep me here for a thousand years so I can wallow in guilt and weep over my dead relatives like you?"

A storm didn't gather, and the world didn't shake as I spat those words at him. He didn't take the bait, only met my eyes stare for stare. We were an immovable object and an unstoppable force. We didn't fear the other but threatened to batter ourselves bloody.

His head only tilted to the side. "Have you even mourned yet? Have you cried?"

"What?" I hissed.

"I don't believe you have. You've been so preoccupied and busy trying to fill that void inside of you with blood, death, and mortals less deserving of you. You've been doing anything you can to keep moving because you know the second you stop, you'll feel all of it. So you lash out and attack because anger is better than grief. It's better than reliving every memory, good and bad, every laugh and smile, everything you said or could have said. It's better than knowing that no amount of flesh or blood you take in vengeance will erase the fact that you have truly lost her forever."

My hand whipped out again, only this time it connected. I slapped him hard enough to make my palm and wrist sting. I knew he'd sensed it and could have stopped it, yet he hadn't.

"I hate you."

"That's good." He lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm. "At least you feel something. What else? Tell me more."

"Fuck you." I yanked my hand from his grip.

Samkiel took a step closer, taking up every inch of my personal space. My back hit the wall again, and I tipped my head to look up at him. The all-powerful god king stared down at me, every soft edge gone under that blistering stare, and I'd be a damned fool to say how much of a thrill it sent through me. He braced his forearms against the wall on either side of me, his body hot, massive, and overwhelming. I wasn't afraid of him. I never was. Fear was not something either of us felt toward the other.

“Do you need me to? Does it help? I assumed you had your fill on Onuna.” A ring of silver lined his irises, and I didn’t want to remember or think about what that meant. “But given how furiously you kissed me last time, I would wager you didn’t find release with the mortals you allowed to touch you. So my guess is that you are still deprived, my Dianna.”

His eyes skittered across my face and lower, my body going hot. I hadn’t heard that endearment in so long, I damn near purred. He fit the hard planes of his body against me, and my belly clenched. Something else replaced my anger, something far more intense and dangerous for both of us.

Overwhelming guilt slammed into me, and I pushed at him. He stepped back, allowing me room to breathe, but not by much. “What, are you judging me now on how I decide to heal?”

“Judge? Not at all. The things I have done to keep myself from feeling far outnumber yours and forever will. Trust me. You’d have to live a millennium to catch up to me.” He scoffed. “You’re right that I don’t get to dictate how you heal, but gods, Dianna, you could’ve used me. I would have let you, and you know it. Anything you desired, whenever you wanted, any way you wished. All you have to do is ask.”

My body trembled with the effort to keep from throwing myself at him and accepting all he offered. I ached to let him take me right here against this godsdamned wall. I knew he meant what he said. He’d given me several demonstrations of how well he could distract me, but it wouldn’t help heal what was broken and wrong and angry inside of me. I was afraid nothing could.

“That’s great.” My voice didn’t sound nearly as stern as I wanted it to. “I’ll pass. Can you move now?”

A small smile spread across his face as he caught my eyes lingering on his lips, and I hated him even more. He leaned forward, and I held my breath, assuming he was about to test my conviction and prove me a liar. I would be lying if I said my mouth didn’t open slightly in anticipation. He was a hair’s breadth away before he pushed off the wall and headed toward the foyer. I took a deep breath, taking the time to regain what little composure I had left and convince myself I was not disappointed. Pushing from the wall, I followed after him.

Samkiel gathered some papers from the table in the middle of the room and picked up a jacket he’d thrown over the back of a chair. “I’ll be back in

a few days.”

“A few days?” My voice emerged shrill, and I nearly winced.

“Yes. I have a lot to catch up on with the council. You have been in and out of consciousness for a week.”

A week? My mind scrambled, trying to process everything but getting stuck on just one piece of information. Three days? Here? Alone? My fingers bit into my palms. No, I couldn’t do it. He couldn’t leave me alone like that with only my thoughts. I’d drown.

“You can’t leave me here that long.”

He slipped his arms through the smooth jacket sleeves, the heavy muscles of his biceps straining the fabric. My gaze lingered a fraction too long, and I struggled to pull my attention away.

“Yes, I can, and you won’t be alone. The Hand will check on you. You have food, clothes, and everything you need here. I made sure of it.”

That was when the pieces clicked, and my breath hitched. Samkiel hadn’t remade this massive palace for himself. He’d made it for me. A warm feeling I thought I’d buried with Gabby stirred.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

“... you merely speak my true name if you have the slightest headache, and I’ll return sooner than I intend.”

I shook my head, not realizing he had been talking this entire time. “Samkiel, I’m not your pet.” I squared my shoulders. “I won’t remain locked up, nor will I stay.”

He fixed his collar before dropping his hands to his sides. “Yes, you will. There are about a hundred or more acres of forest surrounding this place. It would take you weeks to walk to the city, and that is if some creature did not make a meal of you first.”

“So I am a prisoner, then?” I folded my arms. “Are you going to bring out handcuffs next?”

“Is that something you would like?” he asked.

I felt my cheeks blaze hot and instantly regretted bringing it up and changed the subject. “How long do I have to stay here?”

“You’re a criminal, both on Onuna and here on Rasheirim. So it’s either this, or you rot in a prison cell beneath the council hall.”

“What?”

His brows furrowed. “What did you think would happen after you rampaged across Onuna and damn near destroyed the world?

Consequences, Dianna, your actions have consequences.”

I wrapped my arms around myself so tight I could have broken a rib. Samkiel tucked a stack of papers and a book beneath his arm and stepped closer.

“Can you answer one thing for me? Honestly?”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re playing this game again?”

Samkiel didn’t say anything. He just stood there, watching me and waiting.

“Fine. What?” I grumbled. I knew I sounded petulant, and I didn’t care. He was leaving me.

“You weren’t planning to come back to me at all, were you?”

I heard the pain in his voice, and a part of me ached, but I knew it had been the only choice. He deserved so much better.

“No.”

He nodded and turned away.

“You would have been happy,” I said to his retreating back. “If you would have just let me go and kept your warriors out of my way. This would have been over, and you could have made this damned castle for your rightful queen.”

Samkiel glanced at me over his shoulder, a small glow of silver dancing behind his storm-filled eyes. “You’re a fool if you think I would be happy in a world where you did not exist.”

I’d expected anger. I always did when I lashed out, but not this. No, this was so much worse. It extinguished every bit of flame and rage that sustained me. I turned my head away from him.

“This is the safest place for you right now. No matter how much you despise me, I will not have you rotting in a cell. I couldn’t bear it. So I will give you your space while I try to figure everything else out.”

I didn’t look back as his footsteps faded away. A pop of bright light raced past the window, and I was completely alone once more. I reached up, rubbing my hands over my face, contemplating everything that had happened in the last few days, months, and hours.

Dropping my hands, I looked around the massive room. The dark green and gold-trimmed walls, the sparkling chandeliers, and the plush, comfortable furniture were beyond beautiful. My eyes caught on the blanket draped over the end of the long lounge couch. A glass sat on the side table, and a stack of books rested on the floor within easy reach. Samkiel had

been sleeping down here. I looked up, remembering the layout of the second level. This spot was right below the bed I'd slept in. If I had made even the slightest sound, he would have heard. My chest tightened, some flicker of emotion trying to claw its way through my shields.

I moved away from the couch, unable to process what that all meant. I sat on the window seat, piled with large overstuffed pillows, staring out at the beautiful day. The distant mountains taunted me, rolling pink clouds obscuring their peaks. If I had to be in a prison, at least this was a pretty one.

My hand rested under my chin as I sighed, contemplating what I should even do here. The sun bathed the forest, but I saw no birds flitting through the trees or small creatures scurrying about.

Why couldn't he just give up on me like everyone else? Damn him, and damn me for even caring. I heard the telltale pop of someone portalling in behind me and stood, turning toward the approaching footsteps.

"Forget something? Or maybe you want to start another pointless argument..."

My words died as Neverra appeared in the entryway.

Alone.

"Hi."

FIFTY-ONE

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DIANNA



“W hat are you doing here?”

“Hi to you too.” Neverra smiled. The long black pantsuit she wore clung to her curves faithfully. The train of her jacket flared behind her as she stepped inside. It had gold accents across the shoulders, the pads beneath making her seem larger, and the buttons created intricate designs along each side. These had to be her council garbs.

“Where’s Logan?” I asked, looking behind her. “I doubt he would leave you alone after everything.”

She walked past me, heading toward the main room, her hands clasped in front of her. “I snuck out. Hopefully, he hasn’t realized I am gone. I needed to talk to you, and once I saw Samkiel’s light touch down at the council hall, I figured you would be alone.”

An understatement.

“Wow. You guys are fast.”

“Light travels quickly.”

“Cool. What do you want?” I folded my arms and squared my shoulders. “If you think that just because I saved you and Logan, we are going to be best friends, you’re wrong. I’m already regretting that mistake. I _____”

“I like the place, although he’s made it into a castle.” She cut me off as she wandered around the room. She slid her hand along the arm of the couch where he had slept. “He made it as comfortable as he could, huh? When Logan first met me, he used to do the sweetest things, too. Gods court just as the mortals do. It’s usually small things, gifts or flowers. They have this overwhelming urge to take care of those they fancy. Of course,

they are also overprotective and overbearing. Logan is no different. None of the celestials are. He tried everything when we first met, but I wouldn't give him the time of day. He, like the rest of them, had a reputation back then. Everyone called them *The Untouchables*. They would take lovers, but no one could get close to them. So I avoided Logan and his advances. That was until Samkiel decided he needed guards and held open competitions for The Hand. So many tried, and so many failed."

I returned to the window seat, my body aching with fatigue. I wasn't sure why Neverra was sharing all of this with me, but it was better than being alone with my thoughts.

"I made it through that round of competitions, and then so did Imogen. I gained so much I didn't even know I needed. A family, a home, and then, of course, Logan." She smiled, wiping her hands on her dark robe.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Her face twisted in pain. "Because I know you lost yours."

"Leave." The word was sharp and blunt. My lip lifted in a snarl, and my heart thudded in my chest, the uncomfortable pounding uncontrolled without him here to calm it. Anger and pain bubbled just beneath the surface, but no fire danced across my hands, and my fangs failed to appear. No power remained in me. I stood, intending to leave the room, but she was suddenly in front of me. Had they always moved that damn fast?

"I'm sorry. Dianna, I am not trying to upset you. I swear."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

Neverra swallowed hard and looked down at her hands, picking at her freshly painted nails and fiddling with her rings. The fierce warrior seemed nervous and unsure. When she lifted her head to look at me again, the shine of unshed tears filled her eyes. "I'm trying to tell you that I tried to save her. I did. Logan and I cared about Gabriella. We were meant to be just her guards, but she was so sweet and funny. She forced those silly, cute movies on us and told us stories of places you two have been. It was fun and reminded me so much of how life used to be before Rasheirim fell. She loved you so much, which I know you know. I am just so sorry I couldn't do more. I blame myself more than you know."

My heart hurt so badly that it felt like it was knotting in on itself.
"Why?"

Her hands dropped to her sides, and she sighed. "It was my fault. Samkiel told us to stay in that condo, but she got so bored. There were only

so many games to play or movies to watch, and she missed you, missed Rick. She just wanted to go out for a few minutes. She wanted a coffee. I invited Rick over, and then Drake showed up. A part of me didn't trust him, but I thought it was fine. I didn't see or feel them until it was too late. We were trained to think logically and secure the best course of action in dangerous situations. I could have fled and gotten the others, but I didn't want her to be alone. I was supposed to protect her."

I tried to swallow back the rising grief, my eyes burning and nose stinging as tears threatened me, too. Hearing how she tried to save my sister and how much she cared for her broke me.

"It's not your fault."

Neverra's eyes went wide in surprise. I think she expected me to lash out or scream at her, but it seemed I was burning out in more ways than one.

"I was the one who brought her into this wretched world when she almost died the first time. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I damned us both." I hadn't admitted that to anyone.

"Dianna," she said, shaking her head and reaching out to me.

I held my hand up. "If that's all you needed to tell me, you can leave now."

I didn't mean to be so damn cold and mean, but I couldn't contain the broken creature in me that sought only to protect the last pieces of my heart and soul.

She straightened her shoulders, glancing toward the open window. She wiped her sleeve across her face, removing the few tears that wet her cheeks. "I do need to get back before Logan comes looking for me, but I just wanted you to know, and I wanted to give you this."

Her hand dipped into a pocket, and she pulled out a crumpled piece of folded paper. She held it out to me but didn't step any closer.

I took a deep breath, and with a trembling hand, I reached for it. "What is this?"

"Gabby gave it to me in Yejedin. I think she wrote it a while ago and just kept it with her. She told me to give it to you. I never looked at it. Just hid it until I could get free and get back."

My whole body shook.

"I am truly sorry, Dianna. For your loss, for everything."

With a pop of blue light, she left the room. I stood there alone, staring at the worn note. My heart raced. Gabby had written it, kept it. The paper trembled violently as I opened it, the noise the only sound in the room except for the quick gasp of my breath. My vision blurred, obscuring her familiar handwriting.

Dearest Sister,

Okay, I wanted it to be formal, but that sounds silly saying it out loud. Anyway, I think we both know why I am writing this. It is way too late at night because I can't sleep. To be honest, I haven't slept much since you've been gone, kind of like the nights you used to sneak out when we shared a room in Eoria. I would cover for you, and you would always bring me back those small sweet cakes. I would always wait up for you. Only this time, you haven't come back yet. It's been months, and I miss you. I was so scared then that something would happen and you wouldn't come back. It is the same now, but worse. I can't explain it, but I have a feeling that I may never talk to you or see you again.

Listen, I know you're strong and brave and everything, but if something happens, if you do read this note, and I am no longer here, I need you to be stronger. I need you to be brave and fierce, and above all else, I need you to let me go. I know you'll be sad, and I'm crying while writing this, but Dianna, you are so powerful and smart. There isn't anything you can't do, and nothing can stop you. There never was.

You're my sister, and I love you. I'll always love you. A part of me wishes we could have had the life we always talked about. Just know that no matter what happens, you gave me the best life. You never stuck me with a horrible one. And hey, being here with Logan, Neverra, and the other celestials isn't bad. I like them, and I think you would too if you gave them a chance.

For the first time since Eoria, I feel like I have a home and a family. I have fun, but I had the most fun with you, no matter what you think. You showed me the world, and I loved, oh gods, did I love. I want that for you, even though you feel you don't deserve it. It is worth it, Dianna. Don't refute what you need because you fear the pain it could bring. Never let fear rule you. Don't let what Kaden did, rob you of something special.

Dianna, you are loved. You always have been and always will be. I see it even if you don't, but more than that, you have so much love to give. I think that is where that fire comes from inside of you. You are passion and

anger, and above all, pure love. You protected me, loved me, and cared for me my entire life. Because of you, I never knew a day that I was not loved.

You have more stress and weight on your shoulders than anyone I know, and for my part in that, I'm sorry. Promise me one thing. If you happen to find love after I'm gone, you won't let it go. Life is more than fighting and surviving. You've done enough of that. There is so much out there, and I want you to experience it all. I want you to laugh again, to love, to have fun. I want you to live, truly live. So if you read this, if I am truly gone, know that I would never leave you, even if you can't see me. I would never abandon you.

Moisture hit the paper. One drop, then two, as if rain poured from the ceiling.

We can just pretend I am waiting for you to come home. One day, we will see each other again, no matter how long it takes. No matter where I go, I always know I will be okay because I had an amazing sister who loved me. You taught me how to take care of myself. You held my hand when I was scared to jump off cliffs, and you held my hand through everything else. You are not a monster. You never were, no matter what you think. You are my sister, my best friend, and my protector. So, if, by chance, this is the last time we speak, know that your job is done, and it's time for you to take care of yourself for once.

Remember that I love you.

Always - Gabby

P.S. Because I know you, be nicer to Liam.

I didn't feel my knees hit the ground or my body crumple into itself. It wasn't until I felt my forehead rest against the cold stone that I realized I was even on the floor. I clutched the note to my chest, my mouth open in a silent scream. Finally, everything I had been holding, everything I had kept inside, came pouring out. Tears burned my cheeks, and I sobbed, the sound filling the empty palace. Reading the note and seeing the words written on the paper drove home the truth harder than watching the dust of her remains float away on the wind.

She was gone, and no matter what I had done, who I had killed, she was not coming back.

I was truly and completely alone.

The sobs ripped through me, my body feeling as if it were being torn from the inside out. In all the centuries of my existence, I had never felt

pain like this. I cried so hard that the noises I made didn't even sound mortal anymore. I cried until there were no more tears, but still, my chest heaved. The room grew darker and the world colder. I didn't know how long I knelt there holding myself, but I eventually struggled to my feet, still clutching the letter to my chest. My body ached as if I'd been in battle, but I shuffled my way to the kitchen to get the picture before tackling the stairs to return to the room where I'd awakened. I crawled into bed and pulled the covers over my head, holding the note and the picture close, shutting out the world.

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FIFTY-TWO

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SAMKIEL



“She must be dealt with! Face the consequences of her actions!” Leviathan said, slamming his fist on the marble table, shimmers of light dancing beneath his skin.

Several other council members, all dressed in sparkling white garbs and silver studded ropes, nodded. “If the Ig’Morruthens have returned, we should have been notified immediately.”

I sat back in my seat at the head of the large table. “You’re notified when I say you’re notified.”

Jiraiya shook his head, his dark hair swinging around his face. “We are your council, god king. The great kings appointed us before your father’s reign, and we will be here long after yours.”

I leaned forward and folded my hands in front of me. “Do you assume that gives you power over me?”

“The council was formed for a reason. It goes against our purpose for you to only tell us what you deem appropriate when you wish it,” Elianna said, her long red hair tied back into a tight ponytail, the end swinging over the high shoulder pads of her robe.

The tall chamber doors quietly opened, and Neverra slipped in ten minutes late. She gave me a slight bow before joining the rest of The Hand, who stood at my back in a semicircle facing the council.

My jaw tightened, and I turned in my seat, following her with narrowed eyes. My annoyance did not stem from her being late. No, it was the smallest scent of cinnamon that followed her into the room that set me on edge. Neverra lowered her gaze, and Cameron’s eyes widened, his superior sense of smell telling him who she had been with.

I'd told her to wait. What if she had scared her off? It was too soon. Dianna was too fragile right now, violent and vicious, but fragile.

"What Elianna means is we cannot help if we do not know."

I turned back to the room, remembering why I was there.

"And that's why we are having this meeting. To go over everything," I replied.

Leviathan rubbed his brow, age showing on his fingers and face. "Very well. How many Ig'Morruthens are left?"

"Two."

Tora continued to transcribe every word, her small hands moving as fast as we spoke. She pushed back her short hair with ink-stained fingers, the blonde strands barely reaching the collar of her garbs.

"Including the girl?" Rolluse asked. It had been so long since I had seen him. I had no idea when he shaved his head, but it aged him far too much.

"The *girl* is not your or the council's concern. She's mine."

Elianna sighed, throwing up a single hand, and Tora paused in her writing.

"We are well aware how you enjoy others, but this is not the time or place to make such a proclamation," Elianna spat, a few others nodding their agreement. "She is a threat, not another conquest for you to gloat about."

The council room exploded in splinters of wood, stone, and glass. The debris floated around us, only the table and chairs remaining. They gasped, their mouths agape and their eyes wide. I sat calmly in the sunlight as the birds in the nearby forest took to the air, screaming their alarm.

The council members sat frozen, their grips tight on the table. The Hand merely looked amused. They knew I posed no real threat, and I'd never hurt them, but the council needed a reminder of their place.

"I can destroy and remake this place faster than the second it takes for you all to breathe. Do not forget who you speak to."

The council hall came rushing back, the floors, chamber walls, and ceiling reforming, sealed and whole.

"My apologies, my liege," Rolluse said.

"Regardless, my liege," Elianna said. "She is but a beast, no matter what shell she wears. Ig'Morruthens are creatures made to shred and destroy. They are massive, monstrous weapons."

I felt the crack of thunder behind me as my temper bucked against my control. I took a shuddering breath, seeking my center. Regardless of our uncertain relationship and fight this morning, no one spoke ill of Dianna, or they would regret it.

“Tone, Elianna,” I snarled. She must have read something in my eyes because she swallowed whatever else she might have said. “I was unaware that you all assumed your power and wishes superseded mine in my absence. That you somehow gained the right to dictate to me.”

Thunder pounded the sky like war drums, and the wind howled its fury. In contrast, my tone remained eerily calm.

“I have ripped vocal cords out of *beasts* far larger and more vicious than you, Elianna. Watch how you speak. I will not ask again. Your place on the council means very little to me, and you can be replaced. So I suggest you watch your tongue, or I will own it. The old gods are long dead, and Xheor is no longer here to protect you. Choose your words wisely when you address me. All of you. I am still your king.”

I made eye contact with each of them until they lowered their gaze. Elianna’s lips formed into a thin line, but she said nothing else. She sat back in her seat, the heavy curved back shaking slightly with the force. The storm eased, but rain still pounded the open balcony.

“My liege, regardless of Elianna’s sharp tone, we still worry if she is a threat. If her powers are strong enough to eradicate all those who worked for Kaden and kill a King of Yejedin, even with the help of The Hand, it is too great. Her power may even rival yours, I am afraid,” Tora said, her words softer and kinder.

“She is powerless at the moment. I am unsure if they will return. Therefore she poses no threat.”

They looked at me as if I’d gone insane.

“Powerless, how?”

“That is yet to be determined. In the simplest terms, she has burned out her power reserves. So yes, regarding her, where she is staying, and what will happen to her, it is not your concern, nor will it ever be. As I stated, she is mine.”

I had debated telling them about her lack of power, a part of me wanting to find out more before revealing that vulnerability. But if it made them drop this line of questioning, then so be it.

The room grew quiet for the first time since the meeting started.



I RESTED MY HEAD ON THE BACK OF THE THRONE-STYLE CHAIR, WATCHING them file out. It had been hours, and it was time for yet another break. I loathed this part of my job. These meetings could take days or even weeks. The Hand remained, even Imogen. She'd waved away Jiraiya when he'd whispered of a private visit, thinking none of us noticed. Cameron jested about their tryst, earning himself a slap on the arm from Imogen. I did not care what they did in their free time so long as it did not affect their responsibilities.

"You're on edge, big guy. You are practically buzzing," Cameron said.

I kept my eyes closed. "I am not on any edge. I am..." Words failed me.

"Frustrated?" I heard him snicker and could imagine him elbowing Xavier in the ribs at his cleverness.

I merely grunted in response but didn't deign to answer further.

Frustrated was one word for it. My entire being still burned from her bite. I made sure that mark she'd left on my neck healed before stepping into the council halls. Cameron would have been the first to notice, followed by the council, and I did not feel the need to explain how lust was not at its source.

Xavier cleared his throat. "I think you are the only one who makes Elianna shut up."

"Careful," I said, "they are still *your* superiors."

"Sorry," he said, and I heard him sink into a chair.

"But I can speak freely." I cracked my eyes open. "Were they always such pretentious bastards? Am I that way?"

Xavier's smile lit his face, his teeth flashing brightly. Cameron and the others burst out laughing. Neverra sat beside Logan, and they both grinned at me. "No, not of late," Logan said.

"Good."

Cameron picked up a piece of paper he had been taking notes on and ripped it into squares. Then he began folding them into tiny triangular shapes. He flicked one of them across the table at Xavier, who batted it away.

"I loved the whole 'she's *mine*' comment," Cameron said, launching another triangle at Xavier. "So hot, it even made me hard."

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger.

"Please. A warm breeze does that," Xavier quipped.

They both laughed, and Vincent sighed. He propped one foot against the wall he leaned against, his arms folded. "Are you sure it was smart telling them about the loss of her powers?"

"Why would it not be?"

Vincent shrugged. "It makes her an easier target."

Cameron snorted and sent another piece of paper flying across the table. "Dianna, with or without her powers, does not seem like an easy target. Besides, you know what it means that he claimed her like that in front of the council."

Vincent grumbled and glanced away.

Imogen straightened the papers on the table in front of her and said, "The oldest law. Any place, item, or persons claimed under the ruling king is deemed theirs. Shall one act with malice against the king claims, it will be considered an act of war and punishable by death."

Xavier whistled and caught another flying triangle Cameron launched at him before tossing it back.

Cameron dodged it, glancing toward Imogen. "See, staying with the council so long makes you speak like them, Immy. You have got to get away from this place."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he chuckled.

"There is no threat to her *here*." I made sure to enunciate the last part. "The council, while boisterous, has no power to rival mine. The only other creature that may come close cannot venture onto this plane."

Vincent pushed from the wall. "So what? She destroys a city or two, takes lives, and then gets a vacation in a castle you've rebuilt for her?"

"Hey, she saved Neverra and me." Logan's tone made Vincent pause. Usually, Logan had a little more tolerance for Vincent, but not this time. Neverra rested her hand on Logan's, giving it a light squeeze.

"Yeah. We all heard the story. She saved your life after nearly ripping your throat out."

"She planned to send Neverra back, with or without me there. She is more than just the mindless monster the council would make her," Logan said.

My brow rose at his vociferous defense of her.

“And I am happy you and Nev are home, Brother. I am, but does her potential for good outweigh the bad? Are we just forgetting about all the destruction she has wrought after one random act of kindness?”

The room went quiet. Even the birds outside ceased their chatter. I folded my hands in front of me and leaned forward.

“Do you have a problem with how I am handling her?”

Vincent’s throat bobbed, his calm demeanor melting away. “The problem is that you wish to give her leniency when she should be locked downstairs with Camilla. She—”

“I am well aware of what she has done, but I did not ask for your counsel on the matter. Nor are you one to judge what I can and cannot do. What exactly happened under your temporary rule?”

Vincent’s face flushed, and he opened his mouth to respond but stopped, thinking better of whatever he’d been about to say.

“Exactly. I am more than aware of your disdain for her.”

“Disdain?” He barked a small laugh, glancing at the room. “Am I the only one who isn’t under her spell? She practically gutted Cameron and tore through Onuna. I mean, seriously, the list goes on.”

“The circumstances are different. We are not dealing with a creature intent on mere bloodlust and destruction—”

“Seriously?” He cut me off, seemingly unaware he’d done so. “Is it really so good that you are willing to risk everything for her? To make excuse after excuse. Unir would never—”

I was on my feet the second my father’s name left his lips. Sparks of energy danced across my skin, my tattoos flaring to life as the room vibrated. Weariness had left my temper more than frayed, and the last few weeks had only made it worse.

“Out.”

It was the only thing I could say that wouldn’t ruin the centuries of friendship between us.

Vincent spun on his heel, yanked the council doors open, and stormed away without so much as a second glance back.

“All of you. You are dismissed until the council reconvenes.”

Cameron and Xavier shared a glance and practically ran out of the room. Imogen rose and murmured something about talking to Vincent before hurrying after him. Neverra and Logan rose slowly.

Logan met my gaze. "Vincent is only afraid. That's why he lashes out."

"I am aware."

"Nismera did a number on him. We all know it, and he sees the ghost of Nismera in Dianna. It's just fear. There is love for you behind his defiance," Logan said.

I lowered my head, pressing my fists against the table in front of me. "I just wish to be alone. Please."

He said nothing more, and they left, the large doors closing behind them. I sank back into my seat, my hand brushing over my face. The silence, for once, calmed my nerves.

"She called for you," I said, staring straight ahead.

Roccurem solidified, his shadows writhing around him.

"I heard," he said, clasping his hands behind his back.

My jaw tightened at how casual he sounded as if it were his right. She cursed me and called out for him. It was beyond idiotic to feel so much jealousy, yet my gut twisted with it.

"Calm your nerves, Your Majesty. There is no need for you to be envious. She calls to me for answers she is too afraid to receive from you."

I tapped my fist against the table, a million and one thoughts running through my head.

"A part of me wants to forbid you from answering her call, but if she has questions and wishes not to speak to me, I want her to have the support she needs. I would never want her alone. Kaden kept her from friends and family for centuries. I would not do the same. If she reaches out, you may answer, but not before."

Roccurem's shadows swelled, the swirling mass of energy and nebulae dancing around his feet. "The mortals speak of stages of grief. Anger."

Images of Onuna on fire flashed through my head.

"Denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I am afraid Dianna has only experienced two at the moment. You must be prepared for what's coming. Her emotions will return. They may flow like the tide, some rushing forward quicker than others, some remaining dormant for a while or forever, but feelings will emerge regardless. You are the only one able to reach her now."

I scoffed and rubbed my brow. Defeated would be the correct word for how I felt.

"I fear the only emotions she feels in my presence are hate and anger."

“All that power, yet you still do not see.”

“Regardless of how she feels now, I will not abandon her, no matter how much she loathes me,” I said, my expression grim.

“Loathe would not be the terminology I would use to describe her feelings for you, Your Majesty.”

I scoffed. “You have not seen her with me then. She cannot stand the sight of me.”

“Not for the reasons you assume.”

“It’s never been like this before. With anyone. Why does she make me feel this way? I want to kill you. I want to hurt those who speak ill of her. This is not me. I am not that person. Yet your relationship, as platonic as it is, feels like a threat. I couldn’t even stand the thought of Camilla near her because she once cared for her. I almost killed her on Onuna. Do you know what that feels like? To know that I want to reduce anyone that threatens her to mere atoms. Some benevolent ruler I am. Maybe I am just what the stories say.”

“I told you love has power, but I never said it was good.” I glanced at him. He didn’t move even as his form began to fade. “A warning, god king. Be careful with your displays of affection for her. The council will see it as a threat.”

“A threat?”

“They do not see her as you always have, but then, few do. She invokes fear in most. It will be a problem, I am afraid.”

“They won’t touch her. No one will.” It was a vow, and I meant every word.

“It is not her I fear for, Your Majesty,” he said and faded from the room, leaving me in quiet contemplation once more.

FIFTY-THREE

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DIANNA. 91 DAYS.



I didn't know how long I'd lain in bed or how much time had passed. The sun rose and fell. I slipped in and out of sleep, crying in both. Dreams of my childhood haunted me. My thoughts cycled, reminding me of where I was, what I was, and who I no longer had. All I knew was that my mind was my prison, and I was the jailer with the key. A key I didn't know how to use, and to be honest, I didn't know if I wanted my cell unlocked. The note she'd left me was smeared with my tears, but I refused to release it. I had read it over and over again, cursing the old dead gods.

Silver light shot across the sky, and I tracked its progress through the windows. My heart faltered, and I cursed myself, too.

He entered the house, and I turned over, covering my head with the blankets so tightly that no light could sneak in. I didn't hear him enter the room, but I felt him. The bed shifted beneath his weight, a rough sigh leaving his lips.

“I know you’re not asleep.”

I said nothing.

“Have you been in bed this whole time?”

I grunted my response, a mix of fuck you and fuck off.

The bed shifted again, and he ripped the covers from my face. I squinted at him through the mess of hair half covering my face.

“It’s been three days, Dianna.”

I turned my head, looking toward the window. Three days? It felt like hours.

Samkiel picked up the photo from the bedside table. It had broken when I slammed it against the counter during our fight, and now a crack marred

the glass. It ran between Gabby and me, separating us just like I had done all those years ago.

“I ruin everything.”

I didn’t realize I’d spoken until the raspy itch tickled my throat. Samkiel brushed his thumb across the fractured glass. The frame shook as the cracks filled, leaving it whole and undamaged.

“Well, lucky for you, I am here to fix it.”

My head turned toward him, a spark of warmth seeping through my chest before I extinguished it. “Well, you can’t fix me.”

I tried to pull the covers over my head again, but they wouldn’t budge. He was sitting on them, his weight too much for me to shift without my power.

“When was the last time you showered?” Samkiel asked with a raised brow.

I glared at him and flipped him off.

“If you wish to ease your anger in that way instead of yelling, I will not refuse. I told you, you merely have to ask.”

I struggled to free my feet from the blankets so I could kick him.

“You are so easy to agitate,” he mocked.

I growled and continued to pull at the blankets, unwilling to admit defeat. “It’s only because you’re annoying.”

“As are you. Now come on. Get up.” Samkiel stood. “We’re getting you out of the house.”

I crowed in triumph, even though I had done nothing. The covers went over my head, but he stripped them away a moment later. I squealed as he leaned down and scooped me into his arms. All the air rushed out of my lungs as he tossed me over one broad shoulder.

“Samkiel!” I gasped, slapping his back as he carried me toward the bathroom. “You ass! Put me down. I can walk.”

He chuckled and tightened his grip on my legs, his arms like steel bands. Once in the enormous bathroom, the world tilted and shifted, my ass hitting the cold stone of the countertop. I kicked and swatted at him with one hand while trying to push the tangled hair from my eyes with the other. He laughed outright this time and started rolling up the sleeves of his council garbs.

Samkiel strode to the large tub and pressed a silver button. A waterfall appeared, colored lights dancing through the drops in a sparkling display.

“That’s a bathtub?” I asked, my eyes roaming over it. I had never seen anything like it.

“Well, that answers my question about whether you have used it.”

I grabbed a small bottle off the counter and threw it at him.

Samkiel caught it mid-air and smiled as he removed the lid. The scents of jasmine and lemon filled the room as he poured half of the contents into the tub, the water turning a smooth cream color.

“Are you going to wash me too?”

I shouldn’t have asked because the smile that lit his face made my stomach flip.

“If you wish.”

My body shouldn’t have heated at the low, sultry invitation in his tone. I shouldn’t have had a million different images running through my brain at the mere thought of accepting. Yet here I was, my nipples hardening and my body a goddamn betrayer. He knew it too, knew that some part of me, even against my better judgment, reacted to his flirtatious, heated words. Fine. He wanted to play this game. We could. Only I would be the victor.

A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he caught my hesitation. I didn’t need my powers to feel his energy shift as I slipped with sinuous ease from the counter. Call it boredom, irritation, or maybe I was just a ruthless bitch tired of crying, but I wanted to feel something besides the empty ache in my chest. I ran my hand over the thin strap of the cami I wore. Samkiel’s eyes followed my every movement, a moth drawn to a flame, and I wanted him to burn.

I gripped the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head, tossing it to the side. Samkiel licked his lips, his gaze locking on my breasts and staying. I could feel the heat of it as if it were a physical touch. I cupped their weight, my fingers sliding over my nipples, teasing him. He let out a small strangled moan but didn’t move.

My hands moved, running across my ribs and lower. Deliberately, I ran my fingers along the waistband of my lounge pants. Samkiel’s eyes followed, his irises edged with pure silver. I rolled my hips in a rhythm meant to tease and entice. His chest heaved, and he held his breath.

The waistband slipped over my hips, and my pants pooled around my feet. I stepped out of them, standing before him naked. I padded toward him with the effortless grace of a predator. He drank me in as if he was afraid this was a dream, and he was committing every curve, indentation, swell to

memory. He may have been one of the most powerful beings in this world and the next, but in that moment, I had the power, and I reveled in it.

He watched me approach, silver sparking in his eyes, but he didn't move or speak. I stopped just inches from him, the heat of his body a beacon. His hands closed into fists, and his body trembled as he held himself in place. I slid my fingers over his chest, tugging playfully at the silver buttons on his council garbs.

Heat pooled low in my belly. I rested one hand on Samkiel's broad shoulder and looked up at him through my lashes. Pushing to my tiptoes, I leaned in against him and whispered, "Maybe another time."

I shoved against his shoulder, hard enough to jolt him, and walked to the tub. Truthfully, it was more of a pool than a tub, water still pouring into it from above. I stepped beneath the warm water, letting it rush over me before I waded deeper. I settled on a seat and slicked my wet hair back from my face before turning to face Samkiel. He was still staring at me, squeezing the bottle in his hand so hard it was a wonder it hadn't broken.

"It's rude to stare, you know?"

Samkiel jerked as if I'd startled him. He licked his lips and said, "I'll make you something to eat." His voice was rough and had dropped an octave. I smirked, knowing I had won. He turned away from the tub and strode from the room.

"You don't even know how to cook!" I called after him.

I didn't hear a response, which meant he'd probably sprinted once he was outside the bathroom. For the first time in a long time, I genuinely smiled and sank deeper into the fragrant water.

I took my time washing my hair and letting the heat ease my muscles. The water ran the whole time, never overfilling and never getting cold. I stepped out and wrapped myself in a thick, soft towel before returning to my room. I pulled on comfortable clothes, brushed my hair back, and padded downstairs barefoot.

"You smell better."

"Shut up."

I sat at the island, watching Samkiel shape what looked like multi-colored dough. He placed a few pieces on two plates and held his hand over them. Light poured from his palm, and they rose slightly before turning a golden brown.

"That's cheating," I said.

“Don’t worry. As you said, I may not know how to cook, but I know how to survive.”

I nodded, adjusting my seat. So he had heard me. He slid a plate toward me and sat down. Besides the bread and what looked like their version of eggs, he’d piled it high with various colorful fruits. It was beautiful, yet my stomach didn’t growl or rumble.

“You’re not sleeping.”

I stabbed my fork at the food. “And how would you know?”

He cut a slice of fruit and placed it in his mouth. “The dark circles under your eyes.”

My mouth fell open. I tossed a piece of fruit at him, but he just caught it and popped it into his mouth. “You can’t just tell a woman she has bags under her eyes. Holy gods, it’s no wonder you are still alone.”

“So you aren’t sleeping?” he asked, completely unfazed.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no, not really.”

“I can help.”

“Oh, yeah?” I folded my arms, leaning back in my seat. “Is this another flirty proposition?”

Samkiel grinned, his mood brightening, but he ignored my barb. “Depends if you’re going to disrobe in front of me again.”

“Depends if you’re nice or not.”

He lifted a brow. “I would suggest not.”

My eyes narrowed on him as he continued to eat.

“I am going to be perfectly clear with you. My feelings for you have not changed since Chasin, regardless of yours. Teasing is not fun for me. Do not do it again unless you wish for a different outcome.”

I knew he meant every word, and heat pooled in my core. His gaze never left mine, not as he spoke and not as he took a sip of his water. I watched the muscles of his throat work as he swallowed. No matter how I wanted to deny it, I wanted him. What fool wouldn’t? But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t continue to test him.

“And what outcome would that be, oh annoying one?”

“I told you before I would show you eight ways to make you forget that hideous friend word. Tease me again, and I shall show you twelve, and after your little display, we’ll start in the bathroom,” he said, taking another bite. I watched as his lips closed over the fork.

My thighs squeezed together, and I shifted, a flutter of need building in my core that only he had any hope of easing. Even having him for a moment, I knew what he was capable of. I wondered if we fucked hard enough if we'd break the bathroom itself. Crossing my arms, I leaned forward. I knew the tightness of my nipples would tell him what illicit images just scraped across my brain. My face flushed, but he only smiled and took another bite of food. The cocky bastard knew what he did to me, and he reveled in it.

I wanted to snap back with words just as enticing to show him I had power over him as he did me, but another part of me clawed its way forward. I glanced at him from under my lashes and picked up my fork. For once, he wasn't looking at me. What was I doing? I was sitting here flirting with him again as if nothing had happened.

"That's what hurts the most, isn't it? You fell in love with him while Kaden took your sister."

Guilt nipped at me, extinguishing the heat of my lust as quickly as water against flame.

"Fine," I bit back harshly. "I'll make sure I never do that again." I shifted in my seat, placing a hand under my chin as I poked at my food.

Samkiel made a low noise in his throat. "Doubtful."

"Do you ever tire of being an arrogant, know-it-all beast?" I asked, striking out at him. It hurt both of us, but I had to because the alternative was too damned brutal.

Silence fell in the room, a growing chasm stretching between us.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

"Eat." He nodded toward my untouched plate.

"No."

I wasn't hungry. I hadn't been since I came back.

"You have to try to eat at least a small meal for what I have planned."

I folded my arms, glaring at him. "And what do you have planned?"

FIFTY-FOUR

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DIANNA. A FEW DAYS LATER.



He made every morning and evening terrible. I hated him, absolutely hated him.

“Why do I have to do this again?” I groaned. Samkiel strode up the curved rocky path. I stopped, placing my hands on my knees. My ponytail swung forward, the tip reaching toward the ground. My lungs were on fire, and each gasp seemed to make it worse.

He sighed. “As I told you the first five times you asked, it’s an expressive way to work out all your anger, aggression, anxiety—”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I mocked, trying to catch my breath.

“There are other forms of cardio if you’re interested.” The smile he flashed at me made my cheeks heat. Even covered in sweat, he was so damn handsome it was sickening. All I could think about was how jealous I was that it got to touch every dip and ridge of muscle. Yes, I absolutely hated him.

I stood up and strode past him without responding, his soft chuckle following me. That was his plan. He wanted to annoy the emotions out of me, and by gods, I hated that it was working. I hated him.

“Walk in front of me,” I snapped. “I don’t want you staring at my ass.”

He grinned that devastating grin I loathed and leaned down to whisper in my ear as he passed, “I don’t need to stare. I have it memorized. Now if you wanted to let me see it bare again—”

My hand shot out to smack him, but he dodged and continued along the trail, his laughter filling the air.

“Don’t you ever get tired of flirting?” I snapped.

“With you? Never. You are fun to play with, Dianna.”

My fists clenched at my sides. Samkiel was going to be the death of me. I huffed and puffed my way behind him, staring at every ripple of muscle. He was the epitome of male beauty, from his broad shoulders to his tapered waist. I mean, even his legs were sexy. What the fuck was wrong with me? This was a bad idea. Maybe I should walk in front of him.

“Keep up!” he yelled, and I cursed.

He wanted a reaction out of me, whether good or bad. When I cursed him or tried to kick him, he smiled a fraction wider, as if the display of any emotion was proof I was here, alive and not dying inside. And maybe, just maybe, all the banter did stir something other than despair in me, even if it was against my will.

The altitude at this height was almost crippling, but the view was worth it. I stopped again under the pretense of taking it all in. Mountains, far larger than I had ever seen, surrounded us. Green wasn’t even the color I would use to describe the landscape. It was so much more vibrant and alive. The sky damn near shimmered behind the rolling clouds. It was reminiscent of the images of eternal paradise people painted back on Onuna. Ignoring the slap of pain, I wondered if this was what Gabby saw now. Was she somewhere like this and happy?

I hoped so.

With a deep sigh, I turned away and rushed to catch up with Samkiel. My back, my thighs, and my arms hurt. No, that was a lie. Everything hurt. Every day Samkiel could escape from his duties with the council, he dragged me out to this mountain and ran me up and down it. At first, I struggled to keep up, and I would be lying if I said I hadn’t complained the entire time. But I still did it. He never spoke of what went on behind the council doors, but his mood was always sour when he came to me. By the way he watched me, I had a feeling I was often a topic of conversation. It was either all about me or something worse.

“You won’t have to send me to the council.” I huffed and leaned back, trying to catch my breath, my hand resting on my sweat-soaked side. “I’ll die from exhaustion before then.”

Samkiel turned around and walked backward, not missing a step or stumbling. “I don’t remember you complaining this much,” he quipped.

“Why are we doing this again?” I wiped my brow.

He smiled and turned around. The crunch of our shoes against the rocks was the only sound.

"If I am being honest," he said, "this was another test."

I paused next to a jagged rock. "Another test?"

He nodded. "The air at this altitude would kill a mortal, which means your powers are still there, bubbling under the surface."

I stood straight, my fists clenching at my side. "You mean I could have died instead of just being worn out?"

He only smiled, not even flinching. "It wouldn't have reached that point. I watched you every second of the way, listening to every heartbeat, every breath. I would have felt the blood vessels constricting the second it became too much, and we would have stopped."

"So, I haven't lost my powers?"

"No, but they are severely suppressed. So much so that even when you are angry, your hands don't even flicker."

I glanced at my hands, opening and closing them, missing the familiar rush of power and warmth. I felt hollow and empty, but maybe this was better.

"Maybe you're wrong," I said, wiping sweat from my face.

"I'm not."

I glared at him. "You don't know everything."

"Why bury your powers so deeply?"

I glanced toward him as if one of the reasons wasn't staring me in my face. "I didn't mean to."

"It's okay." He took a step closer, the rocks beneath his feet crunching. "We'll figure it out."

My heart lurched as he held out his hand, his pinky extended. I looked at it, remembering what it meant, what had transpired between us, and shoved past him.

"I'm ready to go."



IT WAS LIKE THAT FOR DAYS, SAMKIEL TRYING TO REACH ME AND ME shutting him down. I lashed out because I didn't feel so miserable when he was around, and that pissed me off more than anything.

Our latest argument was him trying to get me to eat. It wasn't like I didn't want to, but nothing sounded or tasted appetizing. Everything was bland, and after a few bites, I was done, no matter what fancy breads, meats, or fruits he brought.

Something felt off, but I would not tell him that. It could be a side effect of losing my powers. I had lived on blood and bone for months and wasn't sure I could return to regular food. After a few days, I stopped thinking about it, not caring enough to really worry about it.

Even though we argued and I complained the whole time, being with him and participating in his crazy, stupid exercise routines seemed to help me. I slept and didn't dream, too tired for even that, but Samkiel wasn't with me all the time. I watched his light leave and cursed myself as I stayed awake, watching for his return. Sometimes when he returned late, I'd run to the bed, fake sleep as if I hadn't been waiting, and finally doze off when I heard him downstairs. We no longer shared a bed, but just having him downstairs brought me peace. That swirling, aching void in my chest didn't scream when he was near. Although, I'd never admit it to him.

I regretted undressing in front of him. It had been wrong, and I'd set him off when I had no right to. I didn't want to start what we had again, even if my body happily disagreed. Sex with Samkiel, even knowing how exciting and amazing it would be, would mean too much, and I didn't have the will to figure out what that meant.

Of course, Samkiel wasn't making it easy to resist. On our runs, he would take his shirt off. I knew he wasn't overheated, even if he was sweating. I had seen him call a breeze when I complained it was too hot one day. No, he was just trying to torture me after the bathroom incident. I knew it.

Not that I looked, stared, or counted how many abs he had, which was too many, by the way. I especially didn't notice the twin lines that ran on either side of them, disappearing below the waistband of his pants. Or the line of finely-dusted hair that trailed—

A rumble echoed from my midsection, my cheeks flushing.

Samkiel's head whipped toward me. "Are you hungry?"

I splayed my hand over the damp fabric of my shirt and glared at him. "No." And I wasn't. Not for food, at least.

The sound of water had me looking around. "No mountain running today?"

He shook his head. "No, I wanted to show you something." He offered me his hand, but I just looked at it. "I don't bite. That's all you, remember?"

"Funny." I rolled my eyes and ignored the slight shock that went through me when I put my hand in his.

He smiled, his large hand engulfing mine as he led me down a small slope.

I gasped as he pushed through the foliage. "Wow."

"Pretty, isn't it?" He smiled at me.

It was. A waterfall spilled into a deep, wide pool before flowing to the river. Trees that dared to touch the sky surrounded us in every direction.

"Stay here."

He strode away, and I waited, drinking in the beauty and savoring the cool mist that rolled from the waterfall. Large rocks pushed from the shallows, and flowers with blooming bushes crowded the shore. The crash of the water was the only sound, drowning out all noise and leaving peace behind. A part of me wanted to sit down and never leave.

"Here," Samkiel said, emerging from the bushes with a handful of berries.

"I'm not hungry."

He shook his head, smiling softly. "They are not for you."

Before I could ask, a rustle came from behind me. I turned to see a large, beautiful stag easing his head through the bushes. He took one look at me and shuffled back into the forest.

I frowned. "Well, that was rude."

"Just wait."

Samkiel stepped in front of me and let out an odd ululating whistle. Branches rustled again, and I braced for it to run away and leave like everyone else.

"This is stupid." I huffed, folding my arms across my chest.

"Just wait." Samkiel held his hand toward me as if I was the doting fawn attempting to flee.

I sighed but stood still, watching.

Samkiel whistled again, a chuff coming from the stag before it finally emerged from the overgrowth.

Its heavy antlers made me think of a stag, but its clawed feet, iridescent coat, and four eyes it was unlike any creature I had ever seen. Samkiel

whistled again, and the stag glanced toward me, lowering its head. Its massive size and beauty were overwhelming.

“It fears me?” I whispered, unable to hide the hurt in my voice. It made little sense that it would matter. I hadn’t even known this animal existed a moment ago.

“Come on,” Samkiel said sweetly. “She’s friendly. I promise.”

I glared at Samkiel’s back, but the stag obeyed, approaching me with its head held high. He had to be ancient with how his antlers branched, yet he feared me. Samkiel came to his other side, holding his hand out with the berries. The stag accepted his offering as Samkiel petted his smooth coat.

“Go on,” he said, nodding at me.

I didn’t know why I was suddenly so nervous, but I wanted the freaking animal to like me. I reached out slowly. It watched me, still feeding from Samkiel’s hand. My fingers touched his fur, and I smiled.

“He’s so soft. His fur feels like feathers.”

Samkiel watched me with a smile. “They are ancient. On Rashearin, they represented strength and power. The Lorveg stag was my mother’s symbol.”

My hand stilled as the stag raised its head. “Really?”

Samkiel nodded, his smile dropping. “Yes, and this is the last one left in the world.”

My chest felt tight. “How did you get him?”

He shrugged, wiping his now empty hands on his long shorts. “I saved what I could from Rashearin, but I also destroyed many in my grief. That is just one of many regrets I carry.”

Samkiel smiled, not at me this time, but toward the animal between us. I watched as he raised his hand, stroking down the side of the stag’s neck. It chuffed, content as could be, but it was the distressed look filling Samkiel’s storm-clouded eyes that made me speak next.

“Oh, so you brought me out for a lesson, not to swim naked in a lake?”

I tried to lighten the mood, make a joke, anything to ease the hurt in his eyes. It was enough to make my own broken chest ache.

He nodded toward my hand, not rising to the bait. “Go ahead, feed him.”

I held my hand out, and the stag studied me. “What if he doesn’t like me?”

Samkiel continued to run his hand along the beast's flank. "Only a fool would not."

My small smile became a giggle as the stag's bristled muzzle teased at my palm. "It tickles."

Samkiel said nothing as he watched me. The stag ate all the berries and afterward grazed for the fallen ones as I petted him. Silence grew but not uncomfortably. It never was between us. I knew Samkiel brought me peace. I could spend hours just in his presence and never feel the need to break the silence. It was something I hadn't even admitted to myself, much less told him, but one reason among so many, why I'd left in the first place.

"You know, when Gabby and I were younger, she loved these stories and fairy tales about princesses who could talk to animals."

Samkiel glanced up at me over the slope of the stags' back. "Do you think I am a princess?"

"Absolutely. You're spoiled like one."

A smile tugged at his lips. "Well, I hate to ruin your illusion, but I do not talk to them, not really. It is more so an understanding, I suppose."

I nodded slowly, even as my lips twitched. "Sure thing, princess."

His eyes cut to mine, and I had a second to regret my decision before he flicked his wrist, and lake water splashed over me.

I gasped, and the stag made a displeased noise in its throat.

"You." I huffed, my arms and face dripping. "Didn't."

He shrugged, utterly unfazed, as he continued to pet the stag that grazed between us. "I did."

My rebellious scream scared the stag away, but I got my revenge.



WE REACHED A DIRT PATH THAT CURVED TOWARD THE PALACE, BOTH OF US dripping water and covered in mossy greens. It took a lot of force, but I eventually pushed him into the lake. I suspected he'd let me, but I still called it a win. Surprisingly, it was quite challenging to drown a god. I caught him glancing at me every so often, a smile on his lips, and I found myself smiling back, both of us giggling like fools at the complete and

absolute ridiculousness that had transpired in the lake. For once, I didn't get lost in my head.

The sun danced off the tips of the turrets where they pierced the forest's canopy. I hadn't realized how large the place was until we were outside.

I grabbed the end of my shirt and wrung it out, water spilling onto the stone bridge.

"You think I can catch an illness with no powers?"

He shook his head, smiling softly. "Doubtful. I'm afraid even illnesses would fear you."

"Ass." I swatted at him, but he dodged me effortlessly. "Do you fear me?"

His grin turned into a closed-lipped smile as he took a step toward me. I don't know why I asked that question or why I was so desperate to know, but a part of me, behind lock and key, was curious.

"No." His eyes scanned my face. "You'd have to do something truly terrifying to scare me, and I have not seen it yet."

A part of me, made of scales, claws, and lethal bite, smoldered under those words.

Samkiel reached out and removed a small twisted branch from my hair, his fingers lingering along the ends, and I let them. "Do you want something to eat?" he asked hopefully.

"Maybe, but let me do it because your cooking sucks. That's probably why I haven't wanted to eat."

He barked a laugh, and the ground shook. Samkiel was in front of me in the next breath, his powerful back blocking all from sight.

"You're needed at the council."

Logan.

I peered around Samkiel. Logan's gaze bounced between us, taking in our disarray before a bright smile lit his features.

"Very well," Samkiel said, turning toward me. "Let me walk Dianna back, and I will be there."

Reality crashed back in, erasing the simple joy of the day. I was doing it again. Pretending everything was fine, that we were.... I swallowed. We weren't having fun. This wasn't a vacation or an escape. I was still a monster who got her sister killed, had done terrible things in the name of vengeance, and Samkiel had a council who wanted my head.

My face blanched as I took a step back from him. He saw the change, and his expression turned stony as if he could sense the defenses I was currently rebuilding.

“I think I can survive a few feet without you,” I said.

Samkiel’s brows furrowed. “Dianna.”

I held my hand up. “Seriously, I’m fine. I doubt I will get kidnapped or trampled or anything else you could possibly worry over on the way.” He took a deep breath, but I cut him off. “Just go.”

Thick unspoken tension heavier than a stone wall slammed down between us.

“Very well,” he said, deciding not to argue for once.

With a snap of his fingers, the path to the palace turned to cobblestone. A railing of the same stone appeared, vines and blooms of various bright colors draping it.

I turned back, glaring at him.

“Just in case. I’d hate for you to get lost,” Samkiel said with a smile.

With another flick of his fingers, every ounce of sweat, dirt, and water disappeared from me, then him, his dirty clothes replaced by his silver and white council garbs, the split tail of his jacket flaring behind him. Regal and majestic, the total opposite of me.

“I’ll return when I can.”

“No.”

“No?”

I squared my shoulders, and that impenetrable wall fully formed between us, erecting itself around my bruised and damaged heart. Every brick he had cast down, I replaced in an instant.

“This isn’t helping either of us. Apparently, you are needed elsewhere, and all you’re doing is wasting your time coming back. In the future, just send The Hand to check on me. The quicker you handle the council, the quicker I can leave here. Whatever you all decide to do with me, at least it will be over.”

“Dianna—”

“They need you. I don’t.” My demons screamed at me. Lie. Hurt him. Push him away! “If worse comes to worst, I’ll call, yell your name, or whatever. Otherwise, just stay there.”

Samkiel’s jaw tightened, his lips pressed into a grim line as I erased every small bit of joy we had shared in the last few moments. “As you wish.

I will await your call then, Dianna.”

Logan looked between us, his brow furrowing as he tried to decipher the undercurrents. Cerulean light encased him, a beautiful compliment to the silver that surrounded Samkiel.

I stayed there on the stone path Samkiel had made for me, watching as he and Logan took to the sky. As his silver light faded, the cold numbness crept back in. I remained until night fell, in no hurry to return to the empty palace, pretending not to search the sky for him.



A DAY PASSED, THEN ANOTHER AND ANOTHER. I COUNTED THE SUNRISES from my bed, keeping myself cocooned inside. The first day was fine. I was sore and needed the rest. I heard footsteps downstairs the following day, but they were too light to be his. Xavier called my name, saying they were here to drop off food. I covered my head just before he entered the room, faking sleep. Whether he bought my act, I didn't care. I only cared that they left.

Another day came, and night fell, but I barely moved. I lay in bed staring at the picture of Gabby and me. The air shifted, and I knew I wasn't alone. I shot up, yanking the covers from my face as Roccurem formed.

He glanced around the room, reaching out to run his hand across the top of a tall dresser. “I have not seen fallen oak in centuries. It is rare.”

“Where the fuck have you been? I assumed Samkiel had you locked up somewhere.”

“Fortunately, I am more valuable than Camilla, who resides beneath the council hall,” he said.

I swallowed. “Why are you here now?”

“You sent the god king away. I wished to see if you had truly withdrawn back into yourself.”

“Why? Did he say something?” I heard the hitch in my voice.

Roccurem just glanced at me. Folding his hands in front of himself. “Guilt like grief is such a heavy burden to carry.”

“What?”

“Samkiel, unlike Kaden, respects your wishes and listens to your words. So, when you say you don’t need him and prefer he stays away, he listens. Even if you did not mean to be so cruel.”

“Leave.”

“He is different from Kaden, yes? I think that bothers you the most. You are not used to anyone caring for you without wishing for something in return.”

I said nothing, only turned my head away.

“Samkiel has not left the main hall and is still there, I would presume. He has been quietly sulking around the council hall with a side of tortured brooding.”

It was the first time I had heard Roccurem even attempt a joke, but I was in no mood. I laid back down, grabbing the covers and bunching them beneath my chin.

“It truly is marvelous what he has done here. The last time a god—”

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t care.” I raised my hand, cutting him off. “If you’ve come to gawk at the decor, just leave. I don’t want company.”

“No, it appears you crave that piece of your heart that is broken. Your sister.”

I shot up, grabbed the bedside lamp, and chucked it at him. It shattered against the wall where he’d stood.

“Why do you refuse his help?” he asked, appearing on the other side of the room. “I witnessed the days you two have spent together. I saw the spark flicker inside your chest, you burned, even if it was only for a moment.”

My brows furrowed, my lip curling. “Of course, fate is a nosy bitch.”

“I see all.”

“Creeper.”

“I felt that flicker of life return to both of you before you unregretfully snuffed it out in anger once more.”

“Why do you care so damned much?” I grimaced.

He didn’t answer. I wondered if what he saw could be worse than what I was already going through.

“Again, why do you refuse his help?”

I took a deep breath, clenching the sheets in my hands. “Go away.”

Roccurem stared at me, his six eyes opening and turning a deep white. “What have you buried so deeply that even I cannot see?”

If I still had my fangs, I would have bared them. “Get. Out,” I snarled at him.

He faded a second later, gone in a wave of mist and smoke. I sat waiting for him to reform and make another comment to rip my emotions to shreds, but the room fell quiet once more. I calmed my ragged breathing, and I lay back down. I curled up on my side and stared at the photo, my eyes burning.

I didn’t remember falling asleep, just waking to find the sun in a different place. Gabby’s face still smiled back at me. After Roccurem’s visit, I had expected to see Samkiel’s silver light as he returned from the council, but it had been hours. Maybe he finally listened to me, and he wasn’t coming back.

I forced myself to get out of bed, shower, brush my teeth, and eat a slice of fruit before I sat down to tie my running shoes. A part of me hated to admit that even when we were fighting, Samkiel made existing easier just by being around. I felt cold, and the emptiness inside me was an unyielding ache that threatened to swallow me whole. I stood and walked out the door, telling myself I was just enjoying the day, not searching the sky.

“They need you. I don’t.”

That was the last thing I’d said to him. My traitorous heart twisted.

What a lie.

FIFTY-FIVE

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DIANNA



I dug my hands into the soft ground as I climbed back up the hill I had fallen down. Reaching the top, I paused to catch my breath. I looked down the narrow dirt path that cut through the forest, branching in all different directions. The sun was no longer visible over the trees. I had been out here longer than I intended. Shit. I could have sworn we'd been down this path before, yet I didn't remember the steep edge along this section.

I dusted myself off, staggering as my thigh protested the movement. Great, I would probably bruise. I sighed and headed back the way I'd come. No birds or small animals fluttered about, and I wondered if this place had any. I hadn't seen or heard any, now that I thought about it. I stopped, noting a familiar log ahead.

I threw my hands up in exasperation. "Oh, come on! I swear I walked this way five minutes ago," I said, realizing how utterly lost I was.

It would be so much easier if I could change forms. If I could make myself a beast or wyvern as before, I could escape and go wherever I wanted. I'd tried every day since waking up to change or summon my flames, but nothing came. Only frustration, anger, and something that felt like relief, but I refused to think about that last one too much.

All the trees and boulders looked the same here, and I couldn't see any hint of the palace. I would probably kiss the stone floor once I reached that damned castle.

I headed back the way I'd come and let my mind wander for the first time in a really long time. I had no powers, or rather, as Samkiel liked to remind me, my powers were severely repressed, and I was stuck here for gods knew how long. Maybe the council would decide I was too terrible to

exist and put an end to me. An odd sense of comfort washed over me at that thought. It wasn't like anyone would miss me. Samkiel was probably sick of me and our constant back-and-forth bickering by now, and he had Imogen. Maybe that was why he'd stayed gone so long and hadn't come back. She might have helped him relax after those long, torturous council meetings and my vicious words. Maybe she would slip a hand along his thigh under the table, or they would take each other behind those fancy columns I had seen the first time he brought me here. I was probably just a burden to him now, something to come back to because he had no choice.

A cold feeling washed over me, numbing my emotions. Maybe I should just get lost in the forest. It would be better for everyone, especially Samkiel. No one would look for me here, and by the time they did, I would be long gone. A pile of bones near a tree for the animals to feast on. I wondered if there was peace in the afterworld for a creature like me.

The ground shook behind me, stopping me mid-step. I sighed and rolled my eyes. Of course, the universe would check my hubris and send some giant monster to eat me.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

My shoulders bunched, and I spun around. The gorgeous blonde celestial stalked toward me. His long black jacket flowed past his calves, the gold accent buttons catching the light.

There was another thud, and the ground trembled as Xavier landed behind me. "Cameron." His smooth voice calmed even my nerves.

Cameron stopped a foot away from me, rubbing his brow. "Sorry. Let me rephrase. Where have you been?"

"How did you find me?"

Cameron snorted. "Well, if I couldn't find you by smell alone, you sound like a wild beast stomping through the forest."

I lifted my arm and sniffed. Did I stink?

"Gods, look at you. Your clothes are disgusting, and you absolutely reek." His face dropped, and he looked at Xavier behind me. "Oh, gods, if she gets sick, Samkiel will slaughter us all."

Xavier chuckled and stepped to my side. He wore the same outfit as Cameron. "She is fine and alive, and so will we be."

"Please, two more minutes, and she would have attracted some beast looking for an easy snack." Cameron blanched.

Xavier shrugged. "It's not our fault the meeting went over."

The meeting where Samkiel said he would be. Imogen was probably there. They were definitely together and—

“How long do meetings take?” I asked, distracting myself from those thoughts.

Cameron grinned at me, and I immediately regretted asking. “Why? You wouldn’t miss him, would you?”

“No.” I swallowed but didn’t back down. “I was just curious.”

Cameron shrugged. “Meetings don’t take that long.”

My stomach dropped as Xavier glanced at Cameron, then back toward me.

“I wouldn’t worry about the meeting, though,” Xavier quipped.

“Why?”

Xavier scratched his head, turning away from me.

“What is it?” I couldn’t stop the worry that suddenly filled my gut.

Cameron folded his arms. “I don’t know. It’s just the last time I saw him, he was with” Cameron slapped Xavier’s shoulder. “What’s that one really pretty celestial’s name? The one who runs behind Rolluse filing every incident?”

Xavier placed his hand under his chin as if thinking. “Lydia?”

“Yeah! Lydia.” Cameron balanced an arm on Xavier’s shoulder. “Yeah, the last time I saw him, he was with Lydia. All I know is he was upstairs with her last night, and from the sounds of it, things were pretty intense. Maybe he had some steam to blow off, especially after what Logan said you told him.”

I growled and took a step forward. Even without my fangs, it was enough to make Cameron take a step back.

“Ha, I win!” Cameron yelled.

“Fine.” Xavier rolled his eyes and dug into his coat pocket. He pulled out a gold coin and flicked it toward Cameron, who caught it.

“Told you,” Cameron quipped, tucking the coin away. “Absence makes the dick grow harder.”

Xavier laughed and shook his head. “That’s not the saying.”

“Wait.” I raised my hands. “You were joking?”

“Of course,” Cameron said.

The blinding rage that had threatened to consume me eased, and my gut settled.

“Feel better, don’t you?” Cameron wiggled his brows.

“I would rip your organs out again if I could.” I snapped back.

Cameron smiled a fraction wider. “Don’t worry. He’s not getting his knob polished while you suffer. I think he’s just staying away because you’re so mean.”

Xavier glared at him. “I am sorry for Cameron. Logan told us what you said, and I guess Samkiel thinks it’s better to give you space.”

I nodded, but Cameron was right. I was mean, and I just didn’t know how else to be anymore. Something in me had fractured so badly when Gabby died that even picking up the pieces seemed to hurt. Now I lashed out at everything and everyone as if I could save what was left of my ruined and broken soul.

“Are the council meetings really that long?”

Cameron chuckled as if I’d told a funny joke. “Oh, sweetheart. Meetings with the council can take far longer, especially with all the information Samkiel has kept to himself.” His eyes roamed over me. Not in a way that made me feel uncomfortable, but to indicate that I was the information Samkiel had been keeping secret.

“They’re talking about me.” The words escaped before I knew I was going to speak them.

“That, among other things,” Xavier said, and I could tell by his tone that their discussions went deeper than just the recent destruction I had caused.

“How long have you been out here?” Cameron asked

I shrugged. “A few hours. Samkiel had shown me some trails when we went for a run. I got bored sitting at—” I bit the words off before I said *home*. “I got bored, so I went for a run.”

Cameron nodded and smirked again as if he knew what I’d been about to say.

“Exercising with Samkiel and surviving with no powers?” Xavier seemed surprised.

Cameron let out a low whistle, rocking back on his heels. “Gods, woman, you are impressive.”

I dropped my gaze. Impressive? Not in the least. Xavier must have picked up on my unease because he stepped before me, his voice soothing as he asked, “May I carry you, my lady?”

“My lady?” I snorted.

“Remember, she wants us to think she’s a cold, emotionless monster, Xavi? Play along,” Cameron said, and I cut him a glare. Cameron’s smile

only grew a fraction wider.

Xavier shook his head, still waiting for my response. He was so kind, even after all the pain I'd caused Samkiel and The Hand. I didn't deserve his kindness.

"No, I'll be fine." I went to step around him, but he stopped me by stepping into my path again.

"It is a very long walk, even for us, back to the palace. It would be easier to fly, especially with that twitch in your thigh."

I glanced down at the slim black leggings that hid the bruise I knew was there.

How did he know?

Cameron stepped forward. "You might as well say yes. He won't give up."

Xavier smiled and offered me his broad hand. "I promise to be a complete gentleman."

Kindness, when not deserved, was truly a mark of strength. I placed my hand in his, the warmth of his touch soothing. Calluses roughened his palm and fingers. Centuries of battles and swordplay had left their mark, but Xavier radiated a quiet strength that told you once you fell under his care, he would use every bit of his power to protect you. Only now, he used it to help a being who had been nothing but a burden to his family.

True kindness, true strength.

One swift motion and I was in his arms, one hand on my back, the other under my knees.

"Comfortable?"

I nodded, and Xavier, then Cameron, shot into the sky.

FIFTY-SIX

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DIANNA



It wasn't until I was in the air that I realized how far away I was from the palace. It would have taken me another day and a half to return had I kept going.

Xavier set me down on the stone bridge.

"Okay, thanks for the ride, but you both can leave now."

Cameron and Xavier shook their heads. Cameron had not stopped talking since they'd found me, and Xavier seemed to love every second of it.

"For the last time, no." Cameron smiled at me before running a hand over his short, blonde hair and turning toward Xavier. "Ugh, you think he will fire me? He's going to fire me. Look at her. Gods, what if he is waiting for us at the palace right now, and we show up with her looking like this?" He licked the pad of his thumb and aimed for the thick layer of dirt on my face.

"Hey!" I snapped, swatting at his hand.

Xavier chuckled as I glared at Cameron.

"Calm down, Cameron. Samkiel won't fire us," Xavier said through his chuckle. He placed his hands in his pocket and leaned toward me, a mischievous grin spread across his face. "Besides, I don't think Dianna will say anything about her little adventure, will you? Especially after we helped you."

My eyes narrowed on Xavier. "Is this blackmail?"

That caused both of them to burst into laughter, the sound so infectious that the corners of my lips twitched.

"Oh, gods, wait!" Cameron barked, completely ignoring my question as he pointed at Xavier. "What if he separates us and makes me file charts upstairs with Elianna? I'll die of boredom."

Xavier laughed as they walked past me, heading toward the castle.

I realized I had no hope of getting rid of them, so instead, I followed them, staring at their wide backs. Their gold-accented robes swayed in the wind as they headed inside, still bantering and laughing at each other's jokes.



I TURNED THE SHOWER OFF AND WRAPPED A LARGE TOWEL AROUND MYSELF before stepping out. This room, the whole place, was too big, too nice. I knew Samkiel had made it that way for me, trying to provide some comfort and normalcy. Even after everything, he was too nice, and I hated it because I didn't deserve it.

My feet slapped against the stone floor, water gathering and disappearing as I walked. The floor absorbed every drop of water that fell from me, shimmering colors pooling in the shape of my footprints. I stopped at the long sink and wiped the mirror clean with a quick swipe. At my touch, a light flickered on, illuminating the mirror and nearly blinding me. I lowered my gaze for a second, giving my eyes time to adjust before looking at my reflection. My hair clung to me, the ends reaching well past my elbows. I stared at myself and barely recognized the woman staring back.

My skin felt taut, my eyes dry, and my entire being heavy without my powers. At least, that's what I told myself. But the truth was, every ounce of weight I had carried these last few months had finally settled and wanted to pull me under. On the nights Samkiel wasn't here and sleep wouldn't find me, I sometimes let it. I would stare at her picture and cry.

Leaning forward, I pulled back my lips in a grimace. No fangs, no sharp edges. I ran my tongue over the edge of my teeth, but I didn't feel a hint of them, nor the sharp sting of hunger that had haunted me the last few months. I stared at myself, and it felt as if something stared back. A beast

behind chains and locks that wanted to be free. A lump grew in my throat, a burning ache in my chest. Before the darkness could consume me again, I left the bathroom and returned to my room. I slipped into another lounge set and curled up on the bed. I picked at my nails, the chipped polish almost all gone.

“What are you wearing?” Cameron practically yelled from the doorway.

My head snapped toward him, his booming voice pulling me from my thoughts. He stood in the doorway, no longer dressed in the council garbs.

“What are you wearing?” I echoed, lifting a brow.

He strode in like he owned the place, adjusting the long necklaces that lay across his chest. Xavier entered behind him, and I gulped. They looked like they were about to attend one of Omel’s runway shows. Their shirts and pants fit faithfully to every muscle, showing off the masculine beauty of their bodies. Cameron caught me looking and grinned rakishly.

“Sexy, right?”

Cameron tugged at his dark shirt, the front dipping so low it practically touched his belly button. His leather pants rode low on his hips, molding to his thighs and ass. Xavier wore a black silk shirt that shimmered and clung to him every time he moved, revealing the heavy muscles of his chest. Buttons ran the length of his legs, breaking up the unrelieved darkness of his outfit.

These two men were beyond sexy. That was not in doubt. They were an invitation to any that dared to look, but nothing in me stirred or hungered for them.

“Get up,” Cameron said, his eyes shining devilishly. “We’re going out.”

I shook my head. “Out? We are?”

“Yes, and you cannot wear that.” Cameron gave me a quick once over.

I snorted. “Samkiel said—”

“Funny story, Samkiel isn’t here.” Cameron clapped his hands impatiently. “Come on, dark queen, we don’t have all night.”

Xavier leaned against the wall, watching us with amused patience. “It will be fun, and we promise to have you back before he even notices.”

“Promise.” Cameron gave me a smile that I knew had been the downfall of women throughout time.

The two of them like this reminded me of the first time I’d met them—pure mischief. I didn’t argue further. Jumping up, I ran to the closet.



WE WALKED BENEATH THE BLINKING NEON SIGN AND PAST THE CROWD growing outside. I never realized how lackluster Onuna was compared to the remains of Rasheirim. Samkiel was right. It didn't compare. Even the air here felt more oppressive and humid. I already missed—

“Samkiel opened up the world after he brought you to Rasheirim, and the mortals went mad. We have never seen this many out all night,” Cameron whispered.

I shook my head, folding my arms tighter across myself, and thanked the old dead gods for Cameron speaking and shaking me from my thoughts. I'd assumed they would take me to a fancy celestial club and was shocked to learn they wanted to go to Onuna. Truthfully, I would have begged to get out of the house and do something fun. I would welcome anything to distract me.

The heels I'd worn kept catching on the uneven stone walkway, and my feet were already hurting. Was this what mortal life had to offer? If so, I would pass. I slid my hand over the front of my dress. Finding something in the massive closet that would pass as a club outfit had been a challenge. We had done some creative mix and matching. I admit, it was fun having Xavier and Cameron throw random dresses and shoes toward me in their efforts to help. We finally settled on a thin white wrap dress. It was short enough, and Xavier messed with the front to reveal the lace bra I wore beneath.

I walked toward the double doors, flanked by the two of them. This was unbelievable. I couldn't believe I was going into a bar with two of The Hand for a fun night out. I forced myself not to think about how much Gabby would have loved this.

You're running out of time.

I rubbed my ear as if I could scratch the words out. That damn voice filtered through my subconscious, haunting every corner of that damned house, and echoed in my every dream. It sounded like another constant reminder of how I'd failed her, and I just wanted to forget tonight. I shook it off, lowering my hand and burying that voice deep.

Cameron must have picked up on the sudden change in my mood. He leaned toward me and whispered, "I don't remember Ig'Morruthens looking this nice." He grinned. "You are usually all horns and fire and sharp teeth."

The corners of my mouth lifted in an attempt at a smile. "I probably could still light you on fire. I just may need matches now."

"Sounds fun," he said with a wink, not missing a beat.

"You look pretty, Dianna," Xavier said, glancing at Cameron over my head.

I don't know why my chest chose that moment to ache, but it did. Like a servant overly eager to please, my mind delivered the memories of the two men I had loved like brothers. Pain flashed like ice in my veins as I remembered their betrayal, yet I could still see Drake's smile when I told a stupid joke and how Ethan had tried not to laugh. They had been a refuge, a place to go where I would be safe and accepted without judgment. Family was what I thought I had, but family was all I had lost. Cameron and Xavier were not Ethan and Drake, but my heart bled for the connection I no longer had. They had said they loved me, and beyond my stupid hate, a part of me still missed them. Anger shut down the swarm of emotions that threatened to overwhelm me.

I hated the word love.

"Let's just get inside," I said, shaking my head and stomping ahead, leaving them and the ghosts behind. "I want to drink enough to black out tonight."



I HELD XAVIER'S GAZE, MY EXPRESSION SERIOUS. "ON THE COUNT OF three. One. Two. Three!"

Xavier licked the salt off the back of his hand as I did mine. Our arms crossed between us, linking with a shot in hand. We tipped our heads back and downed the clear liquid in one gulp. This one didn't burn like the others. I had done four already, and for once, I wasn't feeling immense guilt or regret. No, I felt like I was floating, which was a pleasant alternative.

We slammed the empty glasses down, and the people around us cheered. They laughed and hollered, a pleasant reprieve from the sadness that had become my constant companion.

“No one has ever done three of the devil’s tango and not thrown up.” A woman giggled, her group of friends nodding. It seemed we’d come on some university party night, and students crowded the club.

Cameron waved his hands through the air. “Okay, tabs on me. Less talking, more drinking. Let’s go!” The crowd went wild again, and this time, even Xavier joined in. The bartender slid a bottle toward us, and then he and another hurried away to help the growing crowd. Cameron placed three clean shot glasses in front of us.

“This isn’t really laying low, you know?” I couldn’t stop the giggle that floated out next. Maybe I have had too much. “I am a wanted criminal.”

Xavier filled his glass and then mine before grabbing the salt. “I won’t tell if you won’t”

I snickered while taking another shot with him.

Cameron wrapped his arms around us both, pulling us close. “Oh, this is exactly how you lay low. An over-rambunctious crowd, all drinking and dancing and hiding away to fuck. Everyone here is too focused on having a good time even to notice you.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. “Smart and downright wicked. I like it.”

Cameron winked at me. “Do you have one more in you?”

My head swam as I tried to focus on my glass. “I said I wanted to blackout. The room isn’t even spinning yet. Do your worst.”

“I like you.” He grinned, licked his hand, and sprinkled salt on it before passing it to me.

“Zekiel said you would, but that was before I helped get him killed.”

Cameron stared at me, and I felt Xavier go still. I didn’t wait for him, licking the salt from my hand and throwing back the shot.

“Are you ever going to stop feeling sorry for yourself?” Cameron asked.

“What?” The liquor stilled in my gut.

Xavier snickered and stood, towering over me. “You can’t shock us with things we already know. Samkiel told us everything. We know how Zekiel really died. You can’t push us away like you do everyone else.”

I turned and glared at him.

“We get it.” Cameron squeezed my shoulder. “You want to remind us who and what you are, but we never forgot, Didi.”

My brow lifted. “Didi?”

Cameron nodded and poured another shot, passing it to Xavier.

“Yeah, that’s your new nickname. Everyone gets one. Welcome to the family.”

Family.

A thousand and one images threatened to drown me at once at that word. A house with carved initials, a smile from someone I loved dearly, and a cavern of flames and stone that was more a prison than ever a home. Anger bubbled to the surface, replacing my desperate need to claim what they offered. It was hot, quick, and ready to defend my bruised and damaged heart. “I didn’t ask—”

Cameron shook his head and pressed his hand over my mouth, cutting off my words. He and Xavier gulped their drinks and placed their empty glasses down. Cameron stood, and they grabbed my arms, one on each side of me, leading me to the dance floor.

“Yes, yes, you don’t want it. We get it. Let’s go dance,” Cameron said, his body already moving to the beat.

I narrowed my gaze at him as Xavier laughed. It was the most I could do before I was swept off my feet and taken into the masses of bodies, all jumping and screaming with the music. Whatever retort I had died as Cameron placed me on my feet and twirled me toward him.

“This is fun.” He remarked, spinning me again. “You do remember what fun is?”

He didn’t give me time to answer before he spun me toward Xavier, who caught me grinning like a fool, and soon my face matched, forgetting my anger. Fun. That’s what I wanted, just for a little while. I could blame it on the alcohol, but tonight I would bury my suffering. Just one night.

I knew the members of The Hand were famous, but it still shocked me how people gathered around them, laughing with us all and asking to dance. Everyone wanted to speak to them or just ogle. On the plus side, the management didn’t allow any type of recording device in here. I would bet it was why they’d chosen this club. That, and we were being treated like royalty.

I DIDN'T REMEMBER WHEN IT HAPPENED OR HOW. MAYBE IT WAS THE drinks they had all but shoved my way. I remembered Cameron and Xavier swinging me between them, my feet touching nothing but air, and suddenly, I was laughing, truly laughing. Xavier's face lit up every time, and Cameron would tell another joke to keep me distracted. It worked. We danced, screamed, and sang a song I didn't know the lyrics to, but it was fun.

I was fine as long as I didn't stop, didn't think. Every time I did, I saw her ghost.

Cameron tipped a guy's head back, pouring clear liquid into his mouth. After him, he moved to the guy's girlfriend, and then so on, moving through the crowd. Xavier stopped next to me. He watched Cameron with an indulgent smile as if this were normal when they went out, but I sensed something else beneath his placid facade.

I wondered if they'd ever slept together. I knew celestials, like most, were fluid in their sexuality. The images I had seen in Samkiel's blooddreams told me that much, but it was different with Cameron and Xavier. Maybe they hadn't. Maybe what they had was like what was between Samkiel and me. And a part of me felt so damn guilty for still wanting him after—

My head split, a blinding pain making my teeth clench. I cradled my head in my hands, rubbing at my temples as the music faded. Light spilled from a hallway in a house so far out of reach. Wood bent, splinters falling to the floor as the walls bowed. The rows of chains wrapping around the door drew tight, and the locks clanked with every hit the door took, holding what was locked away inside. Flames crackled, and smoke rolled beneath the door, the beast demanding release with a defiant ear-splitting roar.

My body jolted to the side, a man throwing an apology at me before hurrying away through the crowd. Music flooded my subconscious and yanked me away.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

“You’re up, Didi!” Cameron shouted.

The world snapped back as I forced a smile, blinking away that damned house. Maybe that was it. Maybe the alcohol was burning off, and I needed to drown the voices. I walked over, no one noticing that my head had almost ruptured.

“Everything okay?” Cameron asked.

Maybe I hadn't hidden it as well as I'd thought. I nodded. "Fine."

His hand cradled my head as I opened my mouth and leaned back, trusting him to support me. The alcohol hit the back of my throat, this time definitely burning. I sat up and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, forgetting about my lipstick.

As soon as the fiery liquid pooled in my gut, I motioned that was it for me. My stomach churned, seeking another form of liquid.

Xavier appeared at my side again. Concern etched into his beautiful face. "Want to sit?" I realized that one of them had never been more than a few feet from me all night, and I didn't think it was because they were my jailors. Maybe it was the devil's tango talking, but it seemed they actually cared about me. They were protecting me.

I nodded, and he held out his hand. I glanced at it but didn't take it. Instead, I headed toward one of those large crescent lounge seats. He whistled at a couple trying to swallow each other's tongues. They broke apart, saw him, jumped up, and left.

"Everything alright?" Xavier asked, and I nodded again, lying through my teeth. I didn't want to tell him every blonde woman I saw that even resembled her made me pause and damn near run, thinking she was here and waiting for me to join her for a night of fun.

"What's taking so long for the council to decide to cut my head off or not?" I asked, flopping onto the soft couch. I leaned down, struggling to maintain my balance as the world spun, and unbuckled the straps of my heels. My feet whimpered in relief as I slipped the torturous contraptions off.

Xavier leaned back in his seat a second before Cameron jumped and landed on the opposite end of the couch with enough impact to jolt me. Xavier kept his eyes on me.

"What makes you say that?"

"What are we talking about?" Cameron interjected.

"Is this the part where we pretend I didn't kill people? Attack you or your friends? Attack Samkiel and Silver City? Or would you rather we continue to drink and dance like we're old friends?"

"I like pretending we're old friends," Cameron said, but I held Xavier's stare.

Maybe it was the alcohol or the splitting headache, but any filter I had was long gone.

“What is this, anyway? Take me out, get me drunk? What game are we playing? Trying to figure out my motives? I have none. My powers and strength are gone. I can’t incinerate anyone or squeeze the life from them. I’m harmless.”

“A viper with no venom is still a viper, Didi,” Cameron said, resting his elbows on his knees. His gaze was intent, all humor gone. “And you are anything but harmless. Why can’t you just enjoy a night out? Why ulterior motives?”

I shrugged. “Because everyone has them.”

Cameron whistled low under his breath as Xavier shook his head. “Maybe we just want to be your friend.”

“Doubtful,” I scoffed. “Why would any of you want a viper as a friend? Plus, I have learned my lesson in thinking friends are for me. Drake and Ethan—”

“I had a sister, too,” Xavier cut in. His tone was solemn and without humor, no laughs. Even the music seemed to dull.

Cameron went still and dipped his head. His gaze focused on the ground. These were the warriors I remembered. The ones I met on the remains of Rasheirim almost a year ago.

“You did?”

“Yeah. I lost her too. Before I joined The Hand, she and I were under Kryella’s rule as her guards. She wasn’t like the other gods. She and Unir were nicer.”

“Yeah, you’re lucky you never met the other ones,” Cameron said, glancing at Xavier. “Samkiel is benevolent compared to them. Trust me.”

Xavier nodded before going on. “Kryella sent my sister and I, along with several other celestials, on a retrieval mission. Warrgroggs had overrun the planet, and we were to clean them out. They have this huge slimy carcass and a massive gaping mouth full of nothing but needle-like teeth. They eat everything in sight.”

He paused as if the memory was too much, and I understood. Gods, did I understand. Cameron shuffled his feet as if he wanted to move closer and soothe the pain that suffused Xavier’s face.

“We found where they had been hiding and went down to eradicate them, but there were too many. They had been breeding for too long. We tried to escape, but there were too many, and we had to skirt and jump over holes and crevasses in the ground, slowing us down. She looked at me, and

I knew. She said, “See you on the other side, little brother.” It was something we said every battle, every fight, just in case, you know?”

Oh, I knew. It was the same as Gabby and I ending every conversation with ‘Remember that I love you’.

Xavier went on, making my chest clench. “That was the last thing she said to me before pushing me into a hole. I remember falling and hitting the ground. I remember hearing them coming and the brilliant flash of blue light when they ripped her apart. Then the awful silence came. I was hurt and alone in that dark place. The days I spent staring up, waiting for her to return, felt like years.”

“How did you get out?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Xavier half shrugged as if he hadn’t just revealed a wound on his soul. “Samkiel saved me. He found me down there when Kryella brought the rest of the gods. He wasn’t king at that time, still learning from Unir. The others wanted to evacuate the village. They thought we had all died, but he didn’t give up looking. He’s stubborn and never gives up, as I am sure you have discovered. He saved me, and as soon as he was ready for his own guard, I didn’t hesitate to offer. I’d follow him anywhere. We all would, and I think you would, too.”

Xavier looked at me, and I immediately looked away.

“Samkiel is also the only reason I haven’t cut your head off after making Xavier relive that with the dream eaters,” Cameron said it nonchalantly, but his eyes bore into mine.

I made Xavier relive that? Overwhelming guilt ripped through me, twisting my gut into knots. Xavier’s lips curved in a small grin, but he didn’t respond to Cameron’s declaration. I also didn’t take Cameron’s threat personally. He cared for Xavier. I didn’t blame him for being protective.

I shrugged and said to Cameron, “You could still do it. It wouldn’t kill me. Well, I mean, maybe it would now.”

“Please, after Samkiel—”

Xavier made a noise low in his throat but pretended to look away.

“After Samkiel what?”

Cameron folded his hands in front of himself. “Let’s just say Samkiel still believes you’re not too far gone.”

“He told the council that?”

“He tells the council a lot,” Cameron said, even as Xavier cut him a look.

“Well, he should stop.”

“Why?” It was Xavier’s turn to ask. “Do you believe you are too far gone?”

“What is this interrogation hour?” I scoffed. “Or are you two his wingmen now?”

Cameron snorted. “Let’s be honest. We both know he doesn’t need that. I know at least a dozen tightly wound council members who kill for a chance for him to bend them over one of those ivory desks.”

Whatever expression crossed my face, I was sure it matched the ire coursing through my veins. I knew if I had my fire, my hands would have sparked. I blamed the alcohol and not whatever festering emotions Samkiel had resurrected between us.

CAMERON SMIRKED AND SET HIS GLASS DOWN. “YOU REALLY ARE A jealous thing. Anyway, I prefer staying alive, so you don’t have to worry about me maiming you in Xavier’s honor.” He clapped his hands and stood up. “Okay, I am getting us more drinks. I’ll be right back.”

We watched as Cameron disappeared into the small crowd near the bar, and then Xavier smiled at me as if waiting. I rolled my eyes and sat back, pulling my feet up onto the couch. “Look, I get it. You lost someone too. Congrats, we’re in the same club. You want to bond? Cool. That’s fine, but your sister died nobly, protecting you. Mine was ripped from me because I _____”

A lock rattled.

The club melted away, the council walls forming, and him—always him.

I wished I could protect him, keep him safe, and help him.

“Regardless of what happens or what you decide, I will stand by your side. I will fight this fight with you. You will not be alone, and I will do all I can to keep you safe.”

The words rushed from beneath the locked door. They banged viscously through my subconscious, and that damned headache returned tenfold. I closed my eyes tightly and pushed, shoving away the memory and all the emotions the words brought with them, once again shutting it behind heavy locks and thick chains.

My eyes shot open. The fun, the music, and the effects of the alcohol were all washed away.

A flicker of emotion passed Xavier's face as if he'd won some prize.
"Because you what?"

"Look, if you want an apology, I can't give you one. I've done terrible things for my sister. I regret nothing, and I would do it again. Every. Single. Part."

I half expected him to yell and curse me, and the smile creeping across his face surprised me.

"I don't want an apology. I only told you because I want you to stay close to the ones who feel like sunshine, Dianna."

His gaze turned to Cameron, who was currently making friends with every person who spoke to him.

Sunshine.

Like Samkiel.

Lights to lead us out of the most heinous darkness—that was what Cameron was to him and what Samkiel was to me. Sunshine.

I swiped my shoes off the floor and slipped them back on my aching feet. "I have to pee. Where is the bathroom?"

Xavier stood, and Cameron appeared at his side. I heard Xavier tell him where I was going as I turned away and headed down the steps. The crowd on the first floor writhed and bounced to the music. I wove through, knowing that Xavier and Cameron followed me by the commotion left in our wake. The glowing signs led me to a dimly lit hall. I paused at the door to let a few women lost in conversation exit before slipping inside. Just before the door closed, I looked back and saw Xavier and Cameron settling against the wall.

The women inside laughed and chatted, one girl fixing her makeup, her friend sitting on the edge of the long sink. I ignored them and slipped into an unoccupied stall. Tears clogged my throat, and my eyes burned. Emotions overwhelmed me, and I had no spark or flame to incinerate them, no blood to drown them out. I covered my eyes with my hands and leaned against the cold stone of the wall.

What was I doing here, laughing and having fun? I didn't want this.

Remember that I love you

I didn't want to be here.

My head pounded.

I didn't want to pretend the world was fine when it wasn't.

My hands gripped my head, fingers pressing hard, trying to stop the growing ache.

You won't get another chance.

My fist shot out, hitting the metal door so hard it dented. A blistering pain shot from my knuckles and ricocheted into my wrist. I yanked my hand back, looking at the broken skin. Blood dripped between my fingers, the cuts not mending. They were damaged and split wide open, like the rest of me. Maybe this was what I looked like on the inside—cut open and bleeding.

“What’s her issue?” I heard the other girls snicker and whisper before their shoes clicked across the floor, and they hurried out.

I left the stall, examining my hand as I walked to the sink. I turned the water on and hissed when the cold hit my knuckles, my entire hand throbbing. Glancing up at my reflection, I froze, my eyes meeting those of someone I had not seen in ages.

“Hello, Dianna.”

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I placed my hands on the edge of the sink and stared at her in the mirror.
“Long time no see.”

She bared her teeth in a smile and folded her arms. “I heard you don’t have your powers anymore. That must suck.”

“You know, I thought I saw you out there.” I stood a bit straighter. “A flicker of strawberry blonde hair. I thought I was just insane, but then I smelled that overpriced perfume. Even without my powers, you reek.”

She snarled and lunged. My head hit the sink hard enough that I saw stars. She tightened her grip on my hair, yanking my head up, her canines bared as she hissed in my face.

“You killed him. You killed them all.”

She tossed me, my back hitting the nearest wall and knocking the breath out of me. I slid to the floor, feeling warm liquid pour from my scalp and down my face.

Seraphine stood before me, claws out and ready to rip me to shreds. Golden blonde curls fell over her shoulders and down her back—Drake’s fated lover.

“You have to be more specific. I’ve killed a lot of people.”

She snarled and charged. I guess I could have moved, ducked between her legs as she advanced, but then what? Fight the several vampires that stood around the bathroom? I’d never make it. I had no powers. Then there was the darker part of me that didn’t want to fight. I could just let it all end here.

Seraphine grabbed me by the throat and lifted me off my feet.

“How could you?”

Her fist connected with my jaw hard enough that my teeth punctured the inside of my cheek.

“It was pretty easy, really,” I said as blood filled my mouth. I smiled through the pain. “Would you like me to draw you a picture?”

The next punch split my lip, and the third made the world spin.

I wrapped my hand around her wrist, spitting the blood that pooled in my mouth onto the floor. “Is that it? All you have for your dead ex-lover is a few measly punches? Gods, Seraphine, how basic are you? Disembowel me, at least.”

She tossed me into the large mirror, and it shattered. I fell to the floor, glass raining down around me. I groaned and rolled over. Seraphine reached down and yanked me to my feet by my blood-soaked hair.

“Hair pulling Seraphine? Are you trying to flirt with me?”

Another toss, and I groaned as I slid to a stop near the feet of one of her guards. He stared down at me but made no move to stop me as I struggled to get to my feet. Seraphine’s foot connected with my gut, lifting me off the floor with the force of the kick.

I rolled over, my laugh more a gurgled wheeze. “Fuck. You’re a joke.”

“What?” she demanded, standing over me.

“What is this? Defending him after he’s already dead? A little late, don’t you think?” The words hit her just like they hit me, all things I had said to myself over and over. “They knew the price, just like everyone else. They knew what would happen if they touched her.”

Her face crumpled, and she shrieked. She was on me once more, dragging me up by my shirt. I glared at her even as I fought against her grip.

“He loved you.”

“Love?” I let out a bitter, broken laugh. “No, he didn’t. You wouldn’t sell out someone’s last living family member if you loved them. You wouldn’t lie to them, hurt them, and betray them as he did. That’s not love.”

I brought my knee up hard into her groin. She yelped, and her hold on me eased enough that I could rear back and headbutt her. That was another mistake on my part. We both stumbled back, and I wiped the blood from my face.

“Why do you even care?” I stumbled back, my vision blurring. Yellow eyes glowed around the room as her clan watched and waited. They

wouldn't move unless their queen said so, and she wouldn't. She always loved to finish the kill.

"Because *I* loved him." Grief flickered in her eyes, her mortality showing for a brief second. Drake had loved her enough to change her. A forever bond she broke, not me. "You speak of sacrifices but know nothing of them. I married into that coven to save Drake and Ethan. It didn't mean I didn't care or love him still."

"Listen," I wiped at the blood dripping down my face, "I really don't care."

Her eyes swam with unshed tears as she circled me. "Drake was the reason my heart beat, why I stayed. Now he is gone forever because of *you*."

"That sounds really romantic, and again, I don't care."

"You wouldn't because the vicious and vile Dianna loves *nothing*. You used your sister as a shield to hide all the terrible things you enjoyed over the centuries. As soon as she died, the real *you* came out." Seraphine sneered, fangs glistening. "You may have lost your sister, but how many have you taken from others? How many families have you separated, lovers you have killed? You may hate Kaden, but you are just like him."

The words were brutal but the absolute truth.

"I agree."

Seraphine's head snapped back in shock. She must have thought that I would wilt. Obviously, she didn't know me at all because it only strengthened my resolve.

"Although I think I'm worse because I enjoyed it when I killed Ethan and his wife and burned that mansion to cinders. I felt nothing but satisfaction when I ripped Drake to pieces and destroyed everything they loved and cared for."

A snarl erupted from her throat. I prepared for the feel of her fangs ripping into my throat, wondering how bad it would hurt. What would it feel like to die? Would I see Gabby again before they dragged me to Iassulyn? But the attack never came.

Seraphine stopped mid-step, less than a fraction away from me. Her eyes glazed over, and her mouth went slack. My gaze dropped to the silver blade sticking out of her chest. She whimpered as realization clicked, and fire raced through her body, leaving nothing behind but ash.

Blazing silver eyes stared at me through the cloud that had once been Seraphine. I never cowered from Samkiel, but right now, every story of the world-ending warrior king came rushing back. He stepped forward, and I winced in pain as I took one back. I opened my mouth to say something but closed it again when Samkiel raised his hands. His palms radiated with the silver glow of his power as he tenderly cupped my aching head. I felt my skin knit, a small hiss leaving me at the burn of healing. He scanned me from head to toe, checking for any life-threatening injuries. Once assured I would live, he leaned down and lifted me into his arms without saying a word.

I gasped and gripped his shoulders, trying to pull myself off his arm. He froze, his burning gaze meeting mine. “My back. It has glass in it.”

Samkiel adjusted me in his arms, and I noticed the gray ash painting the entire room. Every vampire that had come with Seraphine now coated the walls.

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FIFTY-EIGHT

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DIANNA



We landed on the stone pavilion. The small jolt had me groaning, and my grip tightened on Samkiel's shoulder. He carried me with my shoes dangling from his fingertips near my thighs. Cameron followed a few paces behind us, Xavier at his side. No one had said anything. Not when Samkiel carried me out of the bathroom, not when we walked through the club lit by the lights from the celestials that had arrived with Samkiel, and not a single word as we returned to the remains of Rashearim.

I knew Samkiel was mad, and I suspected the others were unhappy with me, too. Samkiel always spoke when upset, and seeing him so still and quiet set my nerves on edge.

We passed through the courtyard and kitchen before entering the living room. Samkiel spun with me in his arms, startling Cameron and Xavier.

"Stay here." The two words, simply clipped and laden with the promise of *I'm not through with you*.

They nodded, the humor from earlier gone, their posture straight and guarded. Soldiers, that's what they were, and their commander just gave them an order. I clung to Samkiel as he spun with me in his arms and carried me upstairs. He didn't speak to me even once we entered the bedroom, and he remained silent as he sat me down on the edge of the bed.

He placed his hands on his hips, closed his eyes, and blew out a long breath as if trying to compose himself. I held myself stiffly, my body aching, fatigue eating at me, but I forced myself to focus on him. My blood streaked his white and gold council garb, and he held himself as if struggling to maintain control of himself. He took another shuddering

breath before opening his eyes. The silver had receded to a shimmering ring around his gray irises.

He spun to leave the room, and I jumped to my feet. My body protested, and I winced, swaying a bit. He turned and pointed at me.

“Stay.”

“Is that an order?” I asked, but my tone had lost its usual sass.

“Dianna.” It was a warning. He said it as calmly as possible, but I saw the fury of emotion behind his eyes.

A storm made flesh is what I’d called him, and right now, I felt the pressure of it radiate through the castle.

Deciding not to push him any further right now, I nodded. With one more turbulent glare in my direction, he turned and left the room. I stared at the doorway, too tired to even care that he’d ordered me around like a mangy mutt. I eased myself back onto the bed and took a slow, shuddering breath. My hands trembled, and I looked down at them, covered in blood and ashes—Seraphine’s ashes.

I married into that coven to save Drake and Ethan. Her words chased each other in my head.

She and I were not all that different. We were both prepared to give up everything for the ones we loved. All that time, Drake thought she’d left him, abandoned him because she didn’t love him. He had been so wrong. Seraphine had loved him beyond reason. It would have shocked Drake to learn that the woman he loved more than anything wanted to fight me to the death to avenge him. Maybe they would find each other in the afterlife.

“This is not a game or any other childish endeavors you two wish to partake in! You had strict orders to watch and protect her! Instead, you decide to drag her to Onuna!” Samkiel bellowed, thunder cracking in the distance.

I was on my feet in a second, not caring that he’d told me to stay or that my back and body screamed in pain with the movement.

“Look how easy it was to be ambushed by simple *vampires*.” I had never heard Samkiel raise his voice before, never like this. “He could have taken her. Do you understand that?”

“We wouldn’t have let that happen,” Cameron said.

“Just as you did not let this happen, correct? All it would have taken was a single portal, and she would have been gone! I would never see her again.”

I stopped. A foreign warmth filled my chest and made my throat go tight.

“I’m sorry,” Cameron said, his voice subdued.

“Me too,” Xavier agreed, regret dripping from his tone.

No. They shouldn’t apologize. I pushed through the door and limped down the stairs, clutching at the banister.

“Don’t be mean to them. It’s not their fault.”

Every head turned toward me. Cameron and Xavier looked at me with identical expressions of shock. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a little surprised, too. Why was I standing up for them?

Samkiel glared at me, and Cameron and Xavier looked between the two of us, seemingly stunned that my words had stopped him.

“Are you defending them?” Samkiel gritted out from between clenched teeth.

I shrugged. “It’s my fault. It was my idea. I antagonized Cameron. I just wanted out of here for a little while. The place we went to is usually less crowded, and since you opened the world again, no one would want to screw it up. There weren’t even cameras. So just drop it.”

It was a lie, but Samkiel didn’t need to know that.

Cameron and Xavier stared at me, an emotion I didn’t recognize flashing in their eyes.

“Your idea?” Samkiel asked, rubbing his hand across the growing stubble on his jaw.

“Yes. You know me and how convincing I can be. They didn’t stand a chance.” My eyes darted toward Cameron and Xavier, willing them not to say anything. Respect grew in their eyes, but they remained silent.

Samkiel nodded, still furious. “Regardless. They should—”

“It’s over now. Let it go.” Cameron’s brows rose, but I went on. “I don’t see the point of me being stuck here. Either drop it or take me to the council yourself. A prison is a prison, no matter how beautiful, Samkiel.”

The room got deathly quiet, but I meant every word.

Samkiel remained focused on me but said to Cameron and Xavier. “Leave. Make sure the council knows there was a vampire attack but that it’s handled. I don’t trust a no-technology policy. Make sure there is no footage out there that contains images of Dianna or either of you. I don’t want any word of this reaching the council. Understood?”

They nodded before turning on their heels and leaving Samkiel and me alone.

“Save the lecture, please. I need to get naked so you can dig the glass shards out of my back.”

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FIFTY-NINE

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CAMERON



Xavier and I landed outside the council hall and walked up the main staircase to the second floor.

“It could have been worse,” Xavier said, echoing my thoughts.

I shoved my hands further into my pockets. “Oh yes, let’s allow her to get beat up some more while we pretend a whole clan of vampires didn’t sneak by us.”

“He said it was supposed to work.” Xavier shrugged. “We have to help as much as we can.”

I stopped at the top of the stairs, one hand gripping the thick cream-colored banister. The halls were empty. It was well past sunset, and the moon hung high in the sky.

“I know. It’s just that it feels different. Don’t you feel it? Like we’re waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Xavier chuckled, folding his arms. “You have been hanging out with Logan too much. You have picked up some interesting expressions from Onuna.”

“Maybe, but am I wrong? You feel it, too, right?”

Xavier picked at the side of his lip and nodded. “Yes.”

I pushed off the banister. “See, I’m not crazy.”

“Hey, I never said that.”

I lunged, wrapping my arm around his neck and bending him forward. Xavier’s laugh echoed off the walls. It would always be my favorite sound. I grinned as he tried and failed several times to make me release him.

“You still suck at this,” I joked.

He twisted, trying to flip me off him, and grunted, “Or you just go for the low blow.”

He was right. I knew his left side was weaker, but he also just sucked at grappling. Give him those circular twin death blades, though, and he was unstoppable.

“Is it done? Did it work?”

Roccurem’s voice came out of nowhere, startling us both. We broke apart, and Xavier coughed and straightened the front of his shirt as I took a step back.

“Gods above, Roccurem, a bell, wear it,” I snapped, my heart racing. I blamed it on the fate that appeared out of thin air and nothing else. Nothing more. “And I don’t know. We got our asses handed to us, and we left, so you tell me. You’re the fate.”

Roccurem only waited, his face blank.

“You also didn’t mention an entire vampire coven showing up,” Xavier said, folding his arms over his.

“It was necessary.”

Xavier scoffed. “Yeah, necessary. As in, we’re probably dead when Samkiel returns.”

“We wouldn’t have let it go so far, but someone,” I glared at Roccurem, “insisted.”

Roccurem’s six opaque eyes opened, and he gazed into the distance. “It is a delicate task to heal a heart so damaged and broken. I am afraid that even with all of Samkiel’s powers, Kaden may have succeeded quite thoroughly in his plan to tear them apart. It is still not enough. I will have to intervene a little further.”

“Intervene further?” I asked. “What have you already done?”

Roccurem disappeared in a cloud of dust and stars without answering my question.

I ran a hand through my hair. “What does that even mean?”

Xavier shook his head, staring at where Roccurem had stood. “I don’t know. Fates were always tricky. I think it’s cool we even get to see him up close.”

My lips quirked. “Yeah, I just don’t remember the fates being creepy as shit in all the stories.”

Xavier sighed. “It went too far, didn’t it?” He kicked at the flooring, scraping the toe of his shoe along the stone. A nervous tic he has had since

the day I met him.

“You’re worried about her?”

“Yeah. I hope she’s okay. I kind of like her. She’s fun.”

“Yeah, me too. Do you think Samkiel will hate us?” I asked.

Xavier shrugged. “Who’s to say? Roccurem makes it seem like it is a matter of life or death that they are together, but as you said, I have this weird feeling.”

I nodded. I knew all too well. My senses had been in overdrive as if something was coming for us, but I couldn’t pinpoint what exactly.

“I feel like I’m being edged.”

“What?” Xavier snorted.

“I feel like we are all on the cusp of something, waiting to explode, only it’s not coming.”

Xavier shook his head. “Of course, that would be your way of wording it.”

Xavier’s pocket buzzed, startling us both. He checked his phone and smiled before tucking it away.

“I must go, but I will see you in the morning unless Samkiel decides to kill us tonight.”

I knew who had called and where he was going. The knowledge hit my stomach like acid.

“Yeah.” I forced a smile. “See you then.”

Then he was gone, his bright blue light disappearing, leaving me alone in the hall.

I tucked my hands in my pockets and headed toward the sleeping corridor, trying to ignore the demons taunting me with images of where Xavier was. I stopped and swallowed hard. The idea of lying in bed alone with my thoughts made my stomach turn. Maybe I would go reorganize Elianna’s paperwork backward. At least, that would bring me some joy.

In a pop of light, I was two floors up. I ignored the scenes of battles and famous warriors carved into the walls, striding toward Elianna’s office. The heavy door swung open smoothly, and I stepped inside. Elianna’s head was lowered, her hand supporting her forehead as she wrote.

“Of course, you’d be in here,” I said with a sigh.

Elianna’s head popped up, and she quickly slid another page over what she had been working on. Her office screamed ‘I need attention’ with the gold and cream stone floor, the oversized desk, and the floor-to-ceiling

bookshelves behind her. She had an assortment of large and small plants in intricate pots. Then there was that gaudy mirror in the corner of the room, a testimony to the vanity of the red-headed counselor.

“What are you doing?” She raised her hand. “Actually, don’t answer that. You stink of mortal liquor.”

I grinned and kicked the door closed behind me.

“It’s called having a life, Elli. You should look into it.”

“Don’t call me that.” She sneered at me, tucking a strand of red hair behind her ear and returning to her notes.

“Why? You like it.”

She glared at me. “No, I don’t.”

“What are you doing up so late, anyway? Everyone you want to bully is asleep,” I said, tugging at a long green arrangement of vines spilling from a pot.

“Go away.”

I ignored her and moved closer, leaning over her desk to see what she was writing. She caught my eye and slammed a hand down over the papers, moving them closer to her.

I lifted a brow and grinned. “I’m bored.”

She glared at me from under thick eyelashes. “And what does that have to do with me?”

“Do you want to make me less bored?”

A slight flush bloomed on her ivory cheeks. “No,” she said, standing up and glancing toward the door.

“I already shut—”

Elianna’s mouth slammed against mine. I caught her small form and lifted her, pressing her flush against me. Her lips parted on a gasp, and my tongue claimed her mouth. I tangled my fingers into her silky hair and tipped her head, holding her at the perfect angle to deepen the kiss. Her hands slid beneath my shirt, roaming over my skin and teasing at the waistband of my pants. I shivered and bit her lower lip when she ripped the buttons open and slipped her hand inside. She pulled my cock out with practiced ease, her grip rough as she stroked me, forcing a groan from my throat. Her lips left mine, her breath hot as she kissed down the column of my throat. I tipped my head back, giving her access. Her hands pumped faster, nipping and biting at my chest and lower.

“Fuck, Elli!” I hissed as her mouth wrapped around my cock. Her tongue scraped over the head and slid lower, sliding over the piercing along the underside. I gripped the side of her desk with one hand, the other cupping her head. Every pull, every tug, sent wave after wave of pleasure through my body. Elianna may be a self-righteous bitch, but she could suck cock like a goddess when she wanted to.

My stomach clenched, and I fisted her hair as she damn near swallowed me whole. She sucked, her cheeks hollowing out as she moaned, her soft, lush lips stretched tight around my shaft. Her eyes flicked up as I forced my cock in further, hitting the back of her throat. I looked down at her, even as my mind whispered and dreamed of another. The thought alone almost had me spilling down her throat. She made a soft noise of protest as I pulled back, my cock leaving her mouth with a pop.

I grabbed her by the waist and spun, slamming her onto the desk.

I gripped her knees, pushing her legs wide. The edge of her council robes parted, revealing her pale, toned thighs. I pulled her ass to the edge of the desk and sank to my knees.

“It’s so much easier when you wear the robes,” I murmured, running a single finger up and down her center, teasing her.

“Be quiet.” She groaned.

“Naughty, counselor, not wearing anything underneath your robes. Tsk, tsk.”

Her cheeks turned pink as she glared down at me. “I hate you.”

I chuckled and covered her sex with my mouth. I laid my tongue flat against her slit and lapped up to her clit in one long, slow stroke before slipping a single finger into her. Her back arched, and she writhed as I licked and sucked at the small sensitive bundle of nerves again before adding another finger. She gasped and jerked, pulling her knees higher and grabbing her breast. Her eyes closed so tight her brows almost connected as she chased her pleasure. I wondered who she imagined every time we indulged in our little trysts like this. Both of us knew we only used the other.

My tongue lapped at her clit, flicking the way she liked. Elianna’s hands clasped my hair, pulling me against her. I groaned at the taste of her pleasure. She may be a calculating bitch, but her pussy was damn near divine.

“Oh, my—” She gasped and ripped at my hair. “Yes!”

I yanked my face from between her legs and ripped the fabric from her breasts. My mouth clamped on one tight nipple, sucking and biting before releasing it, leaving it a darker shade of pink as my fingers continued to pump inside her. She moaned as I reclaimed her mouth, clawing at my shoulders.

I pulled away long enough to unfasten and push my pants down a bit more. I gripped my cock, placing it where my fingers had been mere seconds ago, and thrust deep. Elianna screamed, and her eyes went wide. Her grip on my shirt tightened, and I heard the fabric rip.

“This means nothing,” she said on a low moan.

“Obviously.”

I groaned as she lifted her hips, meeting my second thrust and allowing my cock to sink deeper. Her pussy gripped me so hard I nipped at her neck and chin. My hand cupping her jaw painfully tight, I thrust forward. The desk, even embedded into the floor, groaned from the force.

Don’t think about him.

Don’t think about him.

Don’t think about him.

He’s probably doing the same exact thing.

Just forget.

She clawed at my arms and shoulders. Papers flew, and the desk creaked as I fucked her into it.

“I hate you,” she gasped and moaned, squeezing around me. “But you feel so good.”

“Perfect,” I groaned and nodded. I stood up and yanked her closer, driving harder into her. “Now, stop running.”

Elianna reared up, grabbing my shoulders, pissed at my accusation. She bounced even harder. We found a rhythm that had her digging her nails into my shoulders. I slipped a hand between us and thumbed her clit, her pussy rippling around my cock in response. Her head lulled back as I continued to circle the small bundle of nerves until she clenched so hard around me that she almost broke me in half. The tingle started at the base of my spine seconds before I spilled inside her, my cock pulsing.

We stayed like that for a moment, catching our breaths. That’s the way it was with us, only an excuse to forget the damn world, and that was it. A release for both of us, even when I thought about someone I had no business thinking of.

“You ruined my desk,” she breathed against my lips. And I definitely had.

“Not the first time.”

She panted and pulled back to look at me. “Do you want to come upstairs with me tonight?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Come on. I’m stressed, and I need more,” Elianna practically purred, running her hands down my arms and back. “I’ll do that thing you like.”

That got my attention, but not the way she wanted. “Stressed about what?”

She sighed, her beautiful eyes narrowing. “Yes or no, Cameron. It’s not like you have anyone waiting on you, anyway.”

I didn’t know if she meant that for her or me by her tone. I should tell her where she could shove her comment and leave her to clean up her office, but a part of me didn’t want to be alone tonight.

She caught my hesitation and smiled.

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SIXTY

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DIANNA



“Cameron and I have *shared* before.”

I glanced at Samkiel over my bare shoulder. “Shared? I thought Imogen was the only one in The Hand you had slept with.”

He tugged another shard of glass from my back, and I couldn’t keep from wincing. Holy gods, how many pieces did I have stuck in me?

“She is. Cameron and I have never been together, but I allowed my lovers to do whatever and whoever they wished.”

A small smile curved my lips. “Oh, so all the yelling downstairs was because you were jealous and not at all about my safety?”

“Perhaps both.” Samkiel’s hands stilled on my back.

“Both?”

“I do not wish him to get comfortable or have the wrong idea where you are concerned.”

“And what if he is what I want?” I asked, turning a bit to look at him.

Anger, jealousy, and another emotion I couldn’t read crossed his features, the silver pooling at the edge of his irises. The air crackled off my comment alone, just the thought enough to set him off.

“Do you?” His voice rumbled like thunder. So mortals didn’t make him jealous, but Otherworld men did.

A wicked smile crossed my face. “No, I don’t want Cameron. I mostly wanted to see if that vein still pops up on your forehead. It does, by the way.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re not funny.”

“I think I’m hilarious. Now calm down before you destroy my pretty castle. And besides, even the dead could see Cameron is in love with

Xavier.”

Samkiel grunted in agreement. It seemed everyone knew except Cameron and Xavier. “Turn back around, Dianna.”

“Touchy, touchy.” I smirked but turned around, not wanting to push him further. He may still be irritated, but the room had stopped shaking, which was a plus.

Silence fell again. The only sounds were my hisses of pain and glass hitting the ceramic bowl. I sat still on a low ottoman in the massive bathroom, Samkiel behind me. My hands cupped my breasts, holding a thin robe against my torso.

I sighed. “Also, this doesn’t count as me disrobing in front of you again.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’m just saying I’m not trying to tease you, as you put it.”

“I said it’s fine, Dianna.” The way he said my name wasn’t how he normally said it. No, this sounded exasperated, rough, and abrasive.

“Why are you so mad, anyway?” I half turned again to look at him over my shoulder.

Samkiel glared at me. “Turn back around.”

I did.

“Look—”

“Don’t.” The last pieces of glass hit the bowl with enough force to make me nervous. “I don’t wish to hear your excuses for any of it.”

Samkiel never got mad, at least not with me, and I had tried to kill him multiple times. Silver light gleamed across my shoulders, illuminating the bathroom. Even without his hand touching me, I could feel him. A shiver ran up my bruised spine.

Samkiel noticed and paused. He noticed everything when it came to me, attuned to my every breath.

“I’m fine,” I said, shaking my head and easing back into my robe.

He reached out and stopped me, the warmth of his power washing over my back. The wounds tingled and itched as the skin mended.

The ottoman creaked as he stood. I pulled on the robe and tied it closed. He wouldn’t look at me, although my eyes stared a hole through him. He washed the blood off his hands, furiously scrubbing at his cuticles and nails. Vampire dust and blood had turned his council garbs a splotchy gray.

“Do they make dry cleaners for godly clothes?”

His hands slammed against the stone vanity so hard it cracked. “Is this humorous to you? Is everything a joke?”

“You left me for days, and you’re mad I wanted to go out?” I demanded, his anger finally tripping my own temper.

He lifted his head, staring at me through the mirror, his storm-gray eyes filled with rage. “You made it abundantly clear you did not wish for me to be around, Dianna. Again.”

I opened my mouth to respond but snapped it shut when I realized I had no words. Samkiel was right. I had been beyond mean.

Samkiel grabbed a towel off the shelf and turned toward me. “Your life means nothing to you. I get it. You have told me and shown me often enough. Fine, but what about the people it does matter to? What about those that do care about you? Have you thought of that? Are you that damned selfish you think of no one else now?”

My mouth fell open. “How dare you?”

“How dare I? How dare you! You are not innocent in this. Do not pretend that my feelings were ever one-sided. You were there with me every step of the way through Onuna and every godsdamn place you dragged me. What about me? You may be replaceable to Kaden and his ilk, but you are not to me.”

I had been prepared to lash out, but when he spoke to me like that, his voice echoing with such raw pain, it extinguished any desire I had to fight. My heart thudded in my chest. Whether I wanted to admit it, his words soothed the bruised, aching part of me. I wrapped my arms around my chest.

“Look,” my voice was barely a whisper, “it wasn’t like before. I didn’t go there to get killed, okay?”

“Then what were you doing?”

I tossed my hands up in defeat. “I was just tired of staying in this stupid palace waiting for you to come back.”

His face softened slightly as if my words tempered the storm raging beneath his surface. “You told me to stay away unless you called. You did not. I abided by your wishes.”

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. “I know. I just... Look, I didn’t know she was there or was even going to show up. I just wanted to have fun. Or attempt to at least.”

His eyes flashed as if me stating that kindled some spark of hope in him.

“I understand.” He released a breath, his hands flexing across the marble sink. “Regardless, you know better than to go to Onuna alone.”

“I wasn’t alone.”

His eyes met mine. “If you possess a fraction of his power, Cameron and Xavier, while skilled, are not a fair match for Kaden.”

I only nodded and lowered my head, knowing he was right. I had been foolish and careless, not only with my life but with Cameron’s and Xavier’s, as well. Samkiel ran a hand over his face, blowing out a long breath.

The bathroom fell silent, leaving us glaring at one another, but the hunger and raw need I saw reflected in his eyes forced the words from my lips. Words I’d only meant when I’d said them to Gabby.

“I’m sorry.”

Surprise flashed in his eyes, the anger slowly dissipating. I hugged the thin robe closer to myself.

“Was that my lecture?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

A single brow rose. “Do you need to be lectured?”

“You’re the one who is angry.”

He stared at me, looking too hard, too deep, too long. My heart, the jaded and cracked thing it was, fluttered with hope. A part of me already knew he saw the reality of me, but it was finally sinking in that his feelings were unwavering and true.

“It was not anger that I felt. It was fear.”

“Fear?”

“Yes, fear because when I learned of where you were and what was happening, I realized there is no limit to what I am willing to do for you. The old gods spoke of how powerful we all are and how our emotions can override the critical part of our brains. We trained religiously to ensure the realms, the people, come before all else. We cannot be selfish, but I fear that with you, it is not something I can control. When Vincent told me what was happening, I knew I would rip Onuna to pieces for you. If Kaden had taken you, I would turn mountains to sand to find you. I’ve reduced worlds to desolate wastes before, and I’d do it again for you.” He said it so calmly I didn’t think he knew what he was saying. “I thought he had tried to take you again, and I wasn’t there. I am not used to that kind of fear, Dianna.”

My mind flashed to our conversation on that stone bridge. I asked him then if he feared me, and his response was simple. No. Because he wasn’t

afraid of me, only afraid of losing me. Regret filled me as I realized what images must have terrorized him too. Back in that damn jungle when he'd had to carry me, my body ripped to pieces and covered in my blood. The bloody mess he'd had to heal, unable to ease the pain of it. That was why he was so mad. After everything I'd seen of Samkiel, it seemed impossible he would fear anything, but if Samkiel was anything, he was always honest, even brutally so, if he had to be. So here he was again, laying his heart open and bare, waiting for me to claim it and heal it, but I feared all I would do was damage it more, breaking him like I was broken. Maybe him saying he was scared and me saying sorry were two truths we both needed to admit.

"That's also not very heroic, placing me above all else." I swallowed back the rising emotions that threatened to drown me.

"It is not." He glanced toward me and changed the subject, recognizing my deflection. "I do have a question, which I wish answered honestly."

"What?"

"Why didn't you fight back more?"

"No powers, remember?" I responded dryly, glad the question had nothing to do with my feelings.

"I've seen you fight. I've taught you several ways to disarm men three times your size using no power at all. Try again."

My eyes narrowed into slits, and I glared at him but said nothing.

"You know what I think?" he asked.

"Probably something stupid."

A grin tugged at his lips. He pushed away from the counter and strode toward me, his powerful body moving with predatory grace. He knelt before me, and I scooted back, even as a part of me trilled in excitement. Damn traitorous body.

"I think you are powerful enough to turn your powers off." He lifted his hands, snapping his fingers. "Like a switch."

I avoided his gaze. "I'm not that strong."

"Dianna, all you have done since I met you is surprise me. So yes, I think that's exactly what you did. I don't think you did it consciously, but I think you don't want them anymore. You buried them in grief and pain and let a few vampires beat your ass because you think you deserve it."

Too close. Too much. Samkiel was always too close, and he always saw too much.

"And why would I do that?"

He lifted one hand and unbuttoned his council garbs, revealing his tanned chiseled chest. My mouth watered like a starved beast desperate to be fed. I wondered if Samkiel was the type of male to make a sound if I flicked my tongue across his nipple or grazed it with my teeth. My gums ached, fangs begging to spring forward and attach to his flesh, only none came.

“See this scar?”

He pointed to a small line beneath one of his abs, pulling me from my illicit thoughts. The mark was barely visible.

“Yes.”

“I got into a fight a long, long time ago, one amongst many, with a man who I didn’t know was, in your mortal terms, married at the time. He lost, of course, but I let him get a shot in because I felt guilty for my part in the whole situation.”

The jealousy that flared to life in my gut annoyed even me. Not only was Samkiel not mine, but this happened centuries ago.

“Let me guess. You slept with his girlfriend?”

“Husband, actually. I was not aware at the time.”

“Wait, so there is marriage in your world outside of the Mark of Dhihsin?”

“Yes, although it is not taken as seriously. Not all are lucky enough to have a mate, and sometimes mates die long before the two ever meet. It happens, so there are many other ways to bond and show commitment and affection.”

I nodded, and he buttoned his council garbs closed. It would have been unseemly for me to beg him not to bother, so I controlled myself and tried to focus on his words.

“The point of the story is, why do you punish yourself?”

I knew why. I’d tried to bury it, but my traitorous mind would not allow it. Like an overeager assistant, my brain shoved the image of Samkiel and me returning from Roccurem’s realm.

“It’s late, and I’m tired,” I said and shot to my feet, nearly toppling him over in my haste to retreat. I left the bathroom, leaving him kneeling on the floor. In my bedroom, I discarded my robe and pulled on a clean tank top before crawling into the massive bed. I made sure to face away from the photo of Gabby and me.

I heard him exit the bathroom, and his footsteps paused outside the room.

“Will you stay tonight?” I murmured from beneath the covers, waiting for his response with bated breath.

“If you wish for me too.”

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. “And you’ll come back tomorrow after whatever council meeting you have?”

There was a long pause, but I was too afraid to look and see if he was still there.

“Would you like me to?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

“Then I will.”

I heard his footsteps as he left. Knowing he was downstairs eased the gnawing, aching void in my chest, and I realized what was wrong with me. I was lonely. Lonelier than I had been in my entire life, and even though we fought and bickered, I didn’t feel so empty when he was around.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

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SAMKIEL



My armored boots pounded against the floor, and I pushed against the large doors. They swung open, revealing a room that held no chairs or tables, the only decoration several large runes engraved on the floor. The Hand stood waiting for me, all of them wearing the custom-made silver armor I had created for them centuries ago.

“You’re late. Sleep well?” Cameron asked with a suggestive grin.

I hadn’t. I’d tossed and turned the entire night. Regardless of how nice and comfortable they were, couches were not beds and did not promote a good night’s sleep. But I refused to be too far away from her, especially when she asked me to stay. At least below her, I could hear her heartbeat as she slept and knew when she woke. That gave me peace enough. I just wished I had thought about it when I redesigned this place. I would have put another room in this part of the palace.

The flat of my blade smacked against Cameron’s helmet, the metal against metal ringing like a bell. He jerked back, and Xavier laughed. “You deserved that.”

My eyes narrowed behind the visor of my silver helmet, and I pinned him with a hard stare. Xavier adjusted his posture, coming to attention and clasping his hands in front of himself. “I’ll shut up now.”

“You’re both lucky you aren’t on filing duty until the end of time. I can’t believe that you would dare to put her in danger by taking her back to Onuna. You will still be punished for it. I just have not thought of the perfect one. Yet,” I said, my tone ominous.

The room went silent, not even Vincent daring to speak up. Satisfied that I had made my point, I continued. “Logan.” I nodded at the largest

engraved rune on the floor, and he strode forward. His hands rose, tracing a pattern in the air like a conductor before a symphony, directing The Hand to the center of the room. Cerulean light shot up, spiraling toward the ceiling with a counterclockwise twist, forming a column around us. One minute we were on the remains of Rashearim, and the next, in a large, stifling, hot cavern. The light from the cerulean runes died as we landed, shrouding us in darkness. One by one, The Hand formed a ball of lit energy in their palms. Rough rocky walls loomed on each side, and a small ledge jutted overhead.

“This is where we entered Yejedin,” Logan said, pointing toward a smooth rock wall. I held my hand out, pushing power into the stone. A low humming rumble echoed through the cavern, and a silvery outline formed, pulsing with the remnants of a portal. It looked like a still healing scar, a thin veil setting it apart from this world and the next. That’s why she’d needed the map.

“I had hoped the residual energy would still be around.” Imogen stepped forward, Vincent at her side. “Sorry, it took so long to get the calculations right.”

“Do not apologize.” I looked up, trying to gauge how high the rift went. “You did exceptionally well.”

Those calculations were what we worked on during our meetings. We were trying to find a way to create a rift into Yejedin while at the same time not creating a vacuum that destroyed Onuna and all who lived upon it. It had helped that there was a witch downstairs craving forgiveness. Vincent had managed to convince Camilla to help. I did not ask why she’d listened to him, only caring that she had. I called a silver blade into my hand. Imogen opened the large journal she carried, and I glanced at the handwritten formulas. I had already memorized them, but I wanted to be sure.

“It is time for a simple lesson in what the mortals call physics.” Every eye turned toward me as I raised my hand over the spot where the energy still pulsed. “My father taught me several things during my teachings. Had I known the importance of the realms, I probably would have paid more attention. While the realms may be locked away by my life force, there are tiny areas outside of them that are not.” I lowered my hand and turned toward them. “My father made a pocket dimension for Roccurem to keep him safe, but they have existed long before my father was ever born.”

Cameron raised his hand, and I nodded. “If that’s the case, why haven’t we run into more of them?”

“Simple. Only the most powerful can create one or manipulate them. They are, in the simplest terms, a backdoor to all realms. My father learned how to manipulate some, but there are stories of creatures far older than he or I that had the ability. If that is the case, if that’s where this leads, it means that Kaden is not just an Ig’Morruthen but also a very ancient, very powerful threat.”

The room grew quiet as they looked behind me toward the rift.

“With all due respect.” Vincent seemed to shuffle on his feet before glancing at me. “Your father had a lot of enemies, my liege. This, while unnerving, does not surprise me.”

I nodded. “Nor I.”

Imogen was the next to speak, glancing at her journal scribbled with notes. “If what Camilla said is true, your blood would still be the key. If the runes we forged work, it will only open what has already been opened.”

“Well, that doesn’t make me feel any better,” Cameron said.

“You ready, boss?” Neverra asked.

I stepped in front of them and slid the knife across my hand. The wind howled through the cavern, and everyone shifted restlessly. I dipped my fingers into the blood pooling in my palm, and Imogen held the journal open for me as I drew the runes onto the smooth rock. The wall trembled as I completed the last symbol, small pebbles raining from above. The Hand stepped back, and I curled my fingers into a fist as my palm healed.

Call it pent-up anger, frustration, or sleep deprivation, but I was tired of waiting. I was tired of Kaden hiding. After everything he put Dianna through, how he had broken her, if he were here, I would bring his head back to Rasheirim on a spike for her as a gift.

A deep, hollow clang echoed through the cavern, and it began to shake. A swirling mass of flame opened before us. The silver chain bracelet on my wrist lit up as a three-pointed silver shield formed. The width protected the major points of my body, and I shifted to protect The Hand, wanting to take the brunt of anything that might come through.

When nothing but oppressive air rushed forward, I lowered the shield and raised my hand, signaling them to wait before stepping into the portal.

On the other side, jagged rocks fell hundreds of feet into the cavern, landing with a crack and thunk. Smoke billowed in every direction,

reminding me of Winngurd, the world of nothing but volcanoes. I stared at the pure and utter destruction. The stone buildings I could see were barely standing, with rubble and broken limbs littering the ground. The vast destroyed landscape stretched as far as the eye could see, all of it destroyed by a powerful Ig'Morruthen.

My Ig'Morruthen.

I waved The Hand forward and heard them step through the portal one by one.

“Ugh, it smells like sulfur,” Cameron said. The air was thick and hot. I walked to the edge of a monstrous cliff and beheld Yejedin.

“She didn’t hold back, did she? Onuna was lucky if she is capable of this. This is utter devastation,” Xavier whispered.

“Logan said—” Imogen started.

“But I never saw it, just heard,” Logan said, flanking me on my left. “Also, this wasn’t where we entered when we came.”

“I imagine when they opened the portal, they directed it right where it needed to be. We will have to search for the place you two entered.”

“This is going to be fun,” Cameron said jokingly, placing a hand on Xavier’s shoulder.



LOGAN AND I WALKED THROUGH THE MAIN HALL, SINGED ROCKS CRUNCHING beneath our boots. We found the large obsidian stronghold a few hours after we arrived. Dark clouds rolled across the sky, the atmosphere relentlessly oppressive and humid.

“I thought we would have seen some of Kaden’s beasts by now. There were so damn many,” Logan said, looking around warily. “Where did they go? Where did he go?”

“This realm is a disaster. I am not surprised no one is left after the carnage Dianna unleashed.”

“You should have seen her, Samkiel.” Logan glanced at me. “She moves like you. She told me she trained with you, and I saw it in action.”

“She spoke of me?”

Logan shrugged, smiling slightly. “More or less.”

I longed to ask for more details, but I could tell by the spark in Logan’s eyes I would pay for it with a lifetime of teasing.

“Roccurem and I have this theory that her powers are trying to return, but they’re just buried under so much pain. I understand because it’s how I felt for so long. Kaden fractured her into a million pieces, and I am afraid I may not be able to pick them all up.”

“The fact that you want to, that you’re trying, means everything. And it means everything to her, she just doesn’t know how to say it yet.” Logan held his light a tad higher. His gaze never stopped moving, searching the half-destroyed remains of Kaden’s stronghold.

I sighed. “I hope you are right. I can understand her grief and sorrow but nothing else. She is confusing at best. One minute she acts as if she cannot stand my presence. The next she seeks it.”

Logan made a rough noise in his throat. “Trust me. If anyone can reach her, you can.”

A brief laugh escaped me. “Maybe I could if she would stop trying to kill me or when she isn’t upset with me or if she would stop telling me she hates me.”

Logan shrugged. “Hey, Neverra has told me she hates me before, but it was for a very different reason. It is a position you will likely experience soon enough.”

“When has she....” My words trailed off when I caught sight of his grin. It was far too wide to be anything but a double entendre, and his meaning slowly registered. “You are about to be forbidden from spending time with Cameron. Actually, I am forbidding him from spending time with anyone. That should be enough punishment. It might actually kill him.”

His laugh cut through the dense air, a sound I had not heard in months. “Hey, I am just saying. Hate sex is a thing, you know? You guys could do what you and the Queen of Trugarum did when you couldn’t agree on that small territory.” He shrugged. “Get it out of your system.”

I stopped so suddenly that Logan spun, searching the shadows for threats, an ablaze weapon forming in his hands. “There is nothing in my system from Dianna that I’d wish to remove. The thought of just being a simple fuck to her makes me wish to get disemboweled repeatedly. That would hurt less.”

Logan held his hands up in mock surrender. “It was just a suggestion.”

“You, above all, know it is not like that with Dianna or me. Even when she is throwing her anger at me, I do not think I could fully have her and not wish for forever.” I paused, the truth washing over me. “Regardless, her feelings for me have changed. So this entire conversation is pointless.”

Logan scoffed, the sound somewhere between a snort and a laugh. “You’re kidding, right?” I stared at Logan blankly until he realized I didn’t understand what he meant and tried to clarify. “Joking. You can’t be serious.”

“Very serious, and I do not wish to speak about it further. We are in Yejedin. That is our focus.”

Logan shook his head but remained quiet and fell into step beside me as I turned and walked down the hall into what had been a large foyer. A rusted railing held back the ledge, keeping passersby from falling to their deaths.

“I don’t think we’ve been inside this one. It doesn’t resemble the last few. I don’t see any weapons here, and there is less of that strange machinery.”

“This may just be an entrance to some other part, not the stronghold itself.” I grabbed the rail and looked down at the smooth, rocky bottom. I jumped over, landing in a crouch. The ground shook as Logan landed behind me.

I summoned a ball of silver light, the orb dancing on my palm as I raised it.

“Yeah, we definitely haven’t been here,” Logan said. His palms lit with celestial energy, and he lifted them high.

A grunt was my only response as we headed further inside, silence falling between us again. Logan still seemed shut off. He was my best friend, and I had known him forever. I had assumed his spark would return once Neverra was back, and it had to a certain extent, but there was still something off.

This quiet was unnerving, and I wondered what waited in it. We reached the entrance to a cavern, and I raised my sword, the flat of the blade clanking against the armor over Logan’s chest, stopping him from entering. I could see the surprise in his eyes, even with the helmet covering almost all of his features.

“What’s troubling you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you, Logan. You have not been yourself, even since Neverra got back. What is it?”

“You know me so well.” Logan shook his head, attempting to step around me. “It’s not important. Not right now.”

My blade only pressed harder, making him take a step back. He sighed, flicking his finger across his ring to remove his helmet. I did the same. He held my gaze, rubbing a hand across his mouth as if he couldn’t find the words.

“Just say it, Logan. Whatever it is. Just tell me. If I can help you, I will,” I said, meaning every word. He had earned it, whatever it was, but more than that, I wanted him happy again.

He took a deep breath and finally blurted, “I want you to release us. Once Kaden is dead and this is done, I want out. I want Neverra out. I want a life with her, a real one, with a home and children. Something normal, or normal for us, at least. We’ve already talked about it. We can still work at the council, but we want out.”

His jaw clenched, but he held my gaze, and I could see everything he didn’t say. The fear and hopelessness he had felt when he’d lost her. He couldn’t go through that again.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Logan nearly croaked.

My brow lifted. “Were you expecting something else from me?”

“No. It’s just I know everything is terrible for you right now, and I didn’t want to add to your misery, but I have to think of Neverra. I almost lost her, Samkiel.”

My chest ached for him. I knew how distraught he’d been the last few months and how often he checked his hand, making sure the Mark of Dhihsin hadn’t disappeared as she had.

“I almost lost her, and I don’t want to miss out on anything with her again. I know you and Dianna are still fighting whatever it is between you two, but I also know some part of you understands.”

I forced a smile. “I understand, Logan. It’s a harsh reality that nothing lasts forever, not even us. My immortality is a curse. I was never meant to hold the realms together alone. So when this is done, just live, Logan. You both deserve it. You all do. I would never be upset. All I ever wanted was for all of you to be happy. When this is done, you and Neverra are free to leave. I will stop none of you who wish for a different life.”

Logan rushed forward, hugging me. He would have knocked the wind out of me if I hadn't been wearing armor. I clapped him on the back, refusing to think about him not being at my side, and stepped back. He clasped one armored hand on my shoulder before dropping it.

"You've always been better than the other gods. I think that's why they hated you."

I merely shrugged. "Hmm, that and several other reasons."

Logan chuckled, and we started down the small carved-out hallway. As we proceeded, I raised my hand, manifesting a single silver ball of energy. Logan fell back as the tunnel narrowed, protecting my back as always. As we approached the opening, I saw the flicker of flames and allowed my light to fade. Something waited for us, and the icy chill amongst the oppressive heat raised the hair on my arms. I remembered the runes I'd seen when we first entered this section and knew death lay ahead.

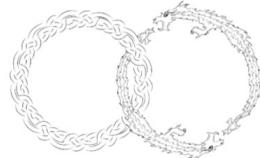
We emerged into the cavern, and I heard Logan's helmet slide into place as he drew his ablaze weapon. My blood ran cold when I saw the symbols carved into the walls. It wasn't a beast or monster in front of us. No, it was much worse. The light died in my hand as Logan stepped to my side, his head tipping back as he looked up and up and up.

Rows and rows of doors were carved within the cliff wall. Long grate bridges crisscrossed from wall to wall, spanning an open, empty pit. All of that registered, but the engraved runes above every door made me stop. Those weren't doors. They were cells.

"What is this?" Logan asked, spinning on the narrow ledge, taking in the enormity of this place.

I shook my head in disbelief.

"Yejedin is not just a pocket dimension, Logan. It's a prison." I pointed at the runes above the cells. "And those runes are meant to hold ancient, powerful beings."



I SENT ALL OF THEM BACK TO THE REMAINS OF RASHEARIM. HOURS PASSED before I returned to the council halls, but by the look of The Hand all sitting

around, it may have been longer than I thought.

The portal to Yejedin closed behind me, the cut on my palm sealing. Cameron shot to his feet, abandoning his seat beside Xavier and the bag of snacks between them.

“It’s about time. We were about to go in and get you.”

Xavier cocked his head, continuing to munch on his snacks. “No, we weren’t. We can’t open portals.”

Cameron glared at him as Imogen stepped forward. “Well? You’re not covered in guts or intestines, so I assume it’s empty? Which also scares me a little.”

I was unsure what they saw on my face, but Logan slowly rose to his feet and stood behind an armored Neverra. Vincent eyed me, his expression unreadable. “I need to show you all something. It has to stay between us. No one in the council can know. Understood?” My eyes pinned each of them, waiting for their nod of agreement.



“I CAN’T BELIEVE WHAT I’M SEEING,” XAVIER WHISPERED, LOOKING AT ALL the empty cells. Some were so vast they were the size of small realms. Large chains engraved with the same containment runes lay broken on the ground.

The others remained silent, taking in every inch. I had searched almost the entire place, preparing myself for what I might discover, but finding empty cells was far worse than the battle I’d expected.

I stopped, and they fanned out around me, standing beneath the jagged cliffs and open sky, in position to see what I needed them to see.

“So, Kaden was a prisoner here? If he and the other prisoners escaped, where are they? We haven’t seen any colossal beasts on Onuna,” Logan said, hovering close to Neverra.

“Because he didn’t escape recently, did he?” Vincent asked, his throat bobbing as he looked at what I’d brought them to.

“No, he did not. I should have thought of it sooner, but it was impossible. During the Gods War, the creatures seemed bent on destroying

everything. I thought it was retaliation for what my father had done, but it was worse. They were intent on vengeance.”

“You think your father locked them up?” Neverra asked.

I shrugged. “Possibly. He was always quite busy, hours turned into days at a time, although my mother never worried.”

Cameron inhaled deeply and narrowed his eyes, examining the rocky wall. I wondered what he scented here. “So hypothetically, your father locked up a bunch of ancient, powerful beings, and what? They broke out?”

“No.” I pointed my blade at the large fissure in the cliff. A jagged broken area that made my stomach revolt. “Look again. The tears, the cracks. Someone broke in.”

They all spun toward me. “If what you’re saying is true. What would have enough strength to punch through a dimension?” Xavier asked.

Vincent’s voice was a deathly whisper. “A god?”

But it was my answer that had them staring at me. I saw the fear run through them.

“Possibly a god or something far worse we don’t know of yet. Something not only capable of releasing so many but also has the ability to control them all.”

As the truth of my words sank in, fear filled their eyes.

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DIANNA



I felt like an idiot.

Six days. Six days Samkiel had been gone. Six days I'd been here by myself. Not one member of The Hand came by. I didn't expect them to come to hang out after my little incident, but no one even stopped to check in on me. I sat on the open window ledge with a huff, crossing my arms in irritation.

No birds sang, but no animals came around here, anyway. The only animal I had seen was that day Samkiel took me to the lake, and the stag had only approached because he was with me. No, I was completely and utterly alone. Maybe that was my problem. At least when he or someone was here, I had someone to argue with instead of being stuck in my head all the time. If I were honest, that was the reason I had kept Camilla alive and Roccurem near. At least with them around, that aching pit in my chest didn't threaten to swallow me whole.

The edge of my long silk dress fell around me, draping across the floor. I watched the sunrise, unable to sleep once again. I'd started to dream again, and I hated it. The same message haunted me through every nightmare.

“You’re running out of time.”

I'd heard it for the first time in that damned house when I dreamed of Gabby. Now it was back with a vengeance. I woke last night dripping in sweat and panting. I couldn't explain the overwhelming dread or that it felt like the voices were in the room with me. The last few nights, I'd snuck downstairs, but the couch was empty and cold. I'd even lain on it, trying to catch a whiff of his scent, but it had been too long. So I wandered, trying to

find something to distract myself. I had read whatever books I could find, walked around the stupid perimeter of the house, careful not to go too far into the forest again, and waited for him again like an idiot. I hated it. Anger soon replaced the warm feeling that had grown in my chest after his last visit, snuffing out any trace of it.

I stood and walked toward the front door. Maybe another walk around the forest would wear me out enough that I could sleep without dreaming. It had seemed to help at first, but it had made no difference the last few nights. Being outdoors was a nice reprieve, especially here. I'd never admit to anyone just how much I enjoyed the view, how the sun dipped behind every tree, how the clouds teased the mountains early in the morning, or the breeze that seemed to pass right when needed. If I was truly honest with myself, this was the first place in a long time that felt like home, but I refused to think about that for too long. The only dark spot was that the one person I missed so damned much would never be with me again. A part of me felt guilty being even slightly content, even for a moment. Maybe Samkiel was right, maybe I was punishing myself. I sighed. Another walk was needed. It at least gave me something to do. I grabbed the white and tan sandals and tied the twin ropes past my calves. One knot, then two, and I was ready to go.

“Leaving?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin, whirling toward the front entrance. I held my hand out, ready to blast the intruder with fire, muscle memory overriding my cognitive thinking.

“How did you...”

Samkiel shrugged. “I landed in the back.”

“You ass.” I grabbed one of the pillows from the couch and launched it at him. He stepped to the right, dodging it easily. I grabbed another and drew back to toss it, but he appeared in front of me and grabbed my wrist. “You left me here for six days, Samkiel!” I nearly shouted.

Shock flashed across his face as if he had no idea. “Six days?”

“Yes, you self-righteous dick!” I jerked my wrist, trying to pull away from him, but he held me with ease.

“You said you would come back, yet you abandon me again?”

He shook his head as if fully registering just how much time had passed. “I didn’t mean to, I swear it.”

“Let go of me,” I hissed.

“Are you going to throw another pillow at me?”

“Yes.”

He tipped his head to the side, staring at me, his eyes filled with warmth.

“Fine. No.”

As soon as he released me, I bent and grabbed the pillow, smacking him in the shoulder this time.

His brows furrowed, and he sighed. “Are you done?”

“I asked you to come back, and you didn’t.”

His eyes softened. He reached out and grabbed the pillow from me. “I promise, I had no intention of being gone that long. I was... busy.”

“Oh, busy? I guess you had more important things to deal with. Pretty council members, maybe?” I crossed my arms, tapping my foot against the stone floor. “Maybe someone named Lydia?”

“Who is Lydia?”

I realized then that Cameron and Xavier had probably made her up just to taunt me. My face heated, and I changed the subject. “Where were you? Why were you gone so long?”

Another emotion flashed across his face far too quickly for me to catch.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, stepping around me and heading toward the kitchen. “Have you eaten since I was away?”

“Why are you ignoring my question?”

He didn’t answer as he opened the large fridge and started pulling out various items.

“Eat first, and then we can leave.”

We. Samkiel said it as if I would even want to spend time with him after he abandoned me.

“I think I can manage on my own. Like I have been doing. Don’t you have godly duties to attend to?”

A brief smirk crossed his features, but he seemed to have no desire to fight. “You are my only priority.”

His words made my stupid heart flutter and eased my ire enough that, for the first time, I actually looked at him. He was slicing more of the orange and green fruit, and I didn’t need my powers to feel how drained and tired he was.

“What’s wrong with you?”

He looked up, surprise gleaming in his eyes. That was fair. I hadn't cared about his well-being in months. I'd been more interested in killing him. Well, trying to, at least.

He merely shook his head. "I apologize. I am just tired."

I stomped over, making sure every step sounded of my frustration. I sat across from Samkiel, and he slid me a plate of assorted fruits and bread before starting on his own.

"Okay. Where have you been?"

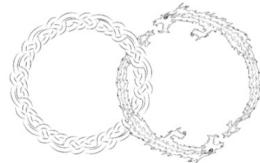
I was still mad, but curiosity was eating at me. And even though I would never admit it to him, I was concerned.

"Godly duties." He tossed my words back at me and flashed a small grin before sitting down.

I picked at the fruit and took a small bite. "How long are you back?"

He stopped eating, and I was afraid I'd said something wrong. "I think our primary focus needs to be getting your powers back."

Okay, deflection. Fine. I deserved that. I placed my hands on the counter. "And how exactly do we plan to do that?"



"WE HAVE BEEN WALKING FOR HOURS. IF THE PLAN TO GET MY POWERS back is to exhaust me, it's working." I sighed.

Samkiel had been quiet for the most part, which was unusual, but I didn't press. At least he made us a trail as we ventured to wherever we were going. With a wave of his hand, a cobblestone path had formed through the undergrowth.

"What do you know about Yejedin?"

His voice startled me, and I stared at his back. "Not much. Why?"

He shrugged. "Research."

I nodded but didn't believe him. "Okay. Well, Kaden told me absolutely nothing about it. I didn't even know it existed until I ran headfirst into another world bent on destroying him and myself. That's all I got."

He stopped as I kept going. "I apologize. There is—"

I stopped and spun toward him, tossing up my hands, the thought of my failure making me angsty once more. “There’s what?”

“Nothing.” He forced a smile and continued walking. “I have the council and others trying to learn more, is all.”

I fell into step with him, silence stretching between us once more. I hated silence so damn much. So to fill it, I said, “Kaden told me nothing. He never did. Not anything about himself or other dimensions. With him, it was: do this for me, and you’ll see your sister.”

“I know, and I apologize. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“But,” I cut him off, “it wasn’t always like that. In the beginning, it was different. He taught me how to survive, how to feed, and how to live with what I’d become.” I trailed my fingers over a brilliant orange blossom, releasing an exotic alien scent into the air. “He wasn’t always as cruel. A long, long time ago, it used to be different. We actually got along. I guess it’s kind of like us now, huh? Except I’m the cruel one.”

His face turned stern. “You are nothing like him.”

I dropped my hand to my side. “Others would disagree.”

“Others do not know you as I do.”

A smile tugged at my lips as we walked on. He said he knew me, but he didn’t know all of me. I wanted to share it with him. I wanted him to know everything. A part of me hoped it would be the final tipping point and he’d leave me alone forever, but that same part whispered what a liar I was.

“Kaden was my first.” I glanced up at Samkiel, wanting to gauge his reaction, but I saw only curiosity.

“First?”

I shrugged. “Not my first kiss but my first everything else.”

Realization flared in his eyes, and he nodded. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Gabby used to say that was why I put up with so much in the beginning. At the time, I thought I loved him.”

“Did you?” he asked, and I felt his eyes boring into the side of my face as if my answer meant something to him.

“No.” I shook my head. “I was young and naïve. Back then, I believed in the same stuff Gabby did. Then, a strange and powerful man saves my sister and me. He set the world at my fingertips, along with more power than I could imagine. Why would I not assume he cared? Even if he was....” I paused. “I told you before that I had tried to have a semi-normal relationship in an abnormal world, but it didn’t last.”

Samkiel nodded compassion and understanding in his eyes. The wind rustled the nearby trees, and the sun cast a violet glow across our path.

“When did it change?”

The snort that left me was as disgusting as the images that followed. “I don’t remember the exact time. Kaden grew distant. I don’t know why. Then I caught him with someone else. After that, I was an object of sex and power to him. I was merely a weapon. He never loved me.” I shrugged. I knew why my insecurities and jealousy were so damn bad. Kaden had broken my heart, but worse, he had destroyed my trust not only in others but in myself.

A pained expression passed across Samkiel’s face, and I realized just how much I had opened up, how vulnerable I’d made myself. Kaden had put wounds on my heart and soul that had never really healed and still festered.

“I have felt that way, too.”

My head whipped toward him. “You have?”

“Not to the extent of what Kaden has done to you, but similar, yes. I am a king by birth. I was not chosen or picked. It was mine because I was born into it, not because I earned it. I didn’t work for it. None of it. Some people worship and need me, but they don’t *see* me. They see a ruler and someone meant to protect them. I am a crown, not a man to them.” He lifted his hand, lightning dancing across his fingertips before bursting into a silver ball of energy. The forest bent and quaked around us, the wind picking up and spinning into a few small tornadoes of dust near our feet. “I am power, a guardian, nothing more.”

“I...” Knowing I had said the same vile, mean things to him, I didn’t know what to say.

He extinguished the power from his hand, and the forest returned to normal. “It may sound humorous given how The Hand acts, but a part of me has wondered if the only reason they are with me is out of duty....” His voice trailed off, and he looked at his feet.

“Sam—”

“My apologies. Perhaps that was too much. It’s easy for me to talk to you.” He forced one of those devilishly handsome smiles. “It always has been.”

I felt the corner of my lips twitch. “No, it’s fine. I just told you something personal, too, so I guess it’s easy to talk to you, as well.”

The tension in him eased, and his expression lightened at my words.
“Yeah?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged playfully. “Other times, I think about strangling you.”

“Ah.” He nodded, a deep chuckle rumbling from his chest. “Well, I suppose I wouldn’t wish it any other way.”

I didn’t know why, but his comment tugged at my heart. This is what we used to share, and I had missed it so damn much. I felt the small tug at the corners of my lips, but until his gaze dipped to my mouth and hope flared behind his storm-colored eyes, I hadn’t realized that I’d smiled.

“Your smile, Dianna, is only one of the most beautiful things about you.”

Beautiful. It was such a stupid word and one I had heard plenty of times before. Yet he said it, and I damn near melted. I cleared my throat, but my voice still sounded husky. “Do you always flirt with homicidal killers?”

His smile was bright, making him impossibly more gorgeous, and a part of me ached. “Only the really pretty ones.”

I rolled my eyes and quickly changed the subject. “You know, you never asked me how I killed Tobias.”

I didn’t like how his words made me feel, and I wanted to change the subject. He made me hopeful as if my world wasn’t in ruins, and that guilt came sweeping back.

“I assumed you’d tell me, eventually. Well, I hoped you would share,” Samkiel said, his gaze focused on the overgrown patch of trees ahead.

“Really?” I asked, ducking beneath a low-hanging branch. The winding path in front of us continued to grow. “Well, funny story. It was actually you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I remembered what you taught me back at the Vanderkai’s mansion about large beasts and soft spots. Then I kind of let him swallow me and cut him from the inside out.”

Samkiel stopped and turned to look at me. “That’s—”

“Reckless?” I winced.

He shook his head in disbelief. “Astonishing. I have done that only once in my very long life and regretted it immediately.”

I laughed. “I have to admit, I also regretted it immediately.”

His wide smile was infectious, and I couldn't help but return it. "Well, I suppose we now have something else in common."

"Besides being stubborn, ancient beings?"

"Besides that." Samkiel nodded and turned to lead the way. He held back a few branches and extended his hand, gesturing for me to go ahead of him. I walked down a small hill, wading through tall grass before my feet touched soft sand.

"This is what I wanted you to see."

"Another pretty lake off the beaten path?" I slipped my hand into his, the warm calluses scraping against my palm, sending a bolt of electricity straight through me. The simple contact made both of us falter. I looked up into his devastatingly beautiful face. He focused on me, the heat of his power winding around us, touching me with soft feathery caresses. I had missed this so much, missed him.

He tightened his hand on mine and spun me, wrapping his arm across my front and pulling me back against his chest. I froze, the sound finally registering. The ocean stretched to the horizon, where it touched the sky. Sun-kissed waves crashed against the shore in a rhythmic pulse, sounding like the planet's heartbeat. Sand rose in small dunes on an untouched beach. My world tilted, tossing me back. I stood on that cliff again, the remnants of her fitting into a jar. All she was and ever had been in my hands and then spread across the world as I emptied it into the ocean, sending her remains into the wind.

No.

Pain radiated from my core, and nausea rose. My chest heaved, and my breathing turned ragged.

No.

Agony, pure and blinding, ripped through my head. Tears filled my eyes, his arms the only thing holding me up.

"No!"

I wrenched myself out of his arms and spun away from the ocean, running from the sound of the waves that felt like acid across my nerves.

"Dianna!" Samkiel called after me.

"No, I am not doing this."

He appeared in front of me, his eyes scanning mine wildly as he held me at arm's length. "I see you. Every single part. I see the part of you that you are trying to bury along with her."

I slapped at his hands as hard as I could. “You see nothing,” I hissed, wishing I had more power and venom to throw at him. Without my powers, I was like a moth threatening a hawk. “You know, for a second, you had me. I’ll admit that. You say things and make me *feel*. The flirting and the listening, you’re good. Gods, you’re good. Was that your plan all along? To make me a miserable, lonely mess so that when you showed up, I’d suddenly talk?”

“What? No. I am trying to help you, but you must also work with me. Dianna, I have never met or heard of a god or goddess, let alone any other powerful being, suppressing their powers as thoroughly as you have. I don’t know the consequences of them returning or how violently they will, but we have to try. We have—”

“We don’t have to do anything.” I jerked at my arms, trying to get him to release me. He held me with ease, which was only fuel on the fire of my rage. I pushed so hard I probably would have twisted my arm off. I’d heard stories of wild animals chewing through their flesh to break free, and I was tempted at this point. “Let. Me. Go.”

He did.

I turned away from him, uncaring of the direction. All I cared about was getting away from here, escaping the pain and memories. Every crash of the ocean against the shore battered at the place I’d hidden away the memories of her. It was physically painful and threatened to swallow me whole.

“Running away from what you feel solves nothing.” He called out.

“Oh, and you would know, wouldn’t you?” I spat and spun around, kicking a flurry of sand at him.

“Yes, yes, I would.”

“Why are you doing this? Are you really trying to help me get my powers back? Do you really want to help me, or are you just that desperate to fuck me?”

“No!” he snapped. “Gods, Dianna, why is it so hard for you to believe that someone just genuinely cares about you?”

“Because they don’t!” I shouted, my voice breaking. “They don’t. I have lived a thousand years as someone’s weapon, someone’s *thing*. Everyone wants something from me, and the only person in the whole world who didn’t is dead!”

My chest heaved, a dam threatening to break tenfold. There it was—the brutal, agonizing truth.

“You’re wrong.” His voice was like cold, hard steel. “She was not the only one. But you are also right that I do want something from you. I want you to be happy, healthy, and alive. I want the best for you because gods know you deserve it after every fucking thing you’ve been through. One day I want you to smile again, really smile. I want to help you heal as you helped me.”

My eyes burned this time, emotions crashing through me, mocking my anger. Samkiel’s words, my feelings, her death, memories of her, and my pain threatened to overwhelm me. My face crumpled, tears sliding down my face. I didn’t see him move, but Samkiel was suddenly before me, cupping my face and wiping away every single one.

“You knew about the ocean. You knew because I told you everything, and you brought me here, anyway.”

“I know,” he whispered, “and that’s why I did.”

I pushed at that ridiculously muscled chest. The impact hurt my wrists but didn’t budge him. “How could you?”

“Because I will not have you hate a memory so precious to you as my father did.”

Shock made me pause, my tears drying up as I stared up at him. “What?”

“He burned gardens after my mother died. Anything she loved was gone. He shut down the estate and moved us away, locking away every single memory of her, growing cold, bitter, and merciless. Although he said he never did, he forgot about her. He erased her, and I will not let you suffer the same fate. Grieving is another form of love, Dianna. Do not unlove her by burying it. I know it hurts, it’s beyond painful, but if you bury her memory, you erase her. So I need you to feel. I do not care if you snap at me or call me vicious names as long as you get it out. Holding it in is only poisoning you. I will not have you destroy yourself from the inside out. I refuse.”

My eyes scanned Samkiel’s, knowing he meant every word he said. I ached for him even in my anger and hurt, but what was he asking? Whatever it was, it was too much for my broken and battered heart. I looked past him, scanning the horizon. I could damn near feel the pound of the waves, and all I saw was Gabby.

The images made my head throb, but I saw how we had run along the surf, kicking sand in our wake the first time we ever made it to the beach. I

saw her holding my hand. I saw myself jumping off cliffs because she was too scared to go first. She always looked to me when she was afraid, and I always went first to make sure it was safe, to make sure she was safe.

"I can't," I whispered. My heart felt like it was rupturing, sorrow threatening to drown me.

"You can. You will." He took a step back and held out his hand. "And not alone."

I looked at his outstretched hand. Those two simple words. Not alone.

"No one was there for me after I lost my father, my world. Not until you. I don't want you to go through this alone. It won't be easy, and there will be days you will feel like you don't want to get out of bed, but I want to be there for you. Every day if you will let me."

I didn't move, didn't speak. Samkiel stood there waiting for me, and I wondered if he had waited like this every day after I left.

"The ocean and the beach hold such happy memories with Gabby. Ones I wish for you to keep. She loved you so much, Dianna. She would never want a memory of her to hurt you, and neither do I. Trust that I will protect you, every part, and I will do everything I can to keep you from being hurt as long as I exist. I promise."

My eyes met his, and I knew he meant everything he'd said. These weren't just empty words and promises. He'd proven it repeatedly. His hand remained outstretched. A yawning bridge between us, a peace offering, a lifeline, and I desperately needed it. I realized Samkiel wasn't just a light to me but an anchor, a shield. And he had been for a while now. I released a final defiant breath, meeting him stare for stare. A truth whispered toward me, knowing without a doubt that with him, I'd never be lost again.

I reached out and placed my hand in his, finally ready to at least try.

For him, I would try.



I SPENT WHAT FELT LIKE AN HOUR WALKING UP AND DOWN THE BEACH. Samkiel never crowded me, he stood watching me, making sure I was okay. The wind blew, and I gathered my hair back and knotted it. I could do this

and not break. With every step, the waves crashed harder, slamming against my subconscious. But I didn't want to feel like this anymore. He was right. I didn't want to hate the things we had shared. I didn't think being here would make me whole again, but it was a start to something.

I walked to his side finally, stopping near him as I brushed my hair from my face.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded, squinting against the sun as I looked at him. “You know you’re the only one who asks?”

Samkiel reached forward and stopped gauging my expression, a silent ask for permission to bring me some comfort, and I allowed it. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, but the wind just tugged it free again.

“We can—”

I gripped Samkiel’s arm, and he steadied me as I took my sandals off.

“It’s softer than Onuna,” I said, curling my toes into the warm sand.

He smiled and tucked his hands into his pockets. The wind played with his hair, blowing it across his forehead, his gray eyes clear and sparkling in the sunlight. “No one comes here. It’s yours if you wish it.”

“A whole beach?” I shook my head. “You’d give me a whole beach?”

“The world, if you wish.”

I smiled and brushed his hair off his forehead before staring out at the ocean. The sand grew cool and wet as I drew closer to the waves, Samkiel at my side. The water rushed forward, lapping at my feet. I wiggled my toes, watching as Samkiel did the same.

“I need to paint my toenails. It’s all chipped polish now.”

“What color?”

I shrugged, keeping my gaze on my feet, afraid to look up. “What’s your favorite?”

He chuckled and made a deep humming noise in his throat. “Hmm, I like red.”

“Flirt.” I smiled up at him, tucking back the few strands of hair the wind tried to claim. “Red it is, then.”

“Too windy?” he asked.

I shrugged. “It’s nice.”

He glanced up, his eyes turning a molten silver. The wind slowed to a light breeze, just enough to keep us cool but not blow my hair everywhere.

“Show off.”

He smirked. "I would hate for it to mess up your hair."

I tried to give him a mock glare but ended up smiling. He rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Tired?"

He nodded. "I didn't mean to be gone so long. I was just... busy."

I didn't press. I had no right to even question him or what he had to do. He was cleaning up my mess again. I had caused him enough trouble.

"It's not my business, and besides, I wasn't very nice back there. I'm sorry."

"Your reactions, as quick and harsh as they are, come from a place that wishes to protect you. You hurt, so you hurt others. It's a defense mechanism. I should have told you where I had planned to take you. So, I am sorry as well."

I leaned into him, bumping against his shoulder. "Look at us, making progress."

He smiled and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close to his side.

"Do you want to get in?" I nodded toward the ocean. "With me?"

Surprise etched his features, but he only nodded. "Of course, but I didn't bring anything with us. I assumed we would just watch the waves today, if even that."

"Why not have fun while we're here?"

"Okay." He smiled. "What does one wear on Onuna to swim?"

"Do you remember when you rescued Gabby the first time?" I swallowed the lump in my throat at saying her name out loud.

He nodded and waited.

"Stuff like what they were wearing at the resort."

"Oh," he said, stepping away and snapping his fingers. "Like this?"

I tossed my head back and laughed, the sound mixing with the song of the waves. Samkiel looked absolutely ridiculous with the overgrown hat, a stripe of sunscreen down the bridge of his nose, an inflatable animal around his waist, and yellow swim trunks.

He smiled widely at me as I got my amusement under control. "What did I do wrong?"

"That is not what I had in mind," I said, waving my hand in his general direction before bursting into giggles again.

Samkiel stared at me as if memorizing my smile, and I knew he'd done it for this exact reaction.

"Let me." I took the hat off. I shook my head and pointed at the inflatable animal around his waist. He discarded it with another snap of his fingers. I dipped my hands into the water before pushing onto my tiptoes to wipe the sunscreen from his nose.

"Okay, that is better." I smiled and took a step back. The yellow swimming trunks could stay because they fit him like a glove. I bit my lower lip, admiring his beauty. Every line and muscle looked sculpted by the gods. He didn't look real.

"You are what they imagine when they sculpt gods on Onuna."

"Is that so?"

He knew it, but I indulged him regardless. "It is."

"That wouldn't be a compliment now, would it, Dianna?"

"Absolutely not." I smiled widely.

My heart thudded loudly, and I wondered if he could hear it. The sun caressed his tanned skin, and my eyes followed. My hand flexed at the memory of the feel of him, the taste of him. I took a shuddering breath. Samkiel was beautiful. Who didn't know that? It was mentioned in literally every fucking book he was named in. Even in the ones where he was covered in armor or the entrails of whatever beast he'd slain.

Silver scars striped his skin, testimonies to his strength and ability. I knew the stories behind some of them and longed to learn about those I didn't. The Goddess Nismera had given him the one across his neck. His broad, powerful shoulders had withstood many battles, a multitude of scars crisscrossing them to prove it. Claw marks slashed across his perfect chest, and smaller ones shined between his abs. My gaze slipped to the twin, long diagonal lines of his oblique muscles that disappeared beneath the waistband of his swimming trunks and the sprinkle of hair beneath his belly button. My mouth watered, and my face flushed, imagining tracing every scar, every hard line, with my tongue.

I cleared my throat and said, "Okay, my turn. I want yellow like yours."

Whether he noticed the heat of my gaze or not, he didn't respond to it, only my request. "Coming right up."

With another snap of his fingers, a yellow two-piece suit replaced my clothes. It fit perfectly, covering everything it needed to but leaving a lot of skin showing. I put my hands on my hips and gave him a mock glare.

“So, apparently, you noticed what other women were wearing.”

His smile was downright devilish as his gaze slid over me in pure male appreciation.

“No, I just know what you like.”

“Liar,” I teased and nodded at the waves. “I’ll race you.”

“Race?” He cocked his head and waved toward the ocean. “The water is right there.”

I grinned at him and took three large steps before diving in. I heard him hit the water right behind me. The world above disappeared as I swam deeper and opened my eyes. The reefs were prettier than anything I had ever seen, but I saw no fish. My lungs burned, and I reversed direction, kicking hard to break the surface. I inhaled deeply, enjoying the feel of the sun on my face.

“You cheated,” he said as I wiped the water from my face, the waves lapping at us.

“Who said I’d play fair?” I said with a big grin. He laughed and splashed water against my face.

We stayed like that for a while, a playful, bickering mess with no more harsh words or vile tempers. I even convinced Samkiel to toss me into the air a few times. He threw me so high that I was able to spin or curl before diving back into the water. It was a distraction and a good one. I hadn’t been swimming in so long that I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed it.

Clouds rolled in as the sun sank closer to the horizon. I floated on my back, staring at the overcast sky and the clouds curling around the mountains beyond the shore. I heard the ripples near me as Samkiel swam closer. “It’s so pretty here.”

“It is. Rashearim was indescribable. This is only a fraction.”

I shifted in the water, kicking to keep myself up and tipping my head to clear the water from my ears. Samkiel was looking at a waterfall cascading down the steep mountain in the distance. Muscles flexed easily across his arms and shoulders as he treaded water. His hair was slicked back from his face, gleaming in the sunlight. He was a work of art and way too perfect to be true. To find someone as beautiful on the outside as he was on the inside was indescribable.

“I didn’t think anyone would notice.”

“What?” he asked, turning toward me.

“Gabby was gone. I wanted Kaden dead, and I didn’t care. I had hoped if I fought him, even if I won, he would take me with him. It never occurred to me that anyone would notice I was gone.”

Pain and anger flashed in his eyes, and he swam toward me. I didn’t back away or avoid his gaze, even as my eyes burned. He stopped in front of me, brushing his thumb against the curve of my cheek. “I would have,” he whispered. “I would have.”

I nodded, tears blurring my vision. Something in me broke. It hurt, but it felt clean as if it needed to break, and now it had a chance of healing. Samkiel had been right. It helped to see this. Being here forced me to face my fears and memories. But none of that was what broke me, shattering my composure.

Samkiel’s arms went around me, and he pulled me in close, his powerful body easily keeping us afloat. Like he always did. My body rocked as I sobbed. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, burying my face against his neck. He had said it before, but I truly heard it this time. He had proven it, time and time again, and hearing him say it today was my true undoing.

No matter how mean I was, how cruel, vile, and hateful, Samkiel saw me, and he cared.

SIXTY-THREE

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DIANNA



We swam until my limbs hurt and the sun touched the water. Samkiel took us up to the cliffs overlooking the ocean. I twisted my hair, ringing out as much water as I could as we sat watching the sunset.

“When do you have to be back?” I asked, nearly holding my breath, not wanting this to end.

He rested his arms across his bent knees. “When I wish,” he said, his body tensing and jaw tightening.

I shifted closer to him, sensing the shift in his mood, but he said nothing further. I knew something was bothering him, but I didn’t want to press, so we sat and watched the colors paint the sky in shades of orange, pink, and purple. It was the first sunset in a long time that didn’t fill me with dread, and I had him to thank for my newfound hope.

“Logan and Neverra want to leave.”

His words caught me off guard. I looked at him, but his gaze stayed focused on the sky. The setting sun gilded him lovingly, drops of water still sparkling on his skin.

“What?”

He lifted one shoulder in a halfhearted shrug. “They want a life outside of this. Once Kaden is dead and this is all done, they want a family, a home. I don’t blame them, and I think Xavier wants out, too, even if he hasn’t said it. Imogen has the council and Jiraiya. She could make a life with that.”

My mind reeled. “But The Hand, I mean—”

“Are not needed if there is no threat. The realms are closed and will remain so as long as I breathe.” He looked at me, and I saw the pain pooling at the back of his eyes. He was losing his family, too.

“But... you guys are family.”

He turned back toward the sea, resting his head upon his arms and sighing deeply. “Yes, but for all intents and purposes, I abandoned them. I was gone for a thousand years, but I also think it’s more than that. I think they have been drifting apart for some time now, and I just wasn’t here to help keep them connected. It’s reasonable that after all this time, after all they have seen and done, they want normalcy. No matter how much I have missed them, I cannot be selfish with them.”

Samkiel swiped at his face as if I wouldn’t notice his pain. He loved them. I knew that even if I had never heard him say the words. Guilt stabbed at me. Here he was, bending over backward to help me, and the ones closest to him were slipping away this entire time. I scooted closer to him, and he turned his head, watching me.

“Have you ever thought about your future? What would you wish for if your life were your own?” Curiosity bit at me. The Hand had already planned. Had he?

Samkiel was quiet for a moment as he processed the question. He slid his fingers through his drying hair and sighed. “I had hopes and dreams when I was younger, before a crown, before a throne. Now? I don’t think about it. This is my life, and the price for that kind of freedom is too high in my case.”

“Well, if they all leave, I can promise to annoy you even more.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and chuckled. “Is that so?”

“Yes, I mean, we’d hate for you to lock yourself away again.”

“As if I could.” He peaked at me. “Someone stole my room.”

“Hey, that was given to me, not taken!” I said, playfully swatting at him.

I couldn’t help but return his wide smile, happy that the shadows had eased from his eyes, and he didn’t seem so sad and lost. He chased away all my demons, and I would chase away his too. Only one of us was allowed to break at a time.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked.

“No, I’m the one helping you. So tell me more. Please,” Samkiel said, reaching out to trace the curve of my lower lip with the pad of his thumb as if he wanted to make sure my smile was real.

“Okay. Here’s something you probably won’t like.” I sighed, but he merely waited. “I don’t feel remorse for what I did. Every single one of them knew what would happen if they touched her. I was very clear about

it, and I don't regret it. I would hurt anyone who hurt someone I loved. That's who I am deep down. Overprotective and possessive, I suppose."

"Territorial," he added.

I pushed him. "I'm being serious."

"I know, but you are telling me things I already know about you. Tell me something else."

"Okay, how about this, then? I would rather have my reputation be one of blood and death than for anyone to touch someone I love again. I don't want just power. I want fear so that anyone even thinking of messing with those I care about thinks twice."

His eyes bore into mine, searching, and I wondered if I had gone too far. Would he finally see the monster beneath my skin and realize what a waste I was? Would he change his mind about healing me and send me to the cells under the council? Maybe he would feed me to Oblivion instead.

His lips curved in a soft smile as he tipped his head toward me. "To be loved by the great Dianna would be a gift beyond imagining. Anyone to receive your love and be claimed by you would be lucky."

I blinked, my breath leaving my body in an audible whoosh. "That doesn't scare you?"

He shrugged. "While your anger is a force that may frighten lesser men, it does not scare me. I told you, you never scared me. I have only been afraid for you, not of you. All of this is coming from a woman who has had everything stripped from her by force. Why wouldn't you use force to keep what you love safe? It is what the world has taught you needs to happen."

"Why do you do that?" I asked, unable to process all that I was feeling.

"Why do you wish for me to dislike you so much?"

"I just don't understand why you still care. Why do you still like me after everything I've done? Why do you still want me? It just doesn't make sense, Samkiel."

He caught my gaze and held it. His eyes were soft and warm, and I swore he was staring into my soul. "I'd be a liar if I said I did not still have feelings for the woman who ripped her heart out to save me, her sister, and the world. The one who will risk everything for someone she cares about without ever thinking of herself. The one who likes loud music and overly sweetened treats and shares everything with me. The woman who ties promises to her small finger. The one who pretends she hates happy movies because she doesn't think she can ever have her own happy ending. The

woman who wields and breathes fire on a whim and loves flowers even when she tries to deny it. I have seen the best of you, Dianna, and now I have seen the worst. I am not leaving. You do not scare me.”

We sat looking at each other. The only sounds were those of the ocean and the breeze rustling through the trees. My heart pounded. No one had ever seen so much of me, and I had never felt so exposed. I didn’t know what to do or how to act. He deserved so much more, so much better than me. Yet he looked at me as if he would rip the world to pieces for me, and I knew I would do so much worse for him.

“You do not have to say anything, nor am I asking for anything, but I need you to understand that pushing me away will not work. I am a very patient immortal. Especially when it comes to those *I* care for.”

He said it as if he hadn’t just rattled my entire world, his words resonating with some fragile part of me.

I pulled my knees up and wrapped my arms around them, watching the show Rashearim was putting on for us. The colors were breathtaking as they changed and shifted, swirling like an aurora borealis. It was quiet again but not uncomfortable. Somewhere between the temple on Onuna and the remains of Rashearim, Samkiel had become essential to me. He had been my anchor even when I was lost and didn’t recognize it.

“Gabby liked sunsets. I would often catch her watching them.”

“There are twin suns on the outskirts of Nebuluinium. They cast a magnificent glow as they set, lighting up the whole sky in a prism of color. She would have liked those.”

“Maybe she can see them from where she is?”

“Definitely.”

I didn’t know if he said it to appease me, and I didn’t care. It made me happy to know it was even a possibility.

“I never got to say goodbye. I think that’s what hurts the most. But at least she told me, right?”

“I think she knows. If there is any way for her to watch over you, I have no doubt she is doing so. Gabriella was a fighter just like you, strong, resilient, and stubborn. Even with the realms sealed, she’d find a way.”

My eyes filled with tears. “She would.”

“I also think that sometimes two people can love each other so very much that not even death can separate them.”

“You are such a romantic,” I joked, which got me another small laugh from him, but his words sank to the very depths of my soul. I shifted closer to him, fitting my arm beneath his massive one, my hand curling around his biceps. I rested my head against his shoulder, the muscles beneath my cheek bunching. He froze as if he was afraid he would scare me away.

“Do you think it will ever stop hurting?” I looked up at him as he turned toward me. “My heart?”

“If there were some way I could help to make the pain less, I would do it. I would bend any rule I could to make it so for you.” He gently wiped away the tears I could not stop. “But even with all my powers, I cannot heal a broken heart, and I can not rush grief.”

“I know,” I whispered, closing my eyes and savoring his touch as he ran his knuckles across my tear-streaked cheek. I laid my head back on his arm, inhaling deeply of his familiar scent. Samkiel brushed his lips across the top of my head, letting me seek comfort in any way I could.

“Can we stay here until the sun sets?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said, resting his cheek against my hair.

Neither of us said anything, watching the sun disappear beyond the sea, but something shifted between us. A piece that had been missing fell back into place. It was something cosmic, and I thought I heard fate whisper to me.

Samkiel said he couldn’t fix a broken heart, but how could I tell him he already was?



SAMKIEL YAWNED AGAIN AS WE ENTERED THE PALACE. I COULD FEEL HIS exhaustion beating at me. There had probably been a lot to do after everything I had done. I imagine he had been busy keeping the world spinning.

“Goodnight, Dianna,” he said, pulling me from my thoughts. He smiled and moved toward the couch. I could tell by the way he moved he planned to crash on the couch and pass out. Call me selfish, but I didn’t want to sleep alone anymore, and I wanted him close to me.

“You can stay.” The words spilled from my lips.

He stopped, half bent as he prepared to sit, and looked up at me, his brow furrowed.

I swallowed. “With me. Tonight. If you want. The bed is large enough to fit almost eight people. Besides, I don’t think the couch is comfortable. Even for you.”

“It’s fine,” he said, straightening.

My heart dropped, along with my face. He’d never denied me before. I hadn’t realized how spoiled I was. I had truly messed this up. My chest burned.

Samkiel grinned. “I mean, it’s fine as long as I don’t move much.”

I let out a silent sigh of relief. “Come on. I promise to be on my best behavior.”

“Okay, if you are sure.” Wariness flickered in his tired eyes, but he grinned and followed me upstairs.

We entered the room, and the lights came on, a dull glow emanating from the corners of the room. Samkiel sat on the edge of the bed. He yawned again and ran his fingers through his hair.

“I’ll take a shower first, then you can.”

He nodded and flopped back on the bed.

I grabbed something to change into and padded barefoot across the stone floor to the bathroom. For the first time in a while, I feel lighter. Talking about Gabby had smoothed the jagged edges of my grief. I knew I would never be healed or whole, but the dull ache in my chest had eased. I didn’t want to waste time in the giant bath, so I stepped into the glass-walled shower.

After washing the salt from my skin and hair, I headed to the sink to brush my teeth. My reflection stared back at me. My irises flashed red, and I dropped my toothbrush. Startled, I jumped back but then stepped forward again. I leaned close to the mirror, pulling at my lower lid, but my eyes remained their normal hazel color. Longing to feel the tingle of power, I tried to force the change, but as all the times before, nothing happened. I could have sworn I saw it, but maybe I was going crazy. I sighed and scrunched my face at my reflection before turning away.

The lights in the bedroom came back on when I entered. I pulled the towel from my hair and put it on the closest ottoman. Samkiel had changed while I was gone. I assumed he had used that very handy godly magic to

clean up. His dark tank and matching lounge pants almost matched mine. He sprawled out on his stomach, his head turned away from me, and his massive arms hidden beneath the pillow.

I walked around to the other side of the bed, running my fingers through my damp hair. Samkiel's eyes were closed, his mouth barely open, and his short dark hair stuck up in different directions. Moving as quietly as I could, I slipped onto the bed and grabbed the thick comforter, pulling it up over us.

"You're going to get saltwater in the bed," I said, my voice quiet. I slid my hand beneath my head as I watched him.

"I changed." His reply was sleep riddled, his eyes remaining closed. "You took too long."

"Sorry, Your Majesty."

The corners of his lips twitched. The lights dimmed until they went off, darkness settling over us. So many nights, they would do that, and I would jerk awake, unable to handle the absolute darkness. Now, hearing Samkiel's steady breathing, knowing he was just a hair's breadth away from me, and I wasn't alone for once, I felt nothing but peace.

"Thank you for today." It was a whisper in the dark, but oh, so much more.

I couldn't see him because my powers were temporarily hiding, but I heard a soft movement.

"You're welcome."

I closed my eyes, a mischievous smile playing on my lips. Maybe it was the day, how comfortable I felt, or the fact that I could finally relax, but I couldn't resist teasing him. "I promise not to wake you up with my mouth in the morning. You obviously need your beauty sleep."

The muffled laugh he let out was downright devious. "I assure you if you're ever feeling generous, you always have my permission."

Liquid heat pooled between my thighs. I kicked him under the covers. His laugh vibrated the bed, and I soon joined him. We lay in the quiet for a moment, the calm contentment a balm on my soul.

"Samkiel?"

"Hm?"

I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. "Can you promise to come back? It's just better when you are here. Even if we are fighting."

It was silent for a moment, and I was afraid he'd fallen asleep. Then I heard his hand slide across the bed and felt his finger wrap around mine.

“Pinky promise.”

He kept his finger interlocked with mine under the pillow between us. My eyes closed, and for the first time in a really long while, I fell asleep without fear of what dreams I would have. I just slept and rested, but I could have sworn in the middle of the night we moved, could have sworn his hands wrapped around my waist, and he pulled me to him, my body fitting against his as if I were made for him. I could have sworn he had held me, and for once, it didn’t feel like my entire world was broken.

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SIXTY-FOUR

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DIANNA



For once, my dreams weren't about death, blood, or sharp teeth but sighs, moans, and writhing beneath the sheets. Hands that gripped my hips, fingers banded with silver rings, holding me tight. Skin against skin, begging to be marked, claimed, and a tickle of stubble that brushed along my thighs.

I woke up with a sigh on my lips, my body aching, and tremors rippling through me as the dream faded. Hunger pulsed within me, but I wasn't craving food.

My hand reached out, searching for the god next to me, but I came up empty-handed. I rolled over, realized I was alone, and sat up. Sunlight streamed between the thick curtains that hung over the windows. I blew a stray piece of hair from my face, a wave of disappointment and frustration replacing the lust coursing through my veins. I tossed the covers back and padded across the floor. Grabbing a sheer robe, I tossed it over my tank and lounge pants.

I headed downstairs, following the sound of voices to the kitchen.

"... that's the problem. A lot of them don't make sense."

Imogen held a large journal, flipping through what looked like pictures and scribbled words. Samkiel leaned on the counter, absorbed in the images.

Right, Imogen was his advisor now. I'd killed the other one.

My stomach didn't roll or pinch at the sight of her like before. I didn't have that overwhelming urge to snap or claw at her. My only urge revolved around ripping those damn council garbs off Samkiel with my teeth. I just needed him alone.

“Good morning,” I said.

Imogen and Samkiel were so lost in conversation they hadn’t heard me come in. Imogen spun toward me, her eyes wide. “Morning,” she said, her tone hesitant.

“Dianna,” Samkiel stood up, “when did you....” His words trailed off as he closed the journal and slid it across the counter to Imogen.

I walked further into the kitchen and hopped up on the counter, my eyes catching on the journal. “Super secret council stuff?”

“Yes, completely classified.” He smirked behind the cup he lifted to his lips, the smell reminding me of the coffee on Onuna. “Which also means I will tell you later.”

I grinned, our eyes connecting. We stared at each other, the tension nearly sparking in the air between us. Imogen cleared her throat and shuffled her feet.

“Did you guys already eat?” I asked, leaning forward to look at the assortment of grains and fruit.

“No,” Samkiel responded. “I haven’t been up that long. I didn’t want to wake you.”

I chose a piece of the toasted grains and said, “Too bad. You should have stayed. I would have woken you up. I was feeling generous.”

He choked on his drink, his face turning red as he coughed. I grinned and took a bite of the toasted grains before turning to Imogen.

“Sorry, I’ve been a bitch lately. I’m kind of a dick.” I placed my hand over my mouth as I chewed and shrugged. “Sometimes... well, most of the time.”

Her mouth did that thing again, where she looked like she wanted to speak but couldn’t.

Samkiel wiped the edge of his mouth, his eyes burning with lust. My words had hit home, and I knew he was reliving the same illicit memories that had awakened me.

A low chime broke the silence in the kitchen, and Imogen reached for a small circular device. “Sorry, that’s us.”

Samkiel cleared his throat and placed his cup down. “Okay. I apologize, but I’m needed back at the council. I do not know if I will return tonight, but I will try.”

My smile faded, and worry darkened his expression as if preparing for that viscous, vile part of me to raise its head and snap. He started to say

something, but I held my hand up.

“It’s fine. I may go for a run or two. I promise I will not wither away while you’re gone. Just not six days again. Please.”

I couldn’t do the silence. I couldn’t.

He nodded, his eyes screaming how sorry he was. “Of course. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

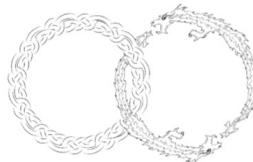
“Promises, promises,” I teased, forcing a small smile.

A look crossed his face, an odd combination of lust and longing, but I didn’t have a chance to figure out what it was before he left with Imogen.

I sighed and wrapped my arms around myself. I was a liar. As soon as he left, that lurking darkness seemed to grow. It crawled and yipped in the corners of every room, its hands outstretched, threatening to devour me. I steadied my breathing.

“This is just your emotions, Dianna, nothing more, nothing less. You’re okay. You’re okay,” I whispered to myself, hoping I could convince myself if I said the words out loud. But even through the clamor of my thoughts, that damned voice whispered beneath it all.

“You’re running out of time.”



DESPITE MY MOOD, THE DAY WAS BEAUTIFUL, AND I SPENT IT OUTSIDE running. I hoped to exhaust myself. Maybe then my body would force me into sleep and keep the nightmares at bay. Determined not to allow that darkness to overtake me again, I showered and made an actual dinner before settling onto the window seat in the living area. I rubbed my sore calf, the house so quiet it was deafening.

I wrapped the long silk night dress around my legs, placed the small plate on my lap, and took a bite of the sandwich. The bread here was so much lighter, nearly melting in my mouth with every bite. Even the fruit seemed sweeter.

The sun had set a few hours ago, and a filigree of stars blanketed the night sky. I’d kept the lights inside low. Too much made my head hurt, so I kept it just bright enough to push back the darkness. I stretched and placed

my empty plate aside, watching the stars spin above. Some of them seemed so much closer here, even a few nearby planets that were closer than the moon orbiting Onuna. The deep, otherworldly colors glowed in the night sky. A cool breeze blew in through the window, bringing with it the sweet earthy scents of the forest and the perfume of foreign flowers. All of it made the lack of wildlife even more apparent. No birds or creatures stirred outside. I hadn't even seen any insects. I pulled my legs up, wrapping my arms around them.

"I don't blame them. I wouldn't want to be around me either," I muttered, curling a long strand of my hair around my finger. A star caught my eye, twinkling as if in answer. It shone so far away, yet it was one of the brightest.

"What? Are you judging me? You're just a ball of gas. What do you know?"

It flashed twice, and I reared back, dropping my legs.

"Can you hear me?"

One wink.

I tossed my hands up. "That's it. I've gone insane. Now I'm talking to stars."

The star flashed.

I placed my hands under my chin and leaned on the windowsill. The wind sent phantom fingers through my hair, teasing it back off my face.

"Well, star, I guess there is no harm in pretending you can hear me. It's nice not to be alone. Without Samkiel here, that's all I feel. But I guess I did that to myself. Or maybe I have always been alone."

It twinkled in response.

"You can't call me a liar. You don't even know me."

Another sparkle, and I plucked at the material of my dress.

"I miss my family, not that I really remember them after all this time. I remember my father's and mother's faces but not their laugh or voices. It terrifies me I might forget Gabby's, too. I just miss my sister. More than anything. She always had the answers and knew what to say to make everything better." My chest felt heavy, emotions hitting me like a ton of bricks. "She would tell me I'm stupid for what I've done, but she would love me anyway, and I am so afraid I will never have that again."

The star seemed to dull before flashing twice more, calling me a liar. Then it hit me as if the star itself was telling me to look where I currently

am. I turned and glanced around the house. It wasn't a prison but a palace designed just for me and created by the one person I'd treated like absolute trash. A wave of guilt washed through me.

"I'm worried I'll ruin that too, little star." I pushed away from the window, not looking to see if the star responded, but I could have sworn light spilled into the room, could have sworn it answered, but it could just be my newfound insanity.

I headed upstairs, figuring Samkiel wasn't coming back tonight.

My whole body felt heavy, but I didn't feel tired. In the bathroom, I placed my hands on either side of the sink and looked into the mirror.

"Okay, inner brain, we've suppressed and pouted enough. It's time to wake up."

I stared at myself, squinting, willing my eyes to change.

Nothing.

I slapped my face hard. Maybe if I pissed myself off, I would wake something up. There wasn't even a flicker of red. I held my hand to my aching, hot cheek, glaring at myself.

"Ow. That was dumb."

Grimacing, I stood there for a minute, thinking. I spun, pacing back and forth in the bathroom, talking to myself like a madwoman. I turned and jumped in front of the mirror, hissing as if that would force my fangs to descend. Nothing happened other than I looked stupid.

I gave up and blew out a breath, putting my hair up in a sloppy bun before heading into the oversized closet. As I walked through, every shelf I passed lit up. A large, round white bench sat in the center of the room. Shoes, ranging from sneakers to heels, covered the back wall. I reached out, running my fingers along the various pieces of clothing hanging from the double-stacked racks. A sad smile touched my lips, remembering why Samkiel had made this room.

A vampire prince who had pretended to care about me, and a man I had thought was my friend. The glossy room changed to the stupid, overly lavish room in the brick mansion. I could see Drake striding in as if he belonged there. I saw myself like I was now as he moved through the clothes, talking to me like he cared. Liar. Traitor. The entire time, he knew what he was doing. They had already decided to betray me, yet he had looked me in the eye and told me I was family. I saw myself standing there, believing every word that dropped from his lying lips.

“I was a good friend,” I snapped to his memory. “You weren’t a good friend, but I was. I will not feel guilty about that. I won’t.” The memory shifted as Samkiel appeared behind the other version of me. The ghost of Drake stiffened, and I understood like I hadn’t before. Drake wasn’t just scared of Samkiel, even though the image of him towering over me made even me pause. No, he was worried because I had someone who would protect me no matter what. I had not seen it then, but I saw it now. Pride filled me because to fall under Samkiel’s protection was something to be proud of. A soft smile curved my lips, something warm and sweet replacing the pain I had felt. Samkiel had always been there, a shield and protector, whether or not I had thought I needed it.

The memory faded, but the smile stayed on my face as I crawled into bed. The lights dimmed until they turned off. I rolled toward the window, watching the hem of the long curtains dance against the floor. I stayed like that for a while, but sleep never came. A thousand and one thoughts raced through my mind, all of them leading back to Samkiel. I tossed and turned for what felt like hours before I sighed and kicked the covers off.

He had helped me so much, even when I was a complete dick. He was still helping me. The words he said and how he backed them up with his actions woke something in me I’d buried the second she died. I felt. I felt things like happiness, guilt, and even regret. That had to mean something, right?

A banging started on that locked door, making my head throb. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples.

My arms hit the bed. The empty cold bed. When was the last time I had sex? Maybe that’s what’s wrong with me. Why our time together, the dream, and the heated glance this morning had need scraping over every nerve-ending and set my blood to boiling. No, it was those damn council garbs. That’s what it was. They fit his powerful shoulders and tapered to his waist, and I knew the chiseled muscles they hid.

“No,” I said to the empty room. “Don’t even think about it. Don’t go there.”

Samkiel’s hand had brushed mine and set a thousand nerve endings on fire. I hadn’t felt that in so damn long.

“Nope, Dianna. We’re not doing this.”

I flipped onto my stomach, covering my head with a pillow, trying to hide from the naughty thoughts plaguing my brain. It didn’t help. I

remembered every flirty comment and every heated glance, my mind eagerly supplying the memories.

The bed was too empty, the smell of him lingering. I missed him and hated that he distracted me without doing a damned thing.

I flipped onto my back, the silk of my nightgown tangling around my legs. It was too hot, too constricting. I sat up, gathering the silk material at my hips and ripping it over my head before throwing it onto the floor. My underwear went next. They were the small, lacy ones that Samkiel knew I liked. Fuck. I fell back onto the bed.

The curtains over the window were partly open, allowing the opaque moonlight to drip inside. A tingle of excitement shivered through me at the thought Samkiel might pass by and see me. A slight breeze blew into the room, nipping at my heated flesh, and I moaned, pretending it was his touch. My eyes dared to close, images from Chasin playing in my head. The memory of how he'd held me, how his hand had dipped between my legs, how purely amazing it felt, made my core tighten.

I thought about Samkiel. I always thought about Samkiel. Even when I lied and said I didn't. Samkiel was important to me, and if I was honest with myself, I only craved his touch. My breathing quickened as I imagined the feel of his powerful arms wrapping around me. How the heavy, sleek muscles of his chest and abdomen had clenched when I took him into my mouth. The v-line of his oblique muscles pointed toward his thick cock. A shudder ran through me as I finally allowed myself to think of him again. It was nearly a relief to admit I wanted him.

My hand slid slowly down my neck, picturing him above me, tracing the path I wanted his mouth to take. I cupped my breast, rubbing my nipples, pleasure shooting through me as they tightened to aching points. Would he always be gentle, or was there another side of Samkiel he would show me once he had me like this? The thought thrilled me. I trailed my hand lower, past the planes of my stomach. My fingers brushed my clit, and my breath hitched, my thighs falling open. I knew the words he would say, knew them with a fiery passion.

Are you deprived, my Dianna?

Oh, yes. Gods, yes, I was.

My hips lifted, my fingers circling my clit. I'd barely touched myself, and just the thought of him had me dripping. I pictured his mouth in place of my fingers, his silver eyes watching me as his tongue circled at the

sensitive entrance before teasing over the small sensitive bud of my clit. My moan felt torn from my soul as I slipped two fingers deep into the tight, wet heat of my pussy and curled them. I moved them faster, whimpering and biting at the pillow next to me, his pillow. I ground the palm of my hand against my clit, Samkiel's scent filling my lungs with every breath. My other hand cupped my breast, squeezing at one nipple and then the other. My small cry of pleasure broke the silence, and I didn't care who heard.

Oh, gods. My pussy clenched, the slick, tight walls fluttering around my fingers. I writhed, imagining his cock filling me, reaching for that release. I had been so unsatisfied since him. No matter who I took or what I did, it felt nowhere close to being with him. I hadn't even fucked him yet, and I was a mess. Gods, I wanted him so badly. I wanted him between my legs, in my mouth, everywhere I could take him. And I would take him until he was a breathless, sweating mess beneath me.

The image of him panting and begging beneath me flooded my brain and almost sent me over the edge. I moved my fingers deeper and faster, picturing his hands grabbing my hips, those silver rings digging into my skin as I rode him harder. I slipped another finger in, trying to mimic what he would feel like. My pussy quivered, the burn of the stretch exquisite. I remembered the dirty words he'd whispered when he discovered how much I enjoyed hearing them, and another wave of pleasure burst in my core. My hips thrust up, and my head slammed against the pillow. I remembered the deep huskiness of his voice, picturing how much he could take before I made him come, and then the look on his face, his pleasure. I wanted him to call my name while buried so far in me that—

My body shook as I came so hard and fast that I nearly wept. My fingers stilled inside me, rubbing my clit, squeezing every last bit of pleasure from my orgasm. I panted, my body trembling. I bit at the pillowcase, trying to muffle my cries. It was the first real orgasm I'd had in months. The first one I had since the last time Samkiel touched me. All I did was picture his face, mouth, those rippling muscles, and those filthy fucking words. I groaned, another orgasm ripping through me. My legs shook along with my body, every nerve ending on fire. I was a sweaty, breathless mess as I came down from the high. My chest heaving, I clamped my hands over my aching sex. I lay there, shocked, staring up at the ceiling. It was good, but not enough. I still ached, my body demanding the real thing, not the mock attempt.

I didn't know how long I lay there before I got up and took another shower. I changed clothes, changed the sheets, and finally crawled back into bed.

Samkiel didn't come back.

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SIXTY-FIVE

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DIANNA



Right morning sunlight poured into the room, nearly blinding me as I awoke. I groaned and rolled out of bed, stopping in the bathroom before padding downstairs on bare feet. I headed through the foyer and into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

“You finally came?”

I tripped over the long ends of my pajama bottoms, practically stumbling into the kitchen.

Samkiel.

His back was to me. He was slicing more fruit and adding the pieces to two separate plates.

“What?” My voice came out a squeak, and my cheeks heated.

Had he heard me? A shiver went down my spine and not from embarrassment but excitement. No, if Samkiel had heard me, he would have burned the stairs with how fast he climbed them to get to me. That, I knew for a fact. He slid the plates across the counter and turned toward me.

“With your powers suppressed, your hearing must be no better than a mortal’s,” he said. “I practically screamed your name.”

My belly clenched, remembering that I had envisioned him doing exactly that last night, but under very different circumstances.

“I was... tired.”

“I made breakfast.”

I forced a small smile, need gripping me even after last night. What was wrong with me?

“Thanks.” I sat at the island and picked up the fork he had placed near me.

“Sorry I returned so late last night.”

I damn near dropped my fork. “You were here? Last night?”

He hadn’t come upstairs.

He tipped his head, looking at me quizzically. “Yes, but it was close to dawn, and I didn’t want to disturb you. I checked in on you, but you were fast asleep. I think I even saw you drool.”

I scoffed. “There was no drool.”

An air of uncertainty hung around him. Didn’t want to disturb me? So he’d slept downstairs instead. The only time he’d acted that way was when we were fighting at Drake’s, and he’d been avoiding me. Was he avoiding me now? Maybe all I’d said the day before had been too much. I had been so cruel these last few months. Why would he want to pick up where we’d left off?

My heart thundered with fear. Samkiel glanced at my chest before meeting my eyes, and I knew he could hear the rapid beat. “Are you alright?”

“Yes. Fine.” I set my fork down and placed my hands under the table, my appetite for both food and sex fading away. The yawning void left behind threatened to swallow me again. Was I too late? Had he decided I was too much work? Too dangerous? Too broken?

Samkiel watched me, his focus absolute as if I were the only thing that mattered. I must be insane. Now I was imagining things.

“What?” I asked, hearing the defensiveness in my tone.

“You haven’t touched your food,” he said, pointing at my plate with his fork. “Are you not hungry?”

I glanced down at the fruit, eggs, and bread. Bile rose, my stomach giving a definitive no.

“No, I feel kind of queasy, actually.”

“Have you felt like that before?”

I shook my head.

“Well, if you wish to stay in today, that is fine. I had something planned for you, though.”

Hope flared. Maybe he wasn’t avoiding me again. I sat up straighter. “What is it? Where are we going?”

“We,” he enunciated, “are not. I have... Umm... I’m going to be busy.”

My hope died.

Samkiel seemed to sense it and went on, even as the space between us grew. “I wanted you to have some fun since I won’t be around today. I also figured The Hand would enjoy a day off.”

My shoulders slumped. “Busy, huh?”

Samkiel went to open his mouth right as a loud crack accompanied by a flash of cobalt made me jump.

“Okay, I waited long enough. Did you tell her? Can we go now?” Cameron demanded as he entered the kitchen.

Xavier followed him in, snickering and shaking his head. For once, neither of them were wearing their dark council garbs. Instead, they wore tank tops and shorts. They looked so normal, not the fierce, deadly warriors meant to keep us all in line.

Samkiel finished chewing a piece of toasted grain and sighed, rolling his eyes. It was an expression I hadn’t seen in a while, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“I thought he’d banished you or whatever gods do to those who piss them off,” I said to Cameron and Xavier. Xavier sat beside me, and Cameron stood on my left. Samkiel’s gaze lingered on Cameron, a muscle in his jaw twitching. I wondered if he was still jealous, while another part of me was thrilled at the thought he might be.

“Have no fear,” Samkiel said. “Cameron and Xavier are still paying for their mistake.”

Xavier sighed as if the punishment was torture, but Cameron only smirked a fraction harder.

“Now,” Samkiel grabbed a napkin, wiping his hands, “I have to go to Onuna for a meeting with the ambassadors. Vincent will accompany me, but I feel the others could use a break.”

Samkiel stood to his full height, my eyes following his every movement as last night flashed through my head. I bit my bottom lip, my core tightening. Heat flooded through me in a rush, my hunger for him returning tenfold. I bit back a whimper and shifted in my seat, trying to extinguish it, keenly aware of Cameron’s abilities and what my scent might reveal. I felt my cheeks flush and quickly dropped my gaze. Cameron had gone uncharacteristically quiet, but I refused to look at him. I shoved a piece of fruit into my mouth, not responding when Samkiel said he’d see me later and left the house.

“I saw that.”

I stabbed at the cold egg on my plate. “Saw what?”

Cameron leaned on the counter and stole a piece of fruit from my plate. Xavier said nothing.

“The smile, the way you practically eye fucked him when he stood up, and let’s not talk about the scent in this house.”

I groaned and put my fork down before covering my burning face with my hands. “Has anyone told you the smelling thing is fucking weird?”

“Plenty of people.” Xavier chuckled.

“Solo activities, Dianna? Tsk, tsk. You know, gods are very possessive. Samkiel would be oh so very hurt if he learned you’d rather take care of yourself than let him.”

I dropped my hands and glared at him. “Well, he seems all too happy to be occupied at the moment.”

Xavier snorted. “Unlikely.”

“It doesn’t matter how busy he is. If you said you needed him, he would be here,” Cameron said, oddly serious.

Xavier grunted in agreement, popping a piece of fruit into his mouth.

Cameron lifted a brow. “You do realize we aren’t the same red-blooded males from Onuna, right? His pride would be wounded. He already thinks you want nothing to do with him. I mean, I doubt he’ll come back once he finds out, and we have a council meeting tomorrow, so then he’ll be gone even longer. You know those take a while, but then that would be fine with you, right? Not like you care anyway.”

“I don’t like threats.” I grabbed the dull toast knife and pointed it toward him. “You won’t say a word to him about my... activities,” I hissed.

Amusement flashed in his eyes, and Xavier whistled under his breath.

Cameron had baited me on purpose and was more than happy with my reaction. “I won’t. If...”

“If what?”

“If you actually hang out with us all today. Have fun, real fun, and your secret is safe with me.”

Cameron shifted the knife away with two fingers, and I let him. Mostly because I didn’t have any powers right now and because what he was offering didn’t sound terrible.

“That’s it?”

He nodded and grinned. “That’s it.”

“Fine.”

“Great.” He clapped his hands. “We’re going to go meet the others. They wanted to get something ready for you.”

“For me?” I asked, so shocked it came out a squeak.

“Yeah.” He glanced at me as if I was the crazy one. “Oh, I forgot, everyone you ever knew has been a dick to you.”

I flipped him off but jumped off the stool, a flicker of excitement lightening my mood. At least I wouldn’t be alone today. “Where are we meeting them?”

“The beach.”



MY BACK HIT THE SAND SO HARD IT KNOCKED THE WIND OUT OF ME. I choked on my laugh, still gripping the ball in my hands.

“That’s a point for us!” Imogen screamed.

Cameron cursed, punching the air. Neverra walked over and pulled me to my feet. A net stretched between the boys and us, three against three.

“You still need one more. Don’t get overconfident now, Immy!” Cameron shouted back before huddling up with Logan and Xavier to devise a new game plan.

I wore the swimsuit Samkiel had made me. Neverra had said she and Imogen had gone shopping to prepare for today, and I would be lying if I said it didn’t make me a little happy to know they were even remotely excited about hanging out with me. It shocked me they would want anything to do with me after how terrible I’d been.

Neverra, Imogen, and I stood in a tight circle. I dropped the ball between us and propped one bare foot onto it.

“Okay, I love my husband, but if we’re going to win and have bragging rights, we have to take Logan out,” Neverra whispered.

Imogen snickered and elbowed Neverra, the two of them sharing a look.

“Okay, how so?”

“His right knee. He damaged it in a battle he refuses to talk about.”

“Pride.” Imogen snickered.

“We get him to move quickly to the right, and he is out.”

I smiled and nodded, glancing over Neverra's shoulder at the guys. Xavier's head popped up, and he made eye contact with me before quickly ducking back into the huddle.

"Okay, Cameron has a powerful arm, one spike, and we lose."

"I can take care of that." Imogen rubbed her hands together. "I really want to win, and I will do what I have to for those bragging rights."

I nodded and kicked the ball up into my hands. "We'll win. I'll make sure of it."

"Are you guys done plotting yet?" I called out. "Or are you ready to lose?"

Imogen, Neverra, and I split up. Neverra stood in front of the net, Logan across from her. He blew her a kiss and winked. She mimed batting it away. Imogen took up her spot on the left, across from Xavier. He stretched his arms from side to side, his grin brilliant and his eyes sparkling. That left me to face off with Cameron.

"Do you really think you're going to win, Didi?" He placed his hands on his knees, swaying side to side.

I tossed the ball up and down with one hand. "I think you are all talk, Cam. All talk, no cock."

His jaw dropped, and then he threw his head back and laughed. I tossed the ball high, jumping as I spiked it over the net.

Cameron recovered quickly and hit it back to our side. Imogen slapped it back, only this time at an angle. Logan dived but too far to the right and slid. I thought we had them for a second, but Xavier was quick. He slid across the sand, hitting it high as Cameron did a follow-up. He jumped, spiking it so hard that Neverra and Imogen ran into each other.

I saw the ball hurtling through the air. Neverra and Imogen landed on their asses, watching it spiral in the air, and Cameron was already hollering for a win.

Oh, no. I don't think so.

They wanted to win. I saw it in their eyes. They wanted a whole week to rub this victory in our faces.

I took a running leap, feeling like I was flying. My face slammed into the ground, sand going up my nose and scraping my chest, stomach, and legs as I fell, but I felt the smooth surface of the ball fall into my hand.

"Oh, come on!" I heard Cameron scream.

I jumped to my feet, Neverra and Imogen piling onto me, cheering. I tossed the ball to Neverra and tried to wipe the sand from my face and torso.

Cameron paced with his hands on his hips. Logan sat laughing, holding his knee, and Xavier chuckled, his dark eyes sparkling in the sunshine.

“She cheated. I don’t know how, but she did,” Cameron said.

“You’re such a sore loser,” Xavier told him.

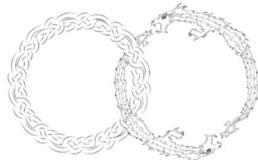
“Are you sure you don’t have your powers back?” Cameron accused, but I saw the humor in his eyes.

“You’re such a baby,” Imogen chided.

They sparred back and forth as Neverra and I headed toward the blanket she had laid out, a large umbrella providing welcome shade. A cool chest sat on one corner beside a small tray with glasses.

“Let’s go relax, shall we?”

I nodded but paused to cover the spot where I’d landed after my leap, making sure to obscure the shimmer of glass in the sand.



I SAT ON THE LARGE KNITTED BLANKET, THE TASSELS AT THE EDGES blowing in the breeze. Neverra reached into the cooler for the sandwiches she’d brought, the brim of her hat bending back in the wind. My breath caught, my heart clenching, as she turned back and smiled at me, offering me a paper-wrapped sandwich. For a fleeting moment, I’d seen Gabby, but only for a second. I forced a smile, accepted the sandwich, and unwrapped it. The guys whooped and hollered behind us, continuing to play.

“I had yours made with extra mustard and no tomatoes.”

My eyes widened, my fingers tightening on the sandwich. “I hate tomatoes.”

“I know.” She didn’t say how she knew, but I knew. Logan and Neverra had lived with Gabby for months.

Neverra bit into hers, watching me, waiting for me to eat too. My system had become accustomed to a different type of sustenance, and food

did not sit well, but there was no way I would not eat this sandwich. One bite, and for once, my stomach didn't protest. Neverra grinned happily.

"It's pretty here. I haven't been before."

"It is," I said, looking out over the waves. "Samkiel brought me here the other day. The ocean, the beach, is still hard for me, but he's—"

"Stubborn."

I laughed and took another bite. "Very."

"He was like that on Rasheirim. The gods hated it because it meant he didn't listen to them. Especially when he first found all of us. It's like talking to a brick wall once he has his mind set on something," she paused, "or his heart."

I hummed behind my sandwich in response, not quite knowing what to say. The sand shifted next to us, and I half turned, surprised to see Imogen. She was half covered in sand and trying to brush it off without success.

"Cameron tackled me. I think he is still mad that they lost," Imogen said. Her eyes darted toward the open basket of food, to Neverra, and then to me. She placed one arm behind her back and gave me a hesitant smile. "Can I sit with you guys?"

I blinked. How was it that one of the fiercest warriors known throughout my world and the next was asking nervously if she could sit with us? But then, I guess she had every reason to be hesitant around me. I hadn't been nice to any of them and tried multiple times to kill them. More than that, I'd been mean to her because of her past relationship with Samkiel. Especially after finding out she'd been his betrothed. Logically, I knew it wasn't her fault, or his, for that matter. It had all been due to my own jealous insecurities.

Shock must have registered on my face because her expression fell, and her gaze dropped. I heard the sand shuffling as she turned away, taking my silence as a refusal. I leaned forward and practically yelled, "Wait!"

She stopped, and it felt like everything had stopped with her. The boys' laughter died as they looked toward us. The ocean no longer slapped against the shore, and the wind stilled as if holding its breath. They glanced at each other, everyone waiting as if my approval of her on my terms meant something to them all.

"Sit. Neverra made more than enough to feed an entire city. I can't eat it all."

The way her eyes lit up as she smiled made my chest ache. How cruel had I been?

Imogen sat on the blanket and grabbed a sandwich.

“That save was great earlier,” Neverra said as Imogen unwrapped her sandwich and took a bite. I saw the way Neverra watched her, how her body language changed around Imogen, and how close they really were. They had no blood bond, but they were sisters. I could see it. That’s what they all were. They were a family.

“Yeah,” Imogen said around her food, “how did you do it?”

I shrugged. “You guys wanted to win.”

They were both silent for a moment as Imogen ate some more. I didn’t know why I asked or what came over me, but I had fun today, and seeing the sun getting closer to the ocean made me apprehensive. I didn’t want today to end.

“Do you guys want to come back to the palace this evening? Samkiel said he would be in Onuna all night, and I don’t want to be alone. If that’s okay. And if you want. You don’t have to.”

Imogen froze mid-bite, and Neverra smiled so widely I almost regretted asking. Logan, Xavier, and Cameron raced toward the water, yelling as they jumped into the ocean.

“I thought you’d never ask!” Neverra said.

SIXTY-SIX

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DIANNA



Music filled the palace, so loud it drowned out the emptiness in my head. Neverra, Imogen, and I stood in the bathroom as I finished mixing the face mask Gabby had taught me how to make.

“I think I have this right, but don’t blame me if your face burns off,” I said.

Neverra laughed and peered into the small mixing bowl I held. As soon as I’d mentioned staying over, Neverra and Imogen had started packing up the beach party. They’d portalled to their homes and returned with so much stuff it looked like they were moving in. It had taken us over an hour to convince Logan, Xavier, and Cameron to let us go alone and another ten minutes to explain to Cameron he wasn’t invited, no matter how much he liked face masks. We had to promise that we wouldn’t kill each other and that we would stay in the house.

“I’ve never done this before,” Imogen said, pulling her hair back from her face and securing it with a band.

I snickered. “You guys are practically goddesses. Goddesses don’t need face masks.”

Pleasure lit Imogen’s eyes, and she glanced at Neverra as if the compliment meant something to her. Neverra gave her an encouraging smile and winked. Did Imogen want me to like her that badly?

The truth was, I liked all of them. Well, all except Vincent. He avoided me like the plague, which suited me just fine.

I set the bowl on the counter, and we all turned toward the mirror and picked up our brushes.

“I’m glad you asked to hang out,” Neverra said, painting the green-speckled mask on her face.

I dipped my brush into the sticky goop. “Don’t get emotional. We’re not best friends. I was just bored.”

Neverra and Imogen grinned at me in the mirror, and I knew they didn’t believe me for a second.

Imogen waved her brush at us. “Well, I’d like to be friends.”

“I’m not good enough to be anyone’s friend.” My tone was casual, almost dismissive, but I felt those words to my soul.

Imogen sighed and looked at Neverra for reassurance before continuing. “Okay, I’m just going to say it now, so it’s out in the open, and we can all move on.”

“Okay.” I glanced toward her.

“Samkiel and I had stopped being intimate years before Rashearin fell.”

I froze, the brush pausing mid-stroke against my cheek.

“The betrothal was forced, and neither of us was happy about it, but we would have done what we had to if it meant keeping peace within the realms. The other gods were looking for any opportunity to dethrone Samkiel. We knew it was only a matter of time before they claimed he was too reckless and careless to settle down and do what was best for the realms. We didn’t love each other, not like that, and we wanted what everyone else did. That stupid mark.”

Neverra smiled, her gaze going to her mark.

Imogen sighed, dipping her brush back into the mask. “It means so much in our world. The one person the universe crafted for you and you alone. All the bliss and everything that comes with it. Or at least that’s what Neverra and Logan preach.”

Neverra nudged her with her shoulder. “Yup. It is like a spark of electricity when you first meet. The mortals call it butterflies, but it is just your powers connecting and communicating. It is a knowing, a greeting, an acknowledgment that you have been waiting your whole life for this one person.”

Imogen laughed. “Yes, like that. It doesn’t matter if you get along or fight like enemies. They are the person you’d do anything for. You become consumed by a weird territorial drive, and no one else will do.”

Neverra giggled. “Understatement of the year.”

Imogen leaned close to the mirror, carefully applying the mask under her eyes. “I’ve never felt that. Not for Samkiel, not for anyone.”

She glanced at me when she said that, letting me know she meant no harm, and my beast yawned and went back to its nap.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, putting my brush back into the bowl. “That’s beautiful. Gabby would have loved it. She was such a romantic.”

“You aren’t?” Imogen asked.

“In my world, there was no such thing as romance. I guess it’s hard for me to believe in something I’ve never had.”

Neverra placed her brush down. “I’m sorry about everything.”

“Don’t be. I did what I had to for her, and I’d do it again. Every part. Even the terrible ones. You guys do realize that, right?”

They both nodded.

“Good.” I smiled at Imogen as she finished her mask. “And I’m sure you still have a mate. They’re probably just sealed behind the realms or something.”

She placed her brush down, examining her face in the mirror, and gave a small shrug. “Well, I guess I’ll be mateless then because the alternative is Samkiel dying, and that isn’t worth it. No matter how great Logan and Neverra say it is.”

Neverra only cleaned her hands off with a small towel. “Okay, movie time.”



NEVERRA HIT A BUTTON ON THE SMALL DEVICE SHE’D BROUGHT, AND A screen projected clear as day onto the wall. They had brought movies that they thought I liked, and a part of my damaged heart swelled. We had just made it to a part where the heroine jumped to her feet when Neverra’s phone buzzed once more on the table between us. She leaned over and grabbed it, taking half of the blanket with her. She grinned at the screen, and Imogen nudged me with her foot, drawing my attention as she nodded at Neverra.

“Logan?” Imogen grinned.

“No, it’s my other secret mate,” Neverra joked. “Yes. It’s Logan.”

“You haven’t been gone that long.” Imogen continued to jest with her.

“He just misses me.” Neverra stuck her tongue out at her.

The room fell silent, the reason for Logan’s unease suddenly weighing on me. Kaden had taken Neverra because she’d tried to protect my sister.

My fault.

“He wants a picture,” Neverra said, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Want to do something funny?”

“Yes!” Imogen all but cheered.

Neverra waved us closer. Imogen and I scooted in, one on each side of her. “Okay, make a funny face,” Neverra said. We all pulled our goofiest faces, and the camera flashed, capturing the moment.

“Perfect.” Neverra laughed and sent the picture before placing the phone down.

We got comfortable again. Imogen and Neverra returned their attention to the movie, but I watched them. Imogen stuffed her face with so much popcorn her cheeks bulged. Neverra laughed at a part of the movie that would have terrified most mortals. They were relaxed and happy to be with each other and me. They deserved happiness after all they’d been through. I had laughed a lot today, but while neither of them had made a big deal out of it, it had surprised them each time. They hadn’t said anything, as if afraid I would notice and stop. They wanted me to be happy, too.

This was it, the feeling I had wanted, needed, and searched for. Family. They weren’t cruel like Kaden, Alistair, and Tobias. They were sweet and kind. This family cared for each other. All of them had checked on me throughout the day, even when I glared or rolled my eyes.

I sighed, the ache in my chest growing. I had fun today for the first time since Gabby was taken from me. A single tear rolled down my cheek, and I turned away from Imogen and Neverra, hoping they wouldn’t notice as I swiped it away.

They are like a family. A home.

That was what Gabby’s note had said, and I was so sorry I hadn’t been able to provide her with this. But more than anything, I was heartbroken she wasn’t here to share this with me tonight.

We made food and watched another movie, and by the time the credits rolled, Neverra and Imogen were curled up on the couch, sleeping like

babes. I was exhausted, but my mind was noisy trying to process all the emotions from the day, my thoughts yipping at me. The living room was dark and quiet, the sound of Imogen's and Neverra's soft snores comforting. I propped my head on my hand, watching the stars dance across the night sky.

Neverra's phone buzzed, startling me. I slid from the couch to sit on the floor, careful not to wake them. Several messages flashed across the screen as I picked up the phone.

LOGAN

Very funny, Nev.

That was right after she sent the picture of us. The next message came thirty minutes later.

LOGAN

I love you. I hope you guys are having a good night

LOGAN

Call me before you go to bed if you can

LOGAN

I'm glad you are home, baby

LOGAN

I can come get you first thing in the morning. I assume you are asleep, but I wanted to tell you I love you.

I closed the phone and placed it face down on the table between us, a hint of jealousy making my chest ache. Samkiel hadn't checked in on me today. He seemed to be back to avoiding me. Not that I blamed him after everything. Maybe he'd changed his mind and only wanted to help me but didn't want anything more. I shouldn't care. He didn't owe me anything. We weren't together, and he had done more for me than anyone ever had. We had never officially been anything, really. But my heart whispered that I wanted us to be something. I wanted that more than I cared to admit.

I stood and padded to the window on silent feet, curling up on the bench in front of it. Neverra shifted on the couch, pulling the covers up and turning before settling again. Imogen had an arm thrown over her head on the opposite end, her mouth slightly open. Her eyes danced behind her lids,

and I wondered what she was dreaming. Watching her reminded me of when Gabby and I would stay up as late as we could when I visited. We would eat and drink as much sugar as we could stomach, trying to stay awake until the sun came up just to spend time together. Ultimately, we would fail, fall asleep, and wake up laughing at the mess we'd made.

A small smile tugged at my lips. The memories were not crippling this time. Instead, they brought a bittersweet warmth to my heart. I had missed the comfort thoughts of Gabby had always brought me, and I had feared it was one more thing Kaden had stolen from me. I leaned my head against the windowsill, my gaze falling on the same star that had twinkled at me the night before.

"In my head, you're up there watching me, watching this. Every time I smile, I feel guilty, so I lash out at everything and everyone. It hurts because you are gone, and I can't share any of this with you. I read your note, and I know you wanted me to just move on, but it's so hard, Gabs. It's very hard, but they do help. They do. He does. And it makes me feel worse because being happy without you here is...." My eyes stung, and I closed them to hold back the tears. "I guess what I am saying is I want to be happy again too, and it doesn't mean I have forgotten about you or anything we have been through. It just means it will hurt a little less when I think about the life I used to have. He makes me happy, and I don't feel so alone when I am with them, and I'm... I'm sorry."

And a lock on a door in a house... quieted.

I opened my eyes to see my star wink back at me.

SIXTY-SEVEN

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SAMKIEL



The empty council hall echoed with silence. I sat at the helm and flexed my hands against the table, my silver rings gleaming in the rays of the rising sun. I returned from Onuna mere hours ago, leaving Vincent to attend to the mortal affairs. Someone had reported suspicious activity from a ship off the coast of the Dead Ocean, but it turned out to be nothing other than a yacht filled with celebrating mortals. Otherwise, it had been quiet, no Otherworld activity since the attack on Dianna. Vincent had covered that up with technology I did not understand nor care for.

Even though I had made it back earlier than expected, I came straight here. Logan had gotten bored and showed up on Onuna. Neverra and Imogen were with Dianna, and I didn't want to bother her, especially after the photograph Logan had shown me of the three of them. They were all making funny faces at the camera, and her smile reached her eyes for once. But it was more than that. We needed to have a conversation that I was just not ready for. So, instead, I came here, letting her enjoy a somewhat normal day of normal fun while I worked.

I flexed my hands again. There was no hint of the grayish tint to my skin I had seen in my nightmares the last few nights. I leaned back, taking the small journal from the breast pocket inside my council garbs. I flipped it open and scanned the few pages I'd filled with events from those dreams. So many damn dreams. I studied the sketch I had drawn on the nights Dianna slept above me, not even her presence able to chase away the nightmares.

The rough lines formed an image of me stretched across a stone altar. Three figures stood over me, two of the same height, one slightly shorter.

All dark and malevolent, all with a crown of horns upon their heads.

Death.

I felt it when my father ran his blade through me in that dream. I felt it when my power erupted from me, scalding my eyes and mouth, my entire being burning as the realms ripped open.

“Have you told her?”

“No.”

I did not startle, sensing that Roccurem had appeared behind me even though the air did not stir with his entrance. I often wondered where he went when he was not here, but I assumed he might venture through the world after being contained for so long.

“Your father would sketch his visions as well.”

I rubbed at the slight stubble on my chin. “Good friends, were you?”

“No, I merely watched over him.”

I closed the journal, placing it back inside my council garbs.

“The halls are quiet,” Roccurem said, sitting to my right. “It is always quiet before a storm, I suppose.”

“And what storms have you seen?” I asked, leaning my elbows on the polished surface of the table.

“Many, my liege. Many. Ones made of spears of ice so cold it cracks skin and freezes blood. In some, the rain is so strong it can crumble buildings. In others, fire and ash engulf the world. All real, all possible, all dangerous.”

“My father spoke of you and your brethren, you know? When I was a boy. Fates shape the tendrils of destiny, time even. A whisper on the winds of catastrophes to come, but I didn’t believe it. I knew you also saw peace, rebirth, life, and death.”

Roccurem only stared at me, not seeming even to breathe.

“I also remember reading about those who could whisper what was to come in dreams. Over and over until the recipient understood, until they got it. A whisper to those they wished to influence.”

If Roccurem ever smiled, I never saw it, but the slight twitch of his lips told me all I needed to know.

“My liege, such powers as those would be outlawed and forbidden. It is not my place to interfere. I merely watch, maybe even suggest.”

“Why did my father lock you away? Was it for your safety, or was he using you for something else?” I asked, holding his gaze.

“You ask questions as if you don’t trust the one who made you.”

“I ask questions because it is possible I already know the answers, and I want to see if you would lie to me.”

The mist near Roccurem shifted, bent as if he were preparing to leave. Or maybe a fate could feel anger.

“Your father saved me from one who was very unkind. One who slaughtered and manipulated my brethren for their gain. Locked away is a mortal term meaning confinement. He protected me as he has done for you and many others. I owe him a debt, and I intend to pay it.”

I sat up straighter. “What debt?”

The council doors opened, and Logan strode in dressed in his council attire, the inky black and gold coat flaring behind him.

“There you are. I have been looking for you. You’re needed in Yejedin. They found something.”

I was on my feet a moment later, striding toward him. I didn’t bother to look back, knowing Roccurem was already gone.



MY FEET TOUCHED THE GROUND OUTSIDE THE PALACE, THE ROARING IN MY head easing. I walked the stone bridge path, the weight on my shoulders feeling lighter with each step closer to her. Feminine laughter filtered through the open front door, filling the palace with warmth, making it something akin to a home. My power reached for her, seeking her warmth and the connection between us.

I paused in the hall, the curtains blowing in the wind near me. I closed my eyes, listening for a moment, afraid it would stop if they knew I was there. She would stop. I’d wished for Dianna to laugh again, and hearing it now was music to my soul. What a beautiful sound. If only the gods could bottle it up, I’d get drunk off of it every night.

A glass shattered, cutting off their laughter, and I was in the kitchen in the next second.

Imogen stood with her hands clamped over her mouth, her eyes sparkling. Neverra’s grin was so wide it had to be making her face hurt.

Dianna's dark hair spilled over her shoulder as she bent down, picking up the broken pieces of glass. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She didn't need dresses or gowns like the goddesses I used to fawn over. Her simple sleeping clothes made me forget why I had come in here.

"Samkiel."

Neverra's voice snapped me out of my daze. I tore my gaze from Dianna and cleared my throat.

Neverra and Imogen wore similar sleeping attire, and I realized it was still early. The plates on the island were piled with stacks of crepes. The same ones she had made for me so long ago, and I realized Dianna had cooked. She had not done that in so very, very long.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," they said in unison, repeating the greeting back to me as if I had caught them in the middle of some wrongdoing.

"Imogen. Neverra." Their backs snapped straight, all humor draining from them at my tone. "You're needed at the council hall immediately."

They nodded once and smiled at Dianna. Imogen thanked her for the evening before heading upstairs. Neverra placed a hand on Dianna's shoulder, a look passing between them as if they shared a secret.

Dianna gave me a soft, almost shy smile. It was such a rare sight to see her so relaxed with her hair sleep mussed and her hazel eyes warm.

"Sorry about the mess." She smiled, glancing at the kitchen and the glass between us.

With a simple flick of my hand, the kitchen was as before. Spotless, with only their breakfast laid out on the island. "What mess?"

She looked at the clean kitchen. "If you ever need to change careers, you definitely have a future in housekeeping." Her tone was light, but I caught the slight tremor in her voice.

"Was yesterday pleasant for you?"

Dianna nodded and stood. The movement was pure seductive grace, reminding me so much of the power she wielded but refused to use. I could sense it at times, a flicker, a spark, begging to be lit once more. The way she moved, regardless if she knew it or not, was an enticement. She did nothing in particular; merely her existence made my blood thrum as if singing her praises. The night she'd stripped in front of me, I'd damn near fallen to my knees and begged for just a taste.

What she did to me without even trying had to be a sin in some realm or the next. On Rashearin, they called women like her temptresses. Able to seduce anyone with a flick of their gaze, a finger, or a soft smile. She was the embodiment of a temptress, and I ached for her no matter what she wore or how she spoke. All she had to do was look at me, and I was hard for her. She caught me up in the wildfire that was her, and I burned happily, but I feared I could not give her what she wanted. The thought put a damper on my mood.

Dianna stepped closer and ran her tongue over her lips. I nearly groaned and had to force myself to focus on her words. “I was wondering if you wanted to do something. Just the two of us? And this time without us fighting. I have this place in mind that would be fun. You do remember fun, right?”

Her scent surrounded me, mixed with the sweetness of the crepes. I swore my heart leaped in my throat and lodged itself there. I smiled to soften my response. “While I would—”

She placed a small hand against my chest, and the words died on my tongue. “Just hear me out before you say no and pretend you are busy. Please.”

My hand covered hers, holding it against my chest. “I never pretend that I am busy. I truly am.”

“Sure you are. Anyway, it would just be for a day. A whole mortal day. You can give me a day at least.”

Don’t look at me like that, my mind and heart whispered. So much had happened so quickly, and now Dianna practically begged to spend time with me. Duty told me I should not, but my heart raged that she would only further reclude herself if I said no. She was so fragile right now, but more than that, I wanted to be with her, to have this time with her.

“Y-yes.” I stumbled over my words before I cleared my throat. “I have things to attend to today, but I can try tomorrow.”

She slipped her hand from beneath mine, and a pained expression crossed her features. It was fleeting, but it was there. She smiled and stepped back right as Neverra and Imogen came downstairs. They carried large bags, both of them dressed and ready to go.

I kept my gaze on her, noting that this smile hadn’t touched her eyes, the hazel now clouded. “I may not be back tonight due to—”

“It’s fine. Tomorrow, remember. Just give me tomorrow,” Dianna said, cutting me off.

Neverra and Imogen seemed to hold their breath, everyone waiting for my answer.

I nodded. “Tomorrow.”

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SIXTY-EIGHT

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SAMKIEL



A roar shook the ground, and another celestial flew through the large gate. Cameron held the end of one thick chain, and Xavier was on the opposite side, straining against his own chain. At least a few dozen celestials struggled with them, trying to hold it still.

It let out another ear-shattering roar, thrashing against the bindings, trying to break free.

“Gigantes.” My voice vibrated from the stone walls, adding another tremor. Pebbles rained down, scattering across the floor. “Be still.”

“You!” it thundered, spotting me in the massive arched doorway.

Its head scraped the high rock ceiling as it continued to pull against the chains. I summoned an ablaze weapon, igniting the runes burned into the cuffs containing the giant’s wrists. Its arms pulled tight, stretching the bulging muscles of its chest. Cameron, Xavier, and the celestials let go, stepping back as the magic took over the job of containment. Matching runes lit above the arch, sealing the door.

It cursed and spewed hatred in its tongue as it beheld me.

“Gods, it took you long enough.” Cameron panted, bending over with his hands on his knees. Dirt and debris coated his armor as if he’d dug himself out of the ground several times. And, given what they’d found, it wouldn’t surprise me to find out the giant had stepped on him.

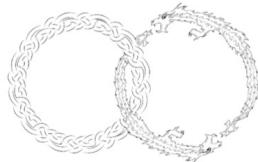
Xavier spat a few orders at the celestials, sending them to make sure the infrastructure of the cell would hold before striding toward me. He crashed to a halt beside Cameron, covered in sweat, his jovial calm replaced by the seasoned warrior that made him one of the most powerful of The Hand. His

armored hand came down hard on Cameron's shoulder, his gaze sliding over his friend, looking for injuries.

"Head back to the council. I need every eye and ear present for the debriefing," I commanded.

"What about you?" Xavier asked, his voice nearly drowned out by the giant's roar as it thrashed against the seal.

"I need information."



HOURS HAD PASSED. I HAD BEEN KEEPING TRACK OF THE TIME. IT MOVED SO differently in other dimensions. Minutes here could be hours to another world, days to some, but I had promised Dianna tomorrow, and I intended to be there.

"You do not tremble in fear of my presence?"

I sighed and folded my arms, armor covering me from head to toe. He threw his body at the runes, and the ground shook beneath his weight when he fell. He glared at me from his knees, quivering with rage. The scraps he wore clung to him, covering the lashes and markings on his greenish-gray skin. I had heard stories of the giants when I was younger, but they had died out long before I existed. So to see one now was unbelievable.

"Should I?" I asked.

"I am Porphyron." The rhythm of his speech was that of a monotone chant filled with power. "I have slain gods, cracked their bones like twigs, laid waste to villages, and decimated worlds. I am a king among giants, and stories will be told in my name."

I nodded, glancing at the time once more. "Yes, I appreciate your ability to share so freely. Unfortunately, most need a small amount of encouragement to do so."

I stood before the door, clasping my hands behind my back. The wall of celestial guards shifted as Porphyron lumbered to his feet and took one large step forward.

"And who might you be, silver one?"

I twisted a ring on my finger, and my helmet melted away. “I am Samkiel. My name comes with many titles, but I assume you already know that.” Arrogance laced my words, but I smiled politely.

“Samkiel,” he grumbled. Porphyrion grimaced as if my name left a bitter taste on his tongue. He lowered himself to his elbows, his body taking up half of his cell entrance. “You reek of the old blood. The blood of Unir now that I am close enough.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You do not know of me, do you?”

He shook his head.

“It seems you have been locked down here for a time.”

“Three thousand seven hundred and forty-two years, to be exact. I counted. On my old walls. Everyone that entered here spoke of what time, what era, and I counted.”

I tried to keep the surprise from my face, but sweat trickled down my back. “This dimension has existed for that long?”

He nodded. “Longer than that. You have no idea where you are, do you?”

“Yejedin.”

“That is one name for it.”

“And what is Yejedin?”

His eyes narrowed on me as if he were trying to decide if I was insane or merely asking questions to annoy him.

“You truly do not know, do you? You are a young god, yet you speak my language? How?”

“I speak a thousand languages from a thousand worlds. Yours was merely one I digested out of curiosity when I wasn’t fighting.”

“How long have you been king, the one they call Samkiel?”

I glanced up, trying to recall my own age. “Close to two thousand years, give or take. Since my birth.”

His smile was so wide I saw the razor-sharp carnassial teeth shining behind his gums. “Ah, so you are what caused the breaking. You are what made the realms so volatile.”

“What do you mean?”

“The rulers of this dimension began talking. Even this far down, I could hear through the cells when the other prisoners were not bellowing. The Old Ones spoke of a boy born who would unseat them, and so they planned.”

“The Old Ones?”

“Aye,” he said, sitting and leaning back against the wall. The ground shook, and a few of the celestials righted themselves before returning to their guard stances. “I thought the Old Ones came back.”

“How so?”

“This dimension shook. I heard the roar and smelled the flames. The runes burned off my original cell. Walls fell, and powerful wings of death flapped through the sky. I crawled out of the rubble just as I saw a massive beast of scales and spikes pass. It destroyed everything in its path. Even I ran and hid. Then your tiny soldiers found me,” he said, pulling on the chains for effect.

Winged death. It was the same thing Santiago had called Dianna, and I suppose, to them, she was. She had slaughtered Tobias and destroyed much of this dimension. If Kaden was one of the Old Ones, it would make sense for her to have his power. Power so strong it made even a giant tremble.

“Tell me about the Old Ones.”

He sighed. “Perhaps after a meal.”

I rubbed my brow, knowing this would take more time than I had.

I secured every rune in place before I left Porphyron. I had set up a rotation of celestial guards to make sure nothing ventured down while I was away. The sun had set by the time I returned to the council, which meant I had hours before dawn. I sighed in relief and sat, rubbing a hand over my face. I promised her tomorrow, and despite everything I still had to do, I couldn’t wait to have the day with her.



MY HEAD JERKED UP AS LOGAN SLID A SMALL TRAY OF ROASTED FOWL AND steamed vegetables near me.

“Neverra cooked, and you need to eat. You’ve been up here all evening.”

The Hand had been here with me since I returned from Yejedin. I had grabbed every book and scroll I could find about realms, prisons, and even worlds inside of worlds. They had been here, reading and trying to figure out why so little was known about this realm, but we came up short. So

when they'd started speaking about getting food, I'd dismissed them all for the rest of the night.

"I am not hungry." I raised my hand, massaging my temple, a million and one thoughts burrowing through my brain.

The chair near me groaned as he sat.

"Nev took Dianna something to eat. She is fine. I told Nev just to head back to our quarters."

"And why are you not with her?"

He snorted. "Someone has to take care of you."

I nodded, my hand still over my eyes. "It feels as though I know nothing. How did my father expect me to be king of everything if there were things he kept from me?"

Logan huffed. "Maybe he didn't get around to telling you."

I lowered my hand, my gaze swinging toward Logan. "He forgot to mention a prison world that has existed for thousands of years?"

Logan's lips thinned into a line, and he shrugged. "I don't know."

Sighing, I pulled the plate closer and picked up my utensils. Logan flipped through a book as I ate. My mind continued to work, trying to figure out what I was missing.

"I—" I bit off the sentence that threatened to pour from my lips and stabbed a piece of meat.

Logan looked up from his book. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied, taking a deep breath. "It's nothing."

He tipped his head, trying to catch my gaze. "Look, we will find out why this place was hidden, even if we have to read every damned book in this place."

"No, I know. It's not that."

I stabbed at my food again, anxiety eating away at my gut. Considering what we'd found, I shouldn't even be thinking of this, but it seemed I didn't have control over it.

"Samkiel."

"It's nothing," I insisted, focusing on my food.

I felt Logan's glare.

"Please return to your book. The research is more helpful than staring at me."

"What are you avoiding?" Logan ignored me and persisted.

I sighed and finished chewing before saying, “I am wondering how important this prison world is to Kaden. Was he just a prisoner there? He has probably been hiding there for eons, making weapons and plans. If he is waiting to end me, that means it probably requires a ritual. It would only make sense since it took a ritual involving me to seal the realms. Thus, one would be required to open them. And rituals, no matter the kind, require sacrifices or major celestial events. Perhaps he is waiting for that.”

Logan sighed. “That’s great reasoning and all, but I’m talking about the other thing that has your leg twitching under the table fast enough to shake the floor.”

I shot him a glare. “It’s nothing.”

“Samkiel.”

“I mean, it’s probably nothing. I have a tendency to overthink a lot of issues.”

“Samkiel,” he said again, his tone changing. He would not drop this, and the truth was, I needed to talk about it. I was overthinking it, and maybe if I said it aloud, I could gain some clarity. I put my fork down and folded my hands in front of me.

“It’s Dianna.”

“Is she okay? Have her powers returned?”

“No.” I raised my hand, scratching at the back of my head. “She wishes to spend time with me. Just us. She requested a day, and she has made it clear that some of her feelings have returned for me.”

“Ah.” Logan smiled widely. “So that’s why you reek of nerves? I knew it wasn’t the colossal monster in a secret prison dimension. Dianna is the only thing that has ever made you sweat like this.”

The look I shot him only made him grin wider.

“I think I am overthinking it. Before Dianna either tried to kill me or we were arguing, but she has started to open up more regarding her trauma. Which is what I wish, but then sometimes she looks at me in such a way that I cannot breathe. It’s as if all the air is sucked from my lungs. She brushes her hand across my chest or lays her head on my shoulder, and I feel something so much more than desire. Before Gabby died, there were glimpses of this, but it was just an idea. Now... this feels like a true beginning. As if my feet have been placed on a path, and if I take the next step, there will be no going back. I don’t know. I am overthinking.” My hands flexed on the table. “Tell me I am overthinking.”

Logan shrugged. "I don't think you are. I think you have been chipping away at those walls she so furiously built, brick by brick, and it's normal that her feelings for you would return. Isn't that what you wanted? Why does this have you reeling?"

"It feels inappropriate to be concerned with such things when we are dealing with so many other major issues."

Logan chuckled and folded his arms. "Uh-huh."

"Am I being irrational?"

"You? Never." Logan smirked.

I sighed, placing my head in my hands.

"What exactly did she say?"

"A day. She wishes for a day."

"Ah, so, like a date?"

I glanced at him from beneath my hands. "What's a date?"

He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "Remember when I first courted Neverra, and I would take her to the plaza? They had muses that would play music or recite poetry during the evening. A lot of couples went there. A date is that. Something that couples do that is not work-related." He made sure to enunciate the last part.

My head slammed to the table, and I lay there face down. "What if you're wrong, and I am just seeing what I want to see? What if it isn't real, Logan?" I mumbled against the table.

Logan's laugh only made my nerves more erratic. "They wrote war songs about you. Men and beasts alike would piss themselves if you stepped on a battlefield, and now the great and fearsome World Ender is afraid of a date."

"I am not fond of you right now," I said.

"You should bring flowers."

"Flowers?" I asked, lifting my head. "Why, so she can toss them in my face? Crush my heart further? We just got to the point where she can tolerate me once more. I do not wish to scare her. Sometimes she retreats so far inside her mind that even I cannot reach her."

"Okay, well, how about this? You will know if it's a date if you see her tomorrow and her hair and makeup are done. Nev always does that, plus the smell."

"Smell?" I asked, more confused than when we'd begun this conversation.

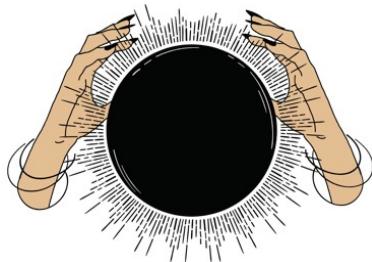
Logan's laugh reverberated off the council halls.
I really hated him.

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SIXTY-NINE

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CAMILLA



I fiddled with the chains attached to the cuffs wrapped around my wrists. The buzz from whatever air conditioning they had stirred above my head. I sat back on the bench in my cell and tucked my legs under me with a sigh. I tried to keep track of how many days I had been locked up by counting the meals Vincent brought me, but my internal clock was just too messed up, and the grumpy celestial was no help.

My hands flexed, and I concentrated on my palm, willing just a flicker of emerald magic to form, but like every other time, nothing happened. Sighing, I leaned against the cool wall.

A door whooshed open, and I sat straight. Any distraction from my thoughts was welcome at this point. Light poured into the room, followed by voices. My heart quickened, thinking Vincent had returned, but I quickly snuffed that reaction. We barely tolerated each other, but at least when he was here, I didn't feel so alone. Even if he just sat silently or complained.

I heard a deep laugh as two sets of feet headed my way. Logan. My hope and excitement deflated.

"I will suspend you if you do not cease." Samkiel's voice was a low growl filled with exasperation.

At the sound of his voice, I stood. I hadn't seen Samkiel since they'd locked me away down here. My hand instinctively ran to my throat. I gulped, remembering the feeling of his power coursing through my veins, almost boiling my body alive. The dark thoughts just kept coming, and I couldn't help but remember the stories I'd heard of Samkiel and Logan. How, when the two of them showed up together, their enemies fell. Was that

to be my fate? Had my usefulness run its course? I couldn't help how I began to tremble, terror twisting me in knots.

They came to a stop in front of me. The power radiating from them made my skin prickle and my magic sing. They were men-shaped forces of light, air, and pure raw power.

"Hello, Camilla. Are you enjoying your cell?" Samkiel asked. His voice always reminded me of the ocean. It sounded beautiful but could create a storm so dark and violent that it would drown you in seconds if you allowed it.

"It's lovely." I lifted my hands, the engraved silver cuffs rattling. "Celestial chains and all. Oh, and the company. Vincent is the best guard."

Samkiel looked at Logan, his brow furrowing with confusion. "Peculiar, I only sent him for one watch. He's been back?"

Logan shrugged. "I don't know. He hasn't said anything about it to me."

That caught me off-guard, and I realized I probably should have kept my mouth shut. Vincent had come back regularly. He'd tell the others to leave, and then he would usually just sulk, barely speaking. But the nights he did, we talked about everything and nothing.

Samkiel brushed it off, placing one hand in his pocket. Even his council garbs screamed power, the silver a stark contrast to the unrelieved black of the celestials. I knew he was the protector and savior of every realm, but right now, he seemed every bit of a predator. Sheer power wafted off him. Maybe that was what Dianna loved most about him. Or maybe it was the ego she'd complained about, but I knew her and could tell she found his confidence sexy. I mean, in all fairness, he'd earned it. He needed no help, no armies. I had heard the stories, read the texts, and witnessed a small amount back in San Paulao. He had nearly ripped the room apart after Dianna was shot. I could easily picture him doing the same to Onuna if she had died in Yejedin. There would be nothing left in the wake of that destruction.

Samkiel was just a boy in love with a girl. I knew it, even if they hadn't said it. Or, like her, denied it. I could feel it dancing across my skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Love was nothing but magic in its purest form.

"I'm assuming you're here to tell me I'll be executed soon?" I swallowed the growing lump in my throat.

Logan snickered, and Samkiel shot him a quelling glance before saying, "Actually, quite the opposite."

I took a step, the chains at my feet rattling. “You’re letting me go?”

If Samkiel heard my racing heart, he didn’t mention it. “Temporarily,” he said.

“Why?” The ‘after everything’ was silent.

Samkiel took a step forward, and I took one back. His large frame took up half the cell door, partially blocking my view of Logan.

“Please, do not get too excited. This is not a....” He looked at Logan. “What is the word I am searching for?”

“Vacation? Maybe?”

“Ah yes, not a vacation for you. I simply require something from you. A favor, no, I apologize, a request, so to speak.”

My nerves raced. What could he want from me? “What is it you need?”

“Merely a day.”

“A day?”

He rubbed at the growing stubble on his jaw as if searching for the words. He seemed nervous. What could he possibly need a day for?

“Yes, I wish for you to impersonate me. Only for a day. Logan will be with you the entire time, helping you if the council wishes to speak, but no one else will know.”

Sweat broke out down my spine. “You want me to impersonate you during a council meeting for a day?”

Samkiel nodded.

“Why?”

“The reason is none of your business.”

The way he said it and shuffled his feet told me everything I needed to know. I fought to keep the smile off my face. Dianna. It had to be because of her. She was the only one I knew that could unnerve him enough to crack his tough exterior.

“Okay. I’ll do it. It’s the least I can do considering...”

Samkiel pinned me in place with his gaze, and my words trailed off. An icy wind ripped through the room, and if looks could kill, I’d be dead.

“This changes nothing about your imprisonment, nor does it make up for what you have done. Do you understand?”

I nodded, lowering my gaze. “I know.”

“Perfect,” he said from right in front of me. He hadn’t bothered to lower the glowing bars. He just appeared inside my cell. I froze as he dipped his head toward me.

“If you try to flee while I am away, try to hurt or trick anyone I care for, I will make sure your death lasts eons. I know how, and I can show you. It would be easy after what you did to my Dianna. Is that also clear?”

My nod was more of a feverish shake. He straightened, my eyes boring into his broad chest. One second he was there. The next, I was looking at Logan beyond the cerulean bars.

Logan tapped his fingers against the screen on the wall beside my cell, and the bars fell.

He stepped inside and produced a key before reaching for my hands. I noticed the hint of a tattoo curving around his wrist as he unlocked the cuffs.

“I’ll need to eat something if I am doing a transfiguration spell. Especially if I am to hold it all day.”

The chains fell to the floor, and my magic welled to the surface, wrapping me in warmth.

Logan stepped back, his expression hard. “I am surprised Dianna let you live after what you did.”

“You care about her.”

“She is my queen.”

“What?” The word left my lips on a gasp.

“If Samkiel so chooses, she will be. But she is also more than that.” Logan took me by the arm and led me to the door. “She saved my life twice and made it possible for me to rescue my wife from Yejedin. So, to say that I care for her doesn’t even begin to express what I feel for Dianna. She’s family now, whether or not she knows it. So let’s get you fed, and this day started, and maybe, just maybe, it will work long enough that they can have one day of peace together.”

A smile teased at the edges of my lips. Maybe in the cruellest way, Dianna had gotten the one thing she so desperately craved—a family.

SEVENTY

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DIANNA



Light, bright and shimmering, darted past the window. I zipped up my jacket and practically ran down the steps. The thick boots Neverra had given me made me a little slower. I rushed into the kitchen and abruptly stopped near the island as he rounded the corner.

“You were able to get away?”

The grin on his face deepened. “You asked. I made it work.”

I hadn’t realized how much I wanted this until I heard those words. Relief flooded through me, and I smiled back.

His brows furrowed, and for a moment, I thought he would tell me it was all a joke. I waited for him to rip this away, cruelty much more familiar to me than kindness. He gestured toward me and cleared his throat. “Your hair... It’s lovely.”

I slid my fingers through it. “Oh, thanks. I straightened it. Imogen let me borrow some stuff.”

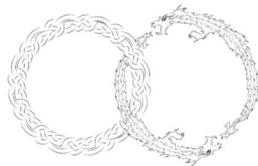
He swallowed and nodded, but I wasn’t sure he’d heard me. His gaze slid slowly over me, and I felt it like a caress. Was he nervous?

Samkiel cleared his throat again. “Alright.” He placed his hands on his hips, his council garbs flaring behind them. “What ghastly tortures have you concocted for us today?”

I smiled brightly, bouncing on my toes. “You will need warmer clothes for where we’re going.”

One of his brows ticked up. “Oh?”

“It’s going to be pretty dangerous.”



“SO, THIS IS YOUR PLAN? THIS IS HOW YOU ARE GOING TO FINALLY KILL me?” he groaned, sprawled out on his back, his arms and legs extended.

“My, my, the mighty and legendary warrior taken out by blades and ice.” I leaned my hands on my knees and smiled down at him. “Who would have thought?”

The glare he sent me had me laughing so hard that I nearly ended up next to him. Once I had my giggles under control, I extended my hand. “Come on.”

He took it, allowing me to help him up. He corrected his posture, but I kept hold of his hand, not letting go.

“Keep holding my hands.”

He looked shocked, but he obliged, his gloved hands engulfing mine. I started skating backward, and he stayed upright for once. Snow continued to fall while a slow, cheery melody played. Thick foliage lined the rink, and multicolored lights floated around the arena.

“I do not like this.”

I moved a tad faster. “Why? It just requires balance. That’s like your whole thing.”

The look he gave me made me throw my head back and laugh.

“Shoes with a single blade seem like an appropriate weapon, but not a great idea to move around on ice.”

“You got this,” I said as I swayed, grinning at him. “I’m going to let go now.”

“Why?” He almost sounded scared, and I bit back another laugh.

Carefully, I let go of him and continued to skate backward. He wobbled, his arms swinging, but managed to stay upright.

“Don’t flail your arms. You’ll fall.”

“I have fallen eight times already,” he said, shuffling forward.

I grinned and shrugged. “Maybe you need to get rid of some muscle.”

He managed one of those damning glares that set my blood boiling. “Then what would you stare at when you think I am not looking?”

I continued to skate, placing my hands behind my back. “I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about,” I said innocently.

“Mmhmm.”

I made a large circle around him and moved to his side. “Watch me. Move your feet like mine.”

He glanced down, watching my feet slide left and right. He copied the movement, his natural grace kicking in, and soon our feet were in sync.

“Good job.”

He smiled widely, this time glancing at me. “Thanks.”

I extended my hand toward him, and I could feel his surprised pleasure. He took it almost reverently but held it firmly. “How did you get so good at this? You never told me.”

I squeezed his hand as we went around the rink once more. “Gabby and I came here during the first big Celebration of The Fall we spent together. It was a few years after they opened. I got a week away from Kaden, and we spent every day here. I busted my ass way more than her, though. She was a natural at everything, and I hated her for it.” I smiled, realizing the memory didn’t come with the same sharp pain as before. “We tried to do this every year so we could get together for the holiday.”

His expression changed, but I couldn’t decipher the emotions.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “While your story is lovely, and I wish you two could have had many more of these adventures, it’s just very strange to me, and I suppose mildly uncomfortable, that Onuna celebrates a day that haunts me.”

I hadn’t considered that aspect of the holiday. Samkiel had nothing but painful memories associated with The Fall. “It’s more about the celebration of life, not the destruction. Everyone was terrified, thinking the world was ending. I mean, for us, the sky literally fell, but it wasn’t all bad. Gabby helped me see that. It may have changed our world, but it gave us the technology we would never have developed, medical knowledge that helped cure so much, and people were just nicer afterward. The Celebration of The Fall is just another way to show appreciation. It showed us how fragile life can be and to appreciate the ones you love always.”

I didn’t realize Samkiel was staring at me until I finished. “What?”

“That was... beautiful.”

I smiled softly, bumping softly into his shoulder. “Gabby’s words, not mine. Trust me, I still hated you all and thought you were the scourge of the universe.”

He tipped his head back and laughed. “There she is. I was afraid you might have gone soft.”

“Who?” I pointed toward my chest. “Me? Never.”

We skated, only the sound of our blades biting into the ice breaking the silence.

“Thank you for bringing me here. I know it means something to you. Anything you wish to share with me means a lot.”

My heart leaped at his words. I knew he genuinely meant it. He always meant what he said and never shied away from how he felt. I’d been broken into so many pieces, and Kaden had taught me that each shard could be used as a weapon against me. It was so hard for me to crawl out of that pit and feel safe expressing any emotion. That was one reason I’d brought him here, away from everyone else. I wanted to try.

I dipped my head, letting my hair fall forward to shield my expression. “You haven’t fallen in almost five minutes. That’s a new record.”

Samkiel allowed the change of subject and nodded proudly. “It’s because you have not let me go yet.”

He squeezed my hand, and I smiled at him. A dark lock of hair had escaped his hat, falling across his forehead. He looked so mortal, trying to keep pace with me, so out of his element. His thick winter coat was black, mine was white, and our jeans were almost identical. I wondered if he’d intentionally matched his clothes to mine, but I chalked it up to my overthinking brain. He hadn’t let go of my hand, and a part of me wanted to yank it back, rebel. The same part that was terrified to experience anything and took comfort in being emotionless and callous

“Can I ask you a question?”

He snorted. “Why would you hesitate now? Don’t you always?”

I bumped my shoulder against his. “I’m being serious.”

He smirked. “Go on, ask away.”

“Why don’t Logan and Neverra have any children? I know celestials can.”

He was quiet for a moment as we skated. We took another pass around the rink before he spoke. “There was a procedure on Rasheirim. Most males, especially those in power, got it to prevent unwanted pregnancy.

Many didn't want heirs from their consorts, and even more, were waiting for their mark before having children. It's reversible if you wish, but most don't."

"Oh. I'm assuming you did it too?"

Samkiel chuckled. "Why do you ask? Ulterior motives?"

"No." I shrugged, feigning innocence. "Call me curious."

"Yes, I had it done, too. Logan and I both had it done after a... umm... scare."

I couldn't hide the coil of jealousy that wrapped around me. I whipped my head toward him, but it only made him laugh.

"Like I stated—a scare."

"Oh, so there are no tiny Samkiels running around the universe that you may not know about?"

"No." He glanced at me warily, and I braced myself. "I had many consorts, and I did not want any more scares during my free time. Also, most wished to bed me for an heir, and I did not want that either. My father might have wished that for me, but after I witnessed what became of my mother with my birth, I would not damn another to that fate, especially one I wished to share life with. I don't care if it would have benefited the realms. That's too steep a price."

My heart ached for him, even if I didn't enjoy hearing about his consorts. It was nearly as bad as reliving his blooddreams.

"You really are a knight in shining armor, aren't you?"

He scowled. "What is that?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"Uh-huh," he said, obviously not believing me.

"What about you? Do you want children?"

I thought about it, and my heart clenched. "Maybe before, but I'd never damn a child to a life with me."

I felt his eyes rake over me. "I know you don't see it, but I don't think anyone would consider themselves damned with you."

I didn't refute him, but I felt the opposite. Children meant home and family, and I'd given up on that long ago. If I let myself dream, I could imagine children and a husband, but I'd never want to burden anyone with me. Even if he said the opposite, I knew the truth. I hurt everyone I cared about, and I would never do that to my babies.

We swayed side by side, our hands clasped as we slid smoothly over the ice.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said. His voice shook away the thoughts that plagued me.

"You didn't. Pinky promise." I gave him a forced smile.

"Then what are you thinking about? You disappear sometimes."

"Do I?"

He nodded. "Sometimes you retreat so far in your head I'm afraid I can't reach you."

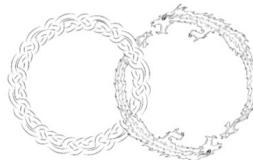
I was an open book to him, and he read every page I learned. I couldn't throw my words like acid to burn him; he merely brushed them off. I couldn't hide behind my anger and hate because he knew better. He always did. His words softened an unruly beast in me, soothing its thrashing body back to sleep. He had no idea how utterly and completely wrong he was. He always reached me, which was the problem and another reason among many why I left when Gabby died. Samkiel could drag me out of my pain and misery, and he would help and be there for me when all I wanted was vengeance and blood. I didn't want his help then, didn't want him to reach me, but now? Now I thought I was ready.

"Sorry, I'm hungry." I squeezed his hand in reassurance to let him know it wasn't completely a lie.

"Mm-hmm," he said, allowing me to change the subject again. "I don't know anything nearby that would still be open." He was right. It was well past closing time for the rink, and since we were trying to avoid being seen publicly, our options were limited.

I caught sight of a gray van half-hidden behind the trees, and I pulled us to a stop, the ice crunching beneath our blades.

A mischievous grin lit up my face. "I have an idea."



"I NEED TO INQUIRE FURTHER ABOUT YOUR IDEAS BEFORE I AGREE," Samkiel said with a huff.

I leaned over, digging through the cabinet. An array of every item needed to make whatever I wished lay frozen in the icebox. I smiled, the cool air brushing against my legs as I popped up, placing my arms across the short metal table.

“What do you want, handsome?” I asked, leaning through the window and pointing toward the menu on the side of the food truck.

His grin was dangerous, his pleasure at the compliment easy to see. “This is stealing. You do realize that?”

I waved my hand. “Eh, I call it borrowing, and technically, you’re an accomplice. You broke the lock, then started the truck. So...” My voice trailed off.

He shrugged. “I’m innocent. You coerced me.”

“Barely.” I snickered.

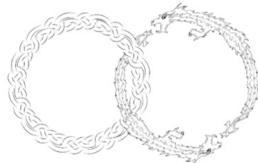
He bit the inside of his cheek, stifling his laugh, before looking at the colorful menu hanging from the side of the truck. “Can you actually make what they have here?”

I placed a hand on my chest. “You doubt my abilities?”

“You’re insufferable.” He grinned and pointed at one of the items pictured on the menu. “Okay, how about this?”

I blew a small whistle through my teeth. “A god with a sweet tooth.”

He chuckled as I retreated into the truck to gather the ingredients, the sound wrapping me in warmth.



WE SAT AT A SMALL TABLE OUTSIDE, BUNDLED UP IN OUR JACKETS AND sitting close. Music spilled from the truck, low enough not to disturb. There were five dishes between us. After my first two failed attempts, Samkiel climbed into the truck with me, and together we worked until we got it right. We had fun. For the first time in so long, I’d been able to relax enough to enjoy myself, and it didn’t feel like he was avoiding me. I would be okay if I could just have him alone like this.

“You’re doing it again,” he said, nudging me with his shoulder before taking a bite of the sweet dessert.

I tipped my head and licked my spoon. “Doing what?”

“Disappearing,” he murmured, his eyes going hot as he watched me.

I smirked at him and stabbed the circular frozen orb until it burst, chocolate dripping out in a mist of steam. “I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“These last few days have been the first time I’ve had fun since...” My words trailed off. I didn’t need to say anything further.

“Me too.”

“I’m surprised you agreed to today.” I leaned forward and took a bite.

“Why?”

I didn’t want to mention the growing tension between us, so I skipped over it.

“The last time I was in Onuna didn’t go so well. Aren’t you afraid Kaden will show up to drag me back?”

“He was not in Yejedin, and I doubt he would show up. He seems to want to stay hidden.”

My spoon stopped halfway to my mouth, and I stared at him. I felt the color drain from my face, my stomach rolling.

“You went to Yejedin?” My heart stilled in my chest. “Is that where you’ve been? Why you left me for six days?”

He sighed and lowered his spoon to rub his hand across his jaw as if he hadn’t meant to tell me.

“You did.” I felt as though the wind had been knocked out of me. “You said you’ve been busy, but this... That’s why you asked about Yejedin when we went to the beach.”

“Dianna.”

Blood pounded in my ears. “You’ve been lying to me.”

“No, I simply did not tell you all I was doing.”

“Why?”

“Because your healing is—”

“Oh, save it,” I snapped. “I don’t care about my healing, and don’t use that as an excuse. We both know you went down there to kill him.”

He just stared at me, confirming everything without saying a word. I slammed my spoon down hard enough to break it.

“It is not your vengeance to seek!”

“Isn’t it?” he snapped back, meeting fire with fire as he always did. Never harsh or cruel, but never afraid. And a flicker of flame in me bent

toward him and his indomitable will. “You didn’t just lose a sister, Dianna. I lost you in every way possible. He *hurt* you. He will pay for that whether or not you think it’s acceptable. I didn’t tell you because you would have run to confront him. You’re a fool to think I’d let you near him without your powers. You mean too much to me.”

My anger pulled back a fraction, even as my chest ached. “Don’t try to calm me down with pretty words when we both know the truth. You’re doing it again. Shutting me out. Just like at Drake’s. You’re avoiding me. I had to practically beg you to get you to spend even a day with me.”

“No, I’m not, and no, you didn’t. I told you I was busy.”

“Yes, searching for him to take away the last thing I have....” The words died in my throat. It was the last thing I had of her, the last thing I could do for her. I’d had the chance, and I’d chosen to flee, to return to the god king staring at me. “Look, I get it. You don’t need me anymore. You have them. They can help and fight with you while I wait in a fucking castle for you to return.”

He recoiled as if I had slapped him. “That is the farthest thing from true.”

“Well, how would I know?”

“Listen, yes, I opened Yejedin to find him. I wanted to kill him so it would be over. I want you safe, Dianna, and I am willing to eliminate anything that would hurt you in this world and the next. But when we got there, we found something I am uncomfortable discussing in the open like this.”

“Well, it’s not like you will discuss it when we get back. You’ll leave. Again,” I snapped, leaning a fraction away from him.

“I am not the one who left, Dianna. You did.”

And it was the truth, the absolute truth. Yet, here I was, acting as if he needed to tell me everything he did when I left, when I hurt him in every way possible, lied to him, used what he had taught me, and spat it back in his face. I had no right.

“You’re right,” I said. “I did leave, but killing Kaden feels like the only part of her I have left. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“I understand. I do, but death, even by your hands, will not bring you the peace you wish.” His gaze met mine, every bit of care and compassion swirling in those depths. I nodded, swallowing the growing lump in my throat.

"Is this all we are going to do? Argue?" I sighed. "I miss how we were." Shock slapped his expression. "I miss how it was before it all went to shit."

A soft smile curved his lips. "I mean, we still argued."

I nodded, my anger fading as quickly as it had come.

"Dianna, I am trying. I really am trying to keep my head above water, help you, help the world, and defeat this psychopath. So, please, bear with me. I am not trying to keep things from you. Your life is more important than anything. I just can't lose you again, and I am not sure how to handle all this."

"Well, you don't have to handle it alone. We used to rely on each other more."

"I know. I just want you to... heal."

"And I want to help."

Samkiel sighed and pulled his hat off, running his hand through his hair, exhaustion etched into his features. It hit me, then. Just how tired he had been lately and how I was not helping but only adding to it. I didn't want to hurt him anymore, not in the slightest. I pushed my anger aside because the truth was, I cared for him enough that I was worried about him.

"I've ruined this." I blew out a long breath.

"This?"

"Yup, this was supposed to be a date."

His eyes gleamed, his throat bobbing nervously as if he had been waiting to hear those exact words. "A date?"

I nodded. "I wanted it to be."

"Well, I do not think you've ruined anything."

"Agree to disagree." I huffed, placing a hand under my chin. "We kinda got into a fight."

He shrugged nonchalantly as he crossed his arms and leaned on the table. "A slight misunderstanding, at the most. We've had many."

I couldn't help the small smile that curved my lips. "Well, I don't want to fight with you or have any slight misunderstandings. I want one good day."

"I agree. I don't want to fight with you, either. I know you are not used to it, but your safety comes first for me. You cannot be within an inch of Kaden without your powers. Not because I think you are weak, but if he hurt you again, touched you, I'd level the world."

I met him stare for stare, knowing he had the power to do it and he wouldn't hesitate. Something must be wrong with me because it was the sexiest thing I had ever heard. "Just let me stab him. Once."

"Dianna." He said my name as a warning.

"Look, I know killing Kaden won't make it better or bring her back, but it would be done at my hands, and that would give me some solace. A way for me to feel like I wasn't a complete failure when it came to her."

His eyes bore into me as he contemplated that for a moment. "Fine."

"That's it? You'll let me."

He picked up his spoon and took another bite. "Sure. You may deliver your final blow once I am done with him. I'll make sure I've incapacitated enough that he cannot hurt you if your powers are not back. Will that suffice?"

My lips twisted in a smirk. "You're cute when you're homicidal."

He made a noise low in his throat. "Do not be mean, then flirt with me."

"Why? It's our whole dynamic."

He grumbled as he ate.

"Besides the ice skating, I brought you here for a reason."

His eyes widened a fraction, the spoon stilling in his mouth as if he thought I had brought him here to kill him. He picked up a napkin and wiped his mouth.

"Is it more painful ice activities?"

I shook my head. "Nope. No pain involved."

Interest danced in his gaze. "Alright. Enlighten me then."

"I want to show you something."

SEVENTY-ONE

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DIANNA



We landed, and Samkiel placed me gently on my feet. I dreamed of this house often, but it looked so different from my memories. The brick path Gabby and I had laughed and fought over while building it was crumbling, little bits of grass growing through the cracks. Overgrown and misshapen shrubs lined it, sentinels to the neglect. It was quiet in the neighborhood. There was nothing and no one out of the streets. The streetlights buzzed, and I couldn't tell if it was from Samkiel or just the sound of the lights.

"What is this place?" Samkiel asked.

"It's the first home Gabby and I bought after leaving Eoria. It was our original safe house."

I turned to him and held my hand out. Samkiel studied me, and I saw the understanding in his eyes. He understood how important this was to me. He, of all people, knew how hard it was to share memories that both made you who you were and cut you to the bone.

"I want to show you."

He took my hand and raised it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to my fingers in a silent thank you. Even with the gloves I wore, I could feel the energy radiating off of him. We walked up the wooden steps and paused on the porch. A bright sticker was stuck to the front door.

FORECLOSURE. PROPERTY OF THE CITY OF ADONAELE.

I dropped Samkiel's hand and ran my fingers over the weathered edges of the sign.

"I stopped paying for this place after—" I shrugged, dropping my hand. "I figured what's the point, you know?"

Samkiel watched me as if he could see into my very damaged and bruised soul. He reached out and twisted the doorknob until the lock broke. The door swung open with a slow creak. “Tell me more. Show me.”

He was doing it again, trying to help me heal. Only this time, it was on my terms. I took a deep breath and entered, Samkiel right behind me. The house was quiet and dark. Samkiel closed the door behind us, his palm lighting with silver, illuminating the room. Dust motes swirled into the air, disturbed by our footsteps and the cold breeze that had sneaked inside. I looked around, memories of the hours Gabby and I had spent looking through used stores for the mismatched furniture bittersweet.

Samkiel followed me into the kitchen, holding his hand higher to ensure I had enough light. The kitchen was bare, with one chair pushed up against the small table. I idly wondered where the second one had gone as I ran a hand over the wall closest to me.

“She hated the pattern that was here when we first bought it, so we spent almost two weeks trying to find a better one. It had to be perfect. This was our first real place. I wanted her to love it and everything in it. I wanted it to feel like home.”

I stroked my hand over the countertop as we passed through the small kitchen, exiting into a small hall on the other side. It split into rooms, one on either side and circled back to the living room in the other direction.

“Was it home?”

I nodded, stopping short. “I like to decorate, especially this place. It was ours.”

I turned slowly, my gaze drawn to the engraving on the wall. My heart raced, beating so hard I was sure I was dying. A cold sweat slicked my skin, and tremors racked my body. I hadn’t realized I’d moved, only that I was there. I reached up and traced the initials carved into the wall.

“What is this?” Samkiel asked from behind me, grounding me and ripping me from the memories that threatened to drag me back into the darkness.

“It’s our parents and our initials. We were painting, and I wanted something to remember them by. Some symbol that we all belonged to each other. I was so sentimental then.” My hand dropped, the truth of my reality sinking in. It had nothing to do with my past, only my future.

Samkiel reached up, tracing the letters, too. “It is not sentimental. My mother and I carved our names into a tree on Rasheirim. It was when I was

younger, and my father was away fighting some battle.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm. That tree stayed until my world fell. It is nice you still have your tree,” he said, his voice filled with sincerity.

He was doing it again, easing into my cracked soul. A word, a glance, an affirmation that he would take care of me, and I would be okay. And I hated it. I hated it because I didn’t deserve it. I didn’t deserve him.

“I told you that Kaden was my first. First, everything, really. I tried to make something work between us while I was stuck where I was, and at first, I thought we had. A part of me cared for him, but all that changed when I caught him with someone else. Our relationship ceased to be, if there had actually ever been one. He was bent on controlling me. I was to do what I was told when I was told to do it. If I didn’t... Well, let’s just say Kaden was creative in his punishments.”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, fighting back the memories of the worst of his retaliations. The sight of his hand cupping Gabby’s chin before the sound of the crack that destroyed my world. I swallowed hard and forced myself to continue.

“He had lovers. I had lovers, but I never got attached to anyone ever again. Even with Camilla, it was never serious for me. Not until you. I have trust issues.” A small breathless laugh escaped my lips. “I have a lot of issues, and I know I can be mean and rude and cruel. I also know I will never fully heal. He destroyed a part of me. It was one of the best parts, and I will never get that back. I mean that with every fiber of my being. I know you want to help, to help me get my powers back, but when they do, if they do, I still won’t be the same girl you are chasing. The last part of my family is gone. I know you want that girl who laughed at the festival, who took pictures with you, who held you, who would have given her life for you and her sister, the one who hoped and could see the good in life, but I’m afraid she is gone too. Samkiel, I’m being as honest and open with you as I know how to be. I am a mess of jagged pieces and broken parts, but...”

Samkiel’s brows bunched together, but he didn’t press or grow frustrated with me. He only watched and listened.

“But,” I finally said, “every fragment, every piece of me still left, cares about you. Even the very dangerous and ugly parts.”

“Dianna,” he cupped my cheek, the heat of his palm rough against my skin, “there are no ugly parts or pieces of you, and I care about them all,

broken or not.”

I felt a crack form in the locked door deep within me. It was a small one, but it let out a shimmer of light.

The next part was the hardest for me to admit, and I swallowed, bolstering my resolve. “I hurt you, punishing you for someone else’s mistakes, and I’m sorry. I couldn’t push Gabby away, but I can you. It wasn’t fair. I just,” I paused, forcing out the words that broke my heart, “I just didn’t want to stick you with a horrible life, too.”

Something sparked behind his eyes, as if my words caressed some broken part in him, too. I didn’t apologize. I never did. Only to Gabby and now to him. Twice. I hoped he could see that and understand what he truly meant to me.

“Dianna,” he paused, seeming to gather his words, “there is no life with you in it that would be horrible. Horrible is living without you.”

A lock on a door in the house we stood in faded.

His smile was devastating. He tenderly brushed a piece of hair back from my face. “Thank you for apologizing and bringing me here. If you wish to stay here all night and talk, we can, or if you wish to sit in silence, we can do that, too.”

He was so sweet and kind, and I didn’t deserve it, not one damned bit. But I wanted it, and I was going to take it.

“I lied earlier.”

Samkiel’s brow ticked up. “Oh?”

“You asked if I had ulterior motives, and I did,” I whispered, exposing my ragged heart. “I didn’t bring you here just to tell you that.”

A small frown edged his features, and I wondered if he thought maybe I’d brought him here to try to kill him again.

“Why did you bring me here, Dianna?” he asked, his already deep voice dropping an octave.

I stepped back, my hand lifting to the zipper of my jacket. The sound of the metal separating echoed through the quiet home. He’d asked me if I was cold earlier, and I’d lied when I said I wasn’t. All I wore beneath the jacket was a red lace bra so thin my nipples showed through it. The straps crisscrossed over my breasts and back, matching the panties beneath my pants. Neverra had given me a knowing grin when I’d asked her to get me the sexy lingerie.

Samkiel slowly lowered his gaze, seeming to savor the sight of me. His entire body went rigid, and I swore he stopped breathing.

“It’s hard to get you by yourself, and I wanted a place no one, not even you and The Hand, could know about.” I shrugged off the jacket and let it fall to the floor behind me.

His gaze swung to mine, his eyes filled with pure unadulterated lust, silver ringing his irises.

I stepped close to him and pushed to my tiptoes, letting my breasts brush against his chest. I pressed my lips to his and lovingly cupped his face. Samkiel, for the first time since I had known him, froze. His mouth didn’t move against mine. He didn’t try to part my lips or take command of the kiss. He didn’t kiss me back.

Samkiel’s hands grasped my arms and pushed me away, but he didn’t let go of me. I swallowed the growing lump in my throat. I was too late. Every fear that had nipped at me over the last two days came rushing back, and my heart ached with the loss I knew was coming. Would I survive this one? Maybe I had pushed him too far and done too much damage. I didn’t blame him. Even gods could only take so much. I didn’t deserve his kindness, and I knew better than anyone that I didn’t deserve him.

“Dianna.” He gazed down at me, my lips, my face, then back again. “I can’t do this.”

The remaining fragments of my heart broke. I was too late. I pushed out of his arms, and he let me.

“Is there someone else?” I snapped, picking up my discarded jacket and shoving my arms into it.

“What?” He recoiled at the suggestion. “No. How could you ask me that?”

“Well, because I was practically topless in front of you, trying to kiss you, and you stopped me.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. Was he angry? Pissed? I wouldn’t blame him. I was terrible.

“You don’t understand. Logan said—”

“Logan?” I scoffed. “You’re thinking of Logan while I kiss you?”

“No!” he practically shouted. “He said the next time I was with you, I needed to clarify my intentions. You left me so easily the last time I was this close to you, Dianna. I cannot do that again. I refuse to risk losing you. We will not do this without you knowing what it means.”

He held my gaze, and I could see his tightly contained hunger. My heart pounded.

That's what this was?

"I need you to understand what you're doing. What you are asking for. I know what I said before about you using me, but I lied. The second I touch you, once I take you completely, there will be no other. I will not share you. There will be no other lovers. I am not Kaden. I will demand you and only you. Do you understand? You mean too much to me. If we do this, you are mine, and I will not share you."

My breathing quickened, matching my racing heart. Samkiel didn't hate me. He just wanted to make it clear what we were about to do because I *meant* something to him.

"Do you understand?"

I licked my lips, my mouth dry. Fear churned in my gut at the hope that rose in my heart. Gods, this man could destroy me. I took a deep breath and nodded.

"I understand."

"Good."

He moved so fast I didn't even feel the air shift. Every worry and insecurity disappeared the second he slammed his lips into mine. The world exploded. Lights flickered inside the house, fueled by his power, his energy leaking as he let his need off the chain. Then again, I was so blinded by need I could have been imagining it.

My hands roamed over every part of him I could reach. I pulled at his jacket, trying to push it off his broad shoulders. He pulled back, helping me shove it off his arms. We stood, staring at each other, both of us panting, our lips kiss swollen. Heat, as pure and hot as my flames flared between us.

Samkiel reached for me, and I stepped eagerly toward him. His mouth came down hard on mine again, this time in full command of the kiss. I jumped into his arms, and he caught me, his hands gripping my ass. My skin was aching to be against his. I practically climbed him, wrapping my legs around his waist. I rotated my hips, pressing the aching heat of my core against the front of his jeans. An immortal sound rumbled in his chest at the friction. I did it again for another feel of the hardness I ached to have inside of me.

I explored every inch of his mouth before biting his lower lip. He growled at the sting and reclaimed my lips, his tongue spearing into my

mouth. I felt him move but was too consumed in the kiss to pay any attention until my back hit a soft surface. My eyes shot open when he pulled away. I pushed up on my elbows, prepared to follow him, but stopped in amazement.

Samkiel had transformed the room without his hands ever leaving my body. I glanced around, seeing he had laid me on the floor where the couches had been. A large thick duvet and plush pillows in various sizes and colors cushioned my body. Hundreds of candles lit the room with a golden glow. A small smile curved my lips when I noticed the petals that decorated the floor, their scent hanging heavy in the air.

“The flowers are a nice touch,” I said, nodding toward them.

A cocky smile lit his features. “I thought so,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt. The candlelight caressed his dark hair and sharp jawline, gilding the heavy muscles of his chest. He was everything the mortals molded the gods after, so painfully beautiful I damn near ached. “The yellow and blue ones caught your eye that night in the garden as we walked. They were the only ones you reached out to touch.”

Warmth filled me at the memory and at the fact he had been so keen to notice. These were the same flowers he had given me that night, too.

“You deserve something nice, my Dianna.”

My Dianna

He didn’t know what that did to me. I raised my legs, bending at the knee slightly as I parted them. His eyes caught every movement, and the way he looked at me, you’d think I was already completely bared.

“Mmm hmm,” I purred, crooking a finger and beckoning him closer. “Say it again.”

Samkiel’s eyes blazed molten silver. He moved with a predator’s grace as he knelt between my knees and leaned over me, the heat from that perfectly sculpted body setting me ablaze.

“My Dianna,” he whispered against my lips before pressing kisses to the tip of my nose, my cheek, and then my brow.

It was so nice and lovely. This was everything I wanted but had always been too afraid to hope for because I knew it was out of my reach. I never got sweet gestures, flowers, or romantic poetry. Yet here Samkiel was, making my dreams come true. My heart swelled so much it damn near burst.

"You deserve to be worshiped like the goddess you are," he said, pressing another kiss to my brow.

"I'm not a goddess."

"You are mine."

Heat pooled between my legs at his words, and I slid my hands beneath his shirt, caressing his chest and shoulders.

"I do not want a quick fuck from you, Dianna. I am very serious about my intentions." His hand cupped my chin, tilting it up. "I will take my time with you, but if at any point you wish to stop, tell me. Do you understand?" he whispered, his breath warm against my ear.

A moan slipped from my lips, and I nodded even if I didn't quite get why I would ever want him to stop. "Yes."

His lips claimed mine. The kiss started soft but deepened when I moaned. He supported himself on one arm and gripped my hair with the other hand, holding me in place as he devoured my mouth. My breath became his, fire erupting in my core. His tongue danced with mine before he sucked it into his mouth. I twisted beneath him, trying to pull him closer, my body roaring to life.

Oh yes, I needed this. I had been missing and searching for this so desperately. My hands pulled at the base of Samkiel's neck, urging him to do that again. I wrapped my legs around his thighs and arched beneath him, rubbing the aching heat between my legs against his hardness. I whimpered, the friction from my jeans digging into me not nearly enough. He smiled against my lips before pulling back. His eyes met mine, and I didn't need my powers to know that something monumental between us was about to change. It felt like the world knew it and held its breath in anticipation.

Cold rushed over me as he sat up, the loss of his heat making me shiver. He traced my lower lip, and his chest rumbled with a low growl when I flicked my tongue over the pad of his thumb. Slowly, meticulously, he slid his hand down between my breasts, and my back arched, seeking more of his touch.

Samkiel held my gaze as his fingers circled my right nipple, and I couldn't hold back my low whimper. He was teasing me, and he fucking knew it. He pinched my nipple through the red lace of my bra, and my hips lifted of their own accord. I moaned, cursing that I'd worn a damned bra now. He smiled wickedly and shifted to my left breast, treating it to the same torturous teasing.

I jerked and hissed as he tugged a fraction harder, but it wasn't from pain, not even close. He watched me intently, even through his lust and hunger, learning what made me react and how to make my body sing. Gods, he was going to ruin me. Muscles flexed across his chest as he abandoned his assault on my now swollen and aching breasts. Samkiel dragged his fingers across my belly, and my breath hitched when he paused at the top of my pants to trail his fingers teasingly along the waistband. My whimper of disappointment died when he suddenly cupped my sex, the heel of his hand pressing with the perfect pressure against my clit.

"Do you think I could feel how wet you already are through these?"

My hips rocked against his hand, and I nodded. I closed my eyes with the added pressure, my hands fisting the blankets beneath me. I spread my knees further, opening to his touch.

"I can feel you practically throbbing," he purred, his voice a low rumble. His fingers stroked and pressed against my center, but it wasn't nearly enough. "Do you want me that badly?"

My lashes lifted just a fraction, just enough to see him through the thick veil. "Yes." I managed to get a word out this time, and I didn't care how desperate it sounded. I just needed him to keep touching me.

"Hm, let's see then, shall we?" Samkiel said, nearly ripping the button from my pants. I lifted my hips in anticipation, and he grabbed the sides, stripping them from me and tossing them away. He wrapped one large hand around my ankle and held my foot up to the light. "Red?" he asked, glancing at my toes.

I nodded, biting my lip. "You said it was your favorite."

He lifted my leg to place a kiss to the dip of my ankle. A whimper escaped me. The wet heat of his mouth seared into my very bones, electricity shooting from my leg to my stomach, making my core clench. He smiled, his breath hot against my skin as he worked his way up my leg, licking the back of my knee before nipping and kissing at the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh.

"I want to taste every part of you," he said with a groan, "and I intend to."

My anticipation grew with every brush of his tongue and touch of his teeth. He traced the sensitive crease of my leg where it met my groin, and I bucked against his mouth. His hands gripped my hips, holding me firmly. Instead of turning toward the place I wanted him most, he moved up to my

hip, nipping at the lace of my panties. He bit the string, pulling it back before releasing it with a pop against my skin. I yelped, his muffled laugh vibrating against me, only adding to my frustration. I fought his hold, trying to angle him where I wanted his mouth to go. Samkiel ignored my attempts, keeping me right where he wanted me.

Bastard.

His eyes darted toward mine as he licked across my stomach and past my navel, traveling away from where I ached the most.

Bastard, indeed.

My expression must have said it all because his smile brightened as he snaked past my breasts to nip lightly at my neck.

“Craving something, my Dianna?” he whispered against my ear. I shivered at the sensation, nuzzling my cheek against his, savoring the feel of his rough jaw. I wanted to pop him for his teasing, but the way he spoke and the feel of his breath and lips against my ear forced another moan from me. A sensitive spot I didn’t even know I had until him.

I nodded and ran my hands through his hair.

“Tell me what pleases you, Dianna.” His teeth tugged at my earlobe, sending shocks of pleasure to my lower belly. “Tell me what you crave, what you need. Tell me what you like so I can do it better than anyone you’ve ever had.”

“You. Just you.” The words left my mouth on a breathless whimper.

Samkiel’s mouth followed the line of my throat, his tongue lapping over my pulse. “Which part first?” I felt him smile against my skin. “You’re not nearly as wet as I need you to be to take my cock without hurting you. Do you want my fingers like when we were in Chasin, or would you prefer my mouth and tongue first?”

Damned bastard.

“Your mouth.” I panted. “Your tongue.”

I thought I’d said something wrong as he raised himself on one elbow, but my doubts quickly died as silver sparks glinted in his eyes. Watching me, he trailed his fingers along my bra strap. He didn’t stop until he reached the center of the lace cup.

“Shall I start here?” he asked with a teasing tap.

Samkiel didn’t give me a chance to respond before he dipped his head and took my breast into his mouth. His tongue rasped across the lace, and my nipple tightened beneath the fabric. Blistering pleasure shot through me.

I moaned, lifting my hips in invitation, molten heat pooling between my legs.

"I love these little intricate undergarments you wear," Samkiel said before gently biting down on my nipple, the lace adding an extra abrasion across the sensitive tip. He tugged, and I felt the pull in my clit. I cried out, my fingers digging into his arms and shoulders. "Although I think I prefer you bare."

Samkiel snapped the strings between the cups with a sharp tug I barely felt. The bra fell away, and his hands took its place, cupping their lush weight. The rough pads of his thumbs ran over the tight, sensitive tips. "Absolutely perfect," he said reverently.

A strong, heart-clenching emotion ran through my body, mixing with my lust.

"I think you might have hit your head harder than you thought on the ice," I said, running my fingers through his hair, my voice little more than a whisper.

Samkiel smiled and dipped his head, sucking my breast into the heat of his mouth. He flicked his tongue against my overly sensitized nipple and slipped his knee between my legs. I groaned and lifted my hips, grinding against his thigh. Each graze of his teeth and pull of his mouth made my pussy clench, desperate for him to fill it. Between the lace of my panties and the hard muscle of his thigh, I was getting closer. So close that I could almost...

Samkiel moved his thigh, taking away that bit of pressure that I needed. My release faded, and I whimpered and glared at him. I tugged on his hair, damn near pouting.

"Sami." The nickname left my lips on a strangled moan of protest. I stared up at him pleadingly, not caring how I sounded.

"Sami?" Male satisfaction filled his smile. "Call me that once more."

"Make me come, and I will."

"Not yet." Samkiel cupped my jaw, the kiss he gave me brief and rough. He pulled back just enough to whisper against my lips. "The first time you come, I want it to be on my tongue."

"Oh gods, Samkiel," I moaned, trying to process his words as he slid down my body. He nipped and licked at my neck before pressing a kiss between my breasts, rubbing his cheek against the soft curves. His hot breath and wet mouth teased at the sensitive skin of my stomach, and I

twisted beneath him. My fingers combed through his hair, spreading my legs wider to give him more room for his broad shoulders. His laugh vibrated against my navel.

“Impatient, are we?”

“Gods above, if I had my powers right now, I’d incinerate you for teasing me.” I looked down at him.

“There’s my girl,” he growled, his voice rough with desire.

My frustration melted into need at his words, and he saw it. He paused at the top of my panties.

“Is this what you want, Dianna?”

He placed another kiss just above the lace edge, his mouth so close to where I needed it to be.

“Yes,” I practically begged, grabbing at his shoulders. “Please.”

Samkiel’s fingers gripped the side of my panties, and his power pulsed. I felt the flash of heat against my most intimate flesh as they disintegrated. He dipped his head and laid his tongue against my center, then slowly, as if savoring me, lapped up toward my clit. I damn near combusted. Nothing had ever felt so fucking good. My eyes rolled to the back of my head. Heat flooded my body, and my skin prickled. It felt like a spark of electricity rested on the tip of his tongue, sending my whole body into overdrive. My back arched, and I reached out, seeking something to ground me. I dug the nails of one hand into the soft plush blanket. If I had my powers, I knew it would be in shreds. The other hand curled in his hair.

“Do you like this?” Samkiel asked, his breath hot against my sex. He gave me another long slow lick, and I gasped. “I want the words, my Dianna. Tell me what you like.”

Words? He wanted words? My mind was putty. I wasn’t sure I even remembered language when he did that. My reply was a sharp nod and a whimper as I thrust my hips toward his face. I panted, my chest rising and falling as he smiled and lowered his mouth too damn slow.

He licked again, long and slow. I wanted to crawl out of my skin, my body coiled mess waiting to rupture. I didn’t care how I sounded as I writhed beneath him. It felt so good. So so good. I pressed as hard as I could against his mouth as he flicked his tongue over my clit, once, twice, and... I couldn’t count.

“You taste so good, baby. I could stay here forever.”

Samkiel slid his hands under me, cupping my thighs and using his thumbs to part my sex. He swirled his tongue around my clit before sucking it into his mouth. My toes tingled, pleasure shooting through my core. I was so close.

“Which do you prefer?”

Was he teasing me?

“Slow?”

He ran his tongue from my opening to my clit and stopped. I shuddered and groaned, my head falling back.

“Fast?”

His tongue swirled around my clit so quickly I damn-neared came off the floor. His grip on me tightened. “Samkiel!” I shouted.

“Or somewhere in between?”

He combined both motions, and my eyes rolled so far back in my head that I feared they would get stuck.

“Answer me, Dianna.”

“All,” I gasped out, barely coherent. “All of it. Any. More. Please.”

His head dipped, and my moans became breathless pants as he licked and sucked on my sensitive flesh. I heard myself and knew I was saying words, but I had no idea what they were. The pleasure was too much, but I bucked my hips against his lips and tongue, never wanting him to stop. The stubble from his jaw rasped against my inner thighs, and I knew I would wear his mark. He had all the power now, and he knew it.

He lifted his head and licked his lips. I whimpered in despair, lifting my head to look at him. My breath stopped. Samkiel may have seemed in control, but his eyes said something different. They were pure molten silver, nearly glowing with power. Usually, when they burned like that, someone died. “Would you like just my tongue or fingers, too?”

He wanted me to speak again?

“Fingers,” I whimpered.

I held his gaze through my lashes, my body trembling with anticipation. Samkiel reached out and traced my lips. I parted them beneath his touch, and he slipped two fingers into my mouth. I sucked, my tongue curling against them as my cheeks hollowed. He hissed and slid them in until my lips rested against the edge of his rings.

Samkiel never broke eye contact as he pumped his fingers in and out a few times before removing them and lowering his hand to tease my clit. He

slowly slid his middle and ring finger into my pussy before curving them at my entrance. I bit my lower lip as I felt them press into me. They were so much bigger and felt so much better than mine. I clenched around them, and my eyes closed in bliss, my body recognizing what it had been missing. Not what, but who. It was Samkiel. It had always been Samkiel. Nothing would ever be the same again.

He pumped his fingers in me slowly, teasingly, and lowered his mouth. At the first touch of his tongue against my clit, I left my body. The combination was electrifying.

I writhed beneath him, my fists bunching the fabric beside my hips. I chased my release, my muscles tensing and my toes curling, the pressure building with every flick of his tongue and slide of his fingers. He pumped harder as if he could feel me reaching. I was so close, and I hadn't been in so long. No matter what I did or what lovers I took, no one made me *feel*, no one except him. My nails dug into his scalp, begging him not to stop with every gasp and moan that parted my lips. I didn't care how desperate I sounded, only that he never stopped.

Samkiel lifted his head and flicked his tongue against my glistening flesh before saying, "I love this spot. If I curl my fingers just deep enough and apply the right pressure..."

I screamed.

"You like it, too?"

I nodded, or I thought I did. I couldn't tell anymore. Pleasure so intense it felt like pain ricocheted from the tip of my toes to my nipples and back to my core. It was as if he controlled every fucking current in my body with his words and touch. I teetered once more on that edge of pure, unadulterated bliss, my orgasm within reach. And he took it away again.

He curled his fingers deep inside of me. "Use your words, Dianna."

"Yes!" I moaned, my hands covering my breasts. I squeezed and pinched my nipples. "Gods, yes. I love everything you do to me."

Hunger burned in Samkiel's eyes as he watched me, the glow almost as bright as the candles. His tongue swept across my clit before he lowered his head and moaned against my swollen flesh, the sound vibrating through the ultra-sensitized bundle of nerves. Pure ecstasy was the only way to describe what I felt. My heart raced, and my breath was coming in small sobs. I gripped his hair, holding his mouth right where I wanted it. I was so close. I

just needed a bit more, but Samkiel lifted his head, and his fingers stilled, ripping it from my grasp.

I let out a small scream of frustration and slapped his shoulders. Samkiel laughed and twisted his fingers inside of me. He knew damn well what he was doing, edging me toward my release and taking it away.

I whimpered. "Stop teasing me."

Samkiel's lips curved in a smile against my flesh, and I hated him. I hated him. I hated him.

"Ask nicely." He curled his fingers, hitting that small spot inside of me with unerring accuracy. I yelped, my back arching.

"Please, please, please!"

"Good girl."

He fell on me, feasting, demanding everything from me. I felt it then, that spark of energy he controlled inside of me. My body bent and burned for him, sweat slicking my skin. The pressure in my core tightened. For the first time in months, I felt *something*. My pussy quivered around his fingers, and my moans became begs, knowing I was about to come.

"That's my girl," Samkiel groaned against my clit. "Come for me."

I screamed, pleasure ripping through my entire being. It was so intense I nearly blacked out. The room spun, and I gasped for air as orgasm after orgasm washed over me. Samkiel palmed my ass with his free hand and lifted me, holding me against his mouth, my body trembling uncontrollably. He didn't stop. Thank the gods, he didn't stop.

"*Sami. Sami. Sami.*" I couldn't tell if I was screaming and didn't care. He'd withheld my orgasm for so long, and now it wouldn't stop.

Damned bastard, indeed.

It felt as if I had no control over my body. My legs were shaking, draped limply over his shoulders. I tried to push him away with trembling hands. Was this why he'd asked me if I wanted to stop? Could I die from pleasure? My heart felt like it was going to burst. He set every nerve ending I had on fire. I had never felt nor experienced an orgasm as hot and blinding as this. My body was his. It always had been.

Samkiel finally lifted his head, gently withdrawing his fingers from my pussy. I moaned at the emptiness, already craving more. I struggled to find the strength and finally managed to open my eyes. He shifted, laying my legs on the bed as he rose to his knees between my splayed thighs. He watched my sweat-drenched body twitch, aftershocks of pleasure rippling

through me. My core tightened at the smug look of male pride carving his beautiful features, and I had no comment, not a single one. He'd earned every bit of that arrogance.

"So deprived, my Dianna."

No words, I had no words. I only nodded, or I thought I did.

Samkiel reached for the edges of his shirt, and I sat up. He rolled his shoulders, slipping it down his arms. My hands splayed against his sides, his muscles twitching beneath my touch. I leaned in, flicking my tongue over his nipple before gently biting down. He groaned, his hips jerking.

I slid my hands over the ridged lines of his abdomen, feeling the muscles flex. My fingers found the button on his pants, and I ripped them open. He was hard against my palm but slippery with a thin coat of moisture. Had he already come? My eyes met his, confusion furrowing my brow.

Samkiel pushed me onto my back and slipped his pants down over his hips. He leaned over me and kicked them off. "I could come a thousand times over listening to you beg and those naughty little sounds you make." My breath hitched, and I parted my thighs wide, cradling him as he settled atop me. "And I plan to."

The thick length of his cock settled against my swollen sex, and I couldn't hold back my whimper. I writhed against him, rocking my hips. "I don't think I can come anymore, Sami."

He smiled, kissing my cheek, the tip of my nose, and then my lips. "Yes, you can. I'll show you."

"Arrogant ass."

He grinned against my lips before taking my mouth in a deep, sensual kiss. I tasted every bit of the pleasure he'd taken from me on his tongue. I reached between us and grasped his cock, his size giving me pause. He was long and thick, my fingers not meeting around his girth. It jerked in my hand as I stroked the silken length, my thumb sliding easily over the slippery tip. I broke the kiss, panting for breath as I rubbed the thick crown from my entrance to my clit and back.

Samkiel groaned, his cock pulsing in my hand. "Treacherous woman," he growled and grabbed my hands. He pinned them above my head, holding my wrists in one big hand. Samkiel rested the head of his cock at my entrance, and I lifted my hips to meet him.

"Sami," I whimpered.

Samkiel moved his hips back, then pressed deeper, teasing me with just the tip. My hands curled into fists, my nails digging into my palms. He entered me inch by glorious inch, slowly giving me time to adjust to the extreme stretch that his sheer size demanded of my body. The burn was a glorious ache that was both welcome and overwhelming.

“More,” I pleaded, twisting my hands in his grip, needing to touch him, needing him to go faster. “Please, Sami, I need all of you.”

He leaned over me, licking and nipping at my lips, tasting each gasped word, savoring every moan. His cock filled me, my body meeting each of his shallow thrusts with a rush of liquid, bathing him in heat, but his pace never wavered. He was going too slow when I needed him so badly.

I lifted my head and deepened the kiss, teasing his tongue with mine. When he continued his maddening pace, thrusting slowly and deeply, I adjusted my legs around his waist and used my own strength to pull him against me. I thrust my hips up as he fell, burying his cock to the hilt inside of me. I screamed at the shock of pleasure and pain.

Samkiel caught himself before he would have crushed me. We lay unmoving, and I savored the kind of connection and intimacy I never dreamed existed.

“Dianna, baby.” He stretched my name out as he moaned. “Did I hurt you?”

Hurt? Pain? All fleeting, all temporary. But this, what I felt for him? That was eternal.

“Never,” I panted, biting at his bottom lip and squeezing my muscles around the steely part of him that was lodged so deeply inside of me. “Now fuck me, please.”

He groaned so damn loud I was afraid the neighbors would hear if they hadn’t already. Fisting his hand in my hair, he took my mouth and moved his other hand to pin down my hip. His first stroke made my body arch, my scream pouring into his mouth. My nails raked down his back, tearing at his skin. He thrust again, and my body quivered around his cock, tightening in sweet welcome.

“Mine,” he moaned. “You are mine.”

“Yours,” I gasped, his claim vanquishing the ugliness of my doubts and fears, the painful echoes of rejection and loneliness. I knew they would rise again—the scar was too deep, too vicious not to—but this man kept hold of his own.

My body bent and molded to his as if he had been made for me and I for him. We fit so damn well, and nothing could compare. I'd never felt so full, so complete, so *alive*.

The feel of his body was like a brand. Even if my powers returned, I'd crave him more than blood.

"Dianna, baby." His thrust was hard and hot, an exquisite burn through flesh swollen from the force of my previous orgasms. His cock moved in and out of me in a demanding rhythm that bathed me in a rich, dark heat. I bit at his shoulder, neck, and any part I could reach as he hit that perfect spot inside of me, and I damn near saw stars. "So good. You feel so fucking good."

"Fuck. Sami." It was a whimper, a cry, and a beg. I needed more. "Harder."

He groaned, his fist tightening in my hair. "Fuck. Call me that again."

"Sami," I groaned. He growled, his next thrust making my body sing in pain and pleasure.

This joining wasn't gentle or easy. It was furious and primal. Hard and rough with a pinch of pain, marking each other with teeth, claws, and words whispered amongst the sound of pounding flesh. Both of us were desperate to claim everything we thought we'd lost.

"Tell me you want me." My voice came out in a breathless whisper, my fingers digging into the thick muscles of his arms.

He rested his forehead against mine. "I always want you."

"Tell me you need me."

I needed to hear and feel it, and I didn't care how it made me sound or if it made me weak. I was so tired of being used. Being unwanted. Being alone.

"Always." He panted. "I can barely breathe without you, Dianna."

I'd never felt so possessed, so indulged. Emotions ripped through my heart and soul as jolts of pleasure shot from my belly to my toes. I no longer knew where I ended, and he began. I didn't care.

The invisible touch of his power reached between us, rubbing my clit as he thrust into me over and over again. I flung my head back and shrieked, muscles trembling from the strength of the passion that poured from me. I came hard, the most exquisite completion of pleasure, delicate muscles fluttering around his thickness, begging him to join me.

“Oh, Dianna. Baby.” He panted. “Fuck, like that. That feels so good. So good. I’m going to—”

“Yes. Please.”

“*Dianna.*” He said my name like a prayer, coming inside me in a furious blaze of incandescence. The force of his release splintered the furniture. Particles rained down but never touched us, as if even in the midst of his orgasm, he protected me. The street lights outside flicked and burst. Every candle he’d lit went out as he emptied himself inside me. Onuna fell into darkness, his energy blanketing the world.

He buried his face against my neck. I held him there until the tremors wracking our bodies eased, and we slowly stopped shaking. His bright, immortal power was still roused, laying over me protectively, and I thought I felt mine rise to claim him. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swore I could feel flickers of emotion from him, from intense male satisfaction to his own shocked wonder at our joining and a deep, unfathomable wellspring of caring.

We lay there for what felt like eons, trying to process everything that had happened, everything that had led us here. I didn’t speak. I had nothing to say. I had learned something I couldn’t unlearn now that I knew it. Samkiel had shattered my understanding of what it meant to make love. As cliché as it sounded, I had transformed into someone else. Something in me had shifted, and I had become a humble stranger to myself. I wondered if he felt it, too. All I knew was that a bond had solidified between us tonight. It felt different, stronger, unbreakable, and very, very dangerous.

I closed my eyes and slid my fingers through his hair, my nails scraping lightly against his scalp. His arms tightened, the full weight of him settling on me. For the first time ever, I felt safe and warm. The beast buried so deep inside of me stopped throwing herself against the walls of her prison and shuddered in relief. Samkiel nestled further into me as if he were afraid if he let me go, this would disappear.

“I wasn’t going to feed your massive ego anymore, but that was... okay.”

A rumble vibrated my entire being as he laughed. “Mhmm, whatever you say.”

I laughed even if I couldn’t express it fully with his weight pressing down on me.

“I honestly expected better.”

I felt him smile against my neck before kissing it, and I savored the tingle that ran through me.

“Does it always feel like this with you? I mean, I’ve seen the dreams, heard the stories, but....” My voice trailed off. The words had left my mouth before I could process them. “That was stupid. I’m sorry. Ignore that.” I hated the way I flinched, not wanting to hear the answer. He had been with goddesses, and I was not a goddess.

He lifted his head to stare at me like he always had, as if I were more precious to him than anything in this realm or the next. As if I were more precious than his crown, his throne, all of it, and at that moment, I truly believed it. His fingers ran down the side of my face, brushing back my sweat-damp hair.

“I used to dream of what my destiny would be, my future. Everyone has an amata. It was written before the universe had form.” He rose above me, his hand cupping my jaw, his thumb running across my cheek. “You are very special to me. No one feels like you. No one else can ruin me so completely. I know without a doubt that if I had an amata, even if they were alive today, I’d still choose you. It will always be you, Dianna.”

I felt tears prick my eyes. “Destiny be damned?”

“You are better than any destiny.”

My chest ached. I hadn’t known how much I needed to hear those words from him. With those words, Samkiel had soothed the damaged, broken part of me that Kaden had left gutted and in need of healing.

I pulled him down, slanting my lips over his as I lifted my hips. Samkiel showed he cared with words and pretty gestures. I showed it with something far more raw. I felt him harden inside of me as I moved again. He moaned into my mouth, his tongue dancing across mine.

“Insatiable.” He smiled against my lips. “I like it.”

“Just wait until—” My words died in my throat when beams flashed across the window, and a knock came from the door.

Samkiel eased out of me and stood. He tossed me a blanket to cover myself and went to the big window. Shifting the curtain to the side, he peeked out and then turned to grin at me like a fool.

“I think you drew an audience.”

My cheeks flushed, and my eyes widened, remembering just how loud I’d been.

“Every neighbor on this street is currently outside gathered around the house. I see a few celestials holding them back. Wait, I know that guy. I told Vincent to fire him.”

“Samkiel,” I hissed, tossing a pillow at him.

It connected with his side, and he laughed.

Someone knocked on the door again and called out, “Hello, this is private property. We received a noise complaint. You have one minute to open the door, or we will break it down.”

“We have to leave,” I whispered, scrambling up and searching for my discarded clothes.

I was supposed to be under lock and key, not out running all over Onuna. The celestials would take one look at him and me and know. It would spread like wildfire, and I didn’t even want to consider what the council would do if they found out.

As if reading my thoughts, Samkiel rushed to my side. With a snap of his fingers, he had the room cleaned up and our clothes back on our bodies. He scooped me up into his arms. The front door crashed open just as Samkiel shot through the back door.

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SEVENTY-TWO

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CAMERON



I walked back to the council hall with a stack of books, but only one mattered. I pushed the council doors open with my hip, Logan and Imogen glancing up as I entered. Vincent didn't even budge, his nose buried in the text, looking for answers we didn't have.

"Where have you been?" Neverra asked. Her voice finally sounded normal. The haunted look she'd worn since her time in Yejedin had finally disappeared, and I wanted it to stay gone.

I dumped the books on the table, spreading them out as Xavier leaned forward. "I thought you were getting us something to eat."

I snickered and moved a few heavy texts, grabbing the one I wanted. "Oh, this is better than snacks," I said, holding up the gray journal.

"What is it?" Imogen asked, leaning back in her chair.

"A journal and not just anyone's. This is Elianna's."

Vincent raised his head, propping his chin on his hand.

"Elianna's?" Xavier asked. "How did you get that?"

"I have my ways." I glanced at Imogen, and she rolled her eyes. My ways usually included sneaking in and out of places I shouldn't, like the bed chambers of snotty counselors who were great with their tongues.

Vincent groaned. "You didn't."

"Didn't what? Get classified information to help us? Uh, yeah, yeah, I did."

I waited for Xavier to laugh like he usually did, but his face was guarded and closed when I turned toward him. He looked at the journal I held, then briefly met my eyes before lowering his head to avoid my gaze. I

cocked my head, but before I could process his reaction, Imogen was at my side, plucking the journal from my grasp.

Neverra strode to the council doors and closed them before she and Logan gathered around Imogen.

“Okay, so we steal from the council members now, among other things?” Vincent said snidely.

“Hey, it’s more productive than pretending to be on guard duty for a witch that can’t leave.”

Vincent’s jaw clenched so tight I thought he was about to throw his book and fight me. He didn’t.

The other thing I was good at was knowing everything about everyone. Which also got me in trouble. I glanced at Xavier, who seemed to be studiously ignoring me, his eyes looking everywhere but at me. Logan glanced between us, noticing the sudden tension.

“What’s it say, Immy?” Neverra asked, leaning over the table.

Imogen flipped another page. “It’s all the old language. I’ll have to transcribe it.”

“Of course, Elianna would write in the old language.”

“Yes, she has many talents,” Xavier quipped. He glanced at me once before flipping a page a little too hard.

Vincent ignored us all and went back to reading.

Neverra cleared her throat. “Okay, transcribe that, and we will keep reading more about the hundred different prison dimensions in the meantime.”

I grunted and sat down. This was going to take longer than I’d hoped. I pulled an ancient book from the stack and opened it.

Imogen gathered a pen and paper before settling into her seat with the journal. “You know what I never understood?”

“What?” I asked, immersed in the boring text.

“The kings have been there, right? Or at least some of them. Why haven’t we sensed them or found them sooner?”

Xavier shrugged. “Cloaking, maybe? Camilla worked for Kaden, and her magic practically sings to mine. She could be descended from Kryella. Maybe she hid them.”

“Santiago worked for Kaden more than Camilla,” Vincent chimed in, not even bothering to look up as he flipped another page.

Imogen shook her head. “Regardless, she betrayed Dianna, along with the vampire prince. But that’s a lot of magic to conceal.”

I smirked at Imogen’s defense of Dianna. Both she and Neverra seemed to really like her. They got along well at the beach the other day and had stayed with her the following night. I thought she was cool. I think Vincent was the only one who still seemed to dislike her.

Logan chewed the inside of his lip before he sighed. “I know Athos was yours and Cameron’s goddess. The Goddess of Wisdom and War, although Cameron missed out on the wisdom part.”

“Hey!”

Logan ignored me as he went on. “I know you have thought this through thoroughly, Imogen. So for you to be stumped kind of worries me.”

Imogen closed her book and leaned on the table. “Think of it. A thousand years of them—just what? Blending in? Mingling? And we heard nothing of them? It’s impossible, even if they were retreating to Yejedin to hide. I think we are missing something, some piece we haven’t found. It’s like they’ve been waiting for something.”

“Wait.” Logan shot from his seat and started to pace. “The other night, I was talking to Samkiel. He mentioned rituals in one of the texts he was reading.”

“Rituals?” Imogen asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Yes, usually they require a sacrifice or a major celestial event. Nev said she heard Kaden and Tobias discussing something that started with an E? What if that’s all related?”

“Okay, so a ritual. There are no major celestial events happening for at least another hundred years,” Imogen said, her brow furrowed as she thought, tapping her pen against her chin.

Logan sighed, flopping back into his seat. “Well, fuck.”

Neverra leaned over and placed a kiss on his cheek. He smiled and lifted her hand to brush his lips over her fingers.

Vincent yawned. “Don’t think so hard, honestly. It will be over soon enough. Dianna killed Alistair. If Alistair was even one of them. Tobias is dead, so it’s only Kaden left now. I don’t think it’s going to matter much longer.”

Imogen shrugged, placing a hand under her chin and blowing out a breath that made a strand of her hair move. “I guess so.”

“You all concern yourselves with the wrong issues.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Roccurem materialized next to the window. Unlike most living creatures, he had no aura about him. It made him hard to detect. The swirling mass of shimmering mist he came from probably factored in as well.

“I swear, I am going to buy you a fucking bell to wear.”

“Roccurem. Good evening,” Imogen said.

“Hello, my lady.”

“He’s always so proper,” Imogen said, shooting me a mock glare. “You could learn something here, Cameron.”

“Thanks, no thanks.”

Logan made a deep sound in his throat and shook his head at us before turning back to the fate. “What do you mean we’re concerned with the wrong issues?”

“The information that matters will not be found in texts any longer. None which you all possess.”

We all collectively slammed our books closed, everyone releasing a sigh of relief.

“So I got these for nothing,” I said. “Great.”

Roccurem turned from the window, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Well, if that’s the case, what do we need?” Logan asked.

“The path you are on is where you must stay for what’s to come.”

More of his riddles. Fates were tricky bitches, and Roccurem seemed no different. I leaned back in my chair and clapped my hands together. “You know what I heard? I heard we don’t need to be here at the moment. I’m starving. Let’s go eat.”

“Cameron.” Imogen shook her head, but she was smiling. “Samkiel said _____”

“The god king is preoccupied at the moment with matters that must be attended to,” Roccurem interrupted.

“What the fuck does that mean? Did he go to Yejedin without us again?” I asked.

Neverra shrugged a little too quickly. Imogen scratched behind her ear and suddenly became interested in the book she’d just closed. Logan avoided everyone’s gazes and slunk further down in his chair.

“Hey, I saw that! What do you all know?” I demanded.

Logan held up his hands, blowing out a breath. “Nothing. He said he was going to Onuna with Dianna yesterday. That’s all I know.”

I slammed my hand on the table for dramatic effect before I pointed at Roccurem. “Is he having sex with Dianna?”

Roccurem’s six eyes popped open, all white and opaque, surprised at my bluntness. He recovered quickly and closed all but two. “He is with your queen, yes.”

Vincent dropped his head into his hands. “Oh, gods.”

I laughed. “Please tell me that Vincent’s noise complaint, slash possible murder call from Onuna, was because of them. Please, Roccurem, give me this little speck of joy.”

“I hate you,” Vincent groaned.

That was all I needed. I laughed so damn hard that Logan joined in. I wiped the tears that prickled at the corner of my eyes as I sighed. “Oh, thank the old dead gods. Do you have any idea how sexual tension smells? It’s not great.”

Neverra laughed, and it was so wonderful to hear.

Imogen reached across the table and popped me. “So mature,” she said, shaking her head.

“Honestly, we should all be lucky they didn’t destroy a city.”

Vincent pushed the book away and stood up. “Cameron. For the love of the old gods and the new. Shut up.”

“What? I’m just saying what we are all thinking here.” I shrugged, ignoring Imogen’s eye roll, but I watched Vincent. His mood seemed more sour than the situation warranted. I glanced at Logan. He, too, was watching Vincent warily.

“No one was thinking that,” Imogen jested.

“Okay, anyway, that means we have plenty of time to eat then. Samkiel will definitely be busy.” I pushed away from the table, and the others followed suit.

“I don’t think Samkiel’s ever had a bad girl before. No offense Imogen,” I said.

She giggled. “None taken.”

Logan opened the door. “What about the one in Cvisor? You remember the one with the green horns?”

“Pfft. That was the shortest fling. He was just returning some mythical gemstone.”

Neverra draped her arm around Logan and tucked into his side as we headed out of the council hall. “Yeah, that was only a week. You’re right.”

I waved my hand as we rounded the corner. “That doesn’t count. Samkiel closed himself off after he watched how heartbroken his father was. I don’t think he ever wanted to feel that level of grief, but then Dianna came along, and I think what he feels for her is unlike anything he has ever felt for anyone. No offense, Imogen.”

Imogen rolled her eyes once more, throwing her hands in the air. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders as we walked.

“Oh, my gods, Cameron. How many times do I have to tell you we weren’t serious?”

I shrugged. “Like I was saying, now that Samkiel has someone he actually likes, he’ll be busy for a while.”

“Not with a prison dimension opened and the world still in peril,” Xavier replied from behind us.

I stopped short and turned to look at Xavier. “Want to bet.”

Xavier shook his head, walking past us. “Not today. If we are not actively searching today, I need to take care of something.”

“Okay,” I said as he all but hurried away, not glancing back at us.

“I’ll bet,” Vincent said, slipping his hands into his pockets as he watched Xavier leave.

“Vincent, my man.”

“Me, too,” Logan piped in.

“Not you, too?” Imogen said, placing her hands on her hips.

“Okay, I say a day,” I said.

“I say a few more hours,” Logan said, wobbling his head from side to side. “I mean, she’s mortal or close to it now, right? How much godly dick can she take before she breaks?”

Vincent rolled his eyes at Logan’s wide grin. It was the first real one we had seen since Neverra came back. “I say less than an hour, so we better hurry and eat.”

“Deal.” I smirked but suddenly stopped. “You know, we didn’t ask Roccurem if he even wanted to go. Stay right here.”

They nodded and continued to banter. I jogged back into the council room. Roccurem still stood at the window with his hands behind his back.

“Hey, did you want to come with us? I don’t remember what fates eat, but you’re more than welcome to come with us.”

He didn't turn toward me, but I suspected those damned white eyes were out. "It will be painful."

I grinned. "Eating? Highly unlikely."

"But it is necessary for what has to occur. I wish there were another way, but it seems even that cannot be avoided. You will lose so much, young hunter. You all will. I do hope you treasure your family while you still have them. I did try. Remember that."

Fear slithered down my back. "Try? Try what?"

He said nothing else before disappearing from the room, his words rattling through my very being.

SEVENTY-THREE

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CAMERON. THREE DAYS LATER.



I tossed the small ball at the council wall, catching it with ease when it bounced back. The council halls were empty, the light of the setting sun sparkling off the shiny stone floors.

“Where is Neverra?”

Logan sighed and flipped another page. “Helping Imogen transcribe that journal.”

“I’m bored.”

Logan scowled at me. “You’d probably be less bored if you helped me.”

“Roccurem said there is nothing in the books.” I threw the ball and caught it again when it hurtled back at me. “Along with some other weird riddle shit.”

I dropped the ball on the table and nudged a text on the different dimensions. “We already read through these. Yejedin isn’t in them, and none of us know why. Maybe we will find out once Immy gets that journal transcribed. So, do you want to go with me or not?”

Logan closed his book and leaned forward. “Why? Because Xavier is ignoring you?”

I bristled. Xavier had been ignoring and avoiding me. I just didn’t know why. Every time I tried to joke or talk to him, he stated he had somewhere else to be and left.

“Fine.” I stood. “I’ll go check on Samkiel myself.”

“Samkiel?”

“Yeah, it’s been three days. I assume that Dianna has gotten her powers back and killed him in cold blood by now.”

Logan sighed in exasperation. “He’s not dead. Every realm would be open, and we would also be dead.”

My lips turned down. “You think?”

Logan shrugged. “Yeah, no telling what’s been festering behind those gates.”

“Okay. Then he is probably near death.”

“No, you are just nosy.”

I shrugged. “Partially, but he hasn’t checked in once. Are you not a little bit concerned?”

Logan’s eyes narrowed, my words hitting home. I waved and turned away, striding toward the door.

“Wait!” Logan shouted.

I didn’t slow, but I heard the chair topple over and heavy footsteps as Logan practically ran after me.



WE LANDED OUTSIDE THE PALACE. NO LIGHTS FLICKERED OR SHONE through any of the windows. I hurried up the path to the front door.

“I doubt anything is amiss,” Logan said, following at my heels.

“Pfft. Samkiel’s like a worried mother hen. The fact that he hasn’t checked in to make sure I haven’t burned the council down is cause for concern.”

Logan shrugged as we reached the end of the bridge. “True.”

We entered the long hall, and I let out a low whistle.

“He really made this place extravagant. He made her a whole fucking castle,” I said.

“Yeah. He loves her.”

I stopped, Logan nearly colliding with me. “He told her that?”

Logan shrugged and scowled, sidestepping so he didn’t plow into me. “Doubtful. He can’t even say it himself.”

“I was about to say.” I shook my head, placing my hands in my pockets. “Dude has been anti-feeling since his mom died.”

“So has she since her sister.”

“True.”

“I think it’s a lot of stuff, honestly. They both have lost a lot. I think that word symbolizes death to them more than anything else. Think about it. Who were the last people they said it to? Samkiel to his mother and father, and Dianna to her sister.”

I grimaced. “Yeah, that will do it.”

“What was that the other day?”

“What?” I asked, genuinely confused.

“Oh, okay, we’re just going to keep ignoring this?”

I leaned against the wall and crossed my arms over my chest. “Honestly, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Elianna? Seriously? Of all people?”

My lips curved in a slow smile. “Oh, are we judging now? Let’s not forget you were no saint before the ever-gorgeous Neverra walked into your life.”

“This isn’t about that. It’s about Xavier.”

I tossed my hands in the air. “You just said it was about Elianna.”

“I saw the way he looked, and I know things have been tense around here lately, but I think Dianna shook up more than just Onuna.”

My grin fell flat, and I turned from him to walk into the kitchen. Whatever Logan was about to say died as we froze in the doorway. The fridge was half open, the light within spilling out. The island had a mountain of empty containers piled on it. I stepped forward, crumbs and debris crunching beneath my boot.

“What the fuck?”

Logan stepped around me, heading toward the living room. I followed him, staring in amazement at the mess. Furniture lay overturned, the table on its side, big chunks missing from the edges. Shredded couch cushions and pillows lay strewn about the floor, feathers floating in the air.

“Think a wild animal attacked and killed them both?”

Logan snickered and pointed up. My gaze followed, and I saw what looked like lacy underwear hanging from one of the chandeliers.

“If by wild animals you mean Samkiel and Dianna, then yes.”

“Well, they didn’t destroy a city, but they are definitely trying to take down a castle.” Logan and I laughed. I turned and backpedaled, swallowing my scream.

Samkiel towered over us. “What are you doing here?” His voice reminded me of the battle of Hazlun when he’d ripped an enemy king’s head off with one hand.

He took a step forward. The moonlight illuminated him, and I realized Samkiel was stark, fucking naked. “Holy gods, dude! Put that weapon of mass destruction away!”

His eyes burned pure silver in the dark room. The glow dimmed as he realized there was no threat. He must have heard us and thought we were intruders. His first instinct was to protect, and he hadn’t even bothered to stop to put on clothes.

Logan snickered. “We were concerned. Didn’t mean to alarm you.”

Small bruises lined Samkiel’s neck and shoulders, bite marks marring the heavy muscles of his chest. “You’re like her own personal chew toy,” I said with a laugh.

“Why?” His voice came out a tad bit rougher than usual.

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

Samkiel gave me a frosty glare that shut me up, and I realized he was answering Logan’s question and completely ignoring me.

“It’s been three days. Cameron thought you might be dead and wanted to check on you. I followed him.”

His face grew slack. “Three days?”

“Yeah. I lost a bet. I didn’t think you would be gone for more than one.”

“We were just worried,” Logan cut in. “Nothing has changed on our front, only more research.”

Samkiel nodded.

I raised my hand toward one of the bruises on his shoulder. “I’m assuming Dianna has her powers back,” I said.

Samkiel slapped it away and scowled at me. “No.”

I glanced at Logan, pointing to a snarling Samkiel. “That’s without powers.”

Logan smiled a fraction wider and crossed his arms, a deep chuckle resonating from his chest.

“We didn’t—”

“Sami,” a feminine voice edged with sleep called from above. Samkiel’s head shot up so fast he nearly broke his neck.

“Sami?” I whispered in breathless wonder.

A hint of silver flared in Samkiel's eyes when he turned back to me. He reached out and lightly popped me upside the head. I lowered my gaze, but my grin remained.

"Quiet," he said, shaking his head.

"Violence is never the answer," I said, rubbing the back of my head.

Logan covered a snicker with a cough and grabbed the back of my elbow. "We were just leaving."

"I'll be back tomorrow just—"

"One day," Logan said, and Samkiel smiled at some inside joke.

"One day." The next second, Samkiel was gone, and Logan was pulling me outside.

"Sami?"

"Let it go," Logan chided.

"Never. I just think it's cute and all, but do you remember the last time someone tried to give him a nickname? He practically disemboweled them."

My humor died as I glanced back toward the forest edge and the council hall beyond. I wasn't ready to go back to Elianna's staring or Xavier ignoring me or books with no answers.

"Are you hungry?" Logan asked, watching me.

"Are you reading my mind right now?" I asked.

Logan gave me an understanding smile that made me shift uncomfortably. "They have these cool chocolate bowls this time of the year on Onuna. Steam rushes out of them when you cut them. I was thinking about bringing one back for Neverra and Imogen if you want to come? Gets us out of the council hall for a while and people you want to avoid."

My lips thinned. "I am so in love with you right now."

"Shut up." Logan laughed.

"I'm so serious. Annul your rites with Neverra. I'll marry you right now."

Logan tipped his head back, laughing as he pulled me into a sideways hug. We shot into the sky and toward Onuna.

SEVENTY-FOUR

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SAMKIEL



“Roccurem.” His name echoed in the council halls as I summoned him.

The room seemed to bend as he formed in the center of it. I folded my arms over the heavy armor that covered my body.

“Yes, my king?”

“Where is everyone? I checked, but only the council sits on the top floor.”

“The blonde one said they went for breakfast.”

“Which blonde one?”

Roccurem tipped his head, the movement eerie and alien. “The boisterous one.”

I rubbed a hand across my face before nodding. Of course, they would. I was late. Three days, Logan had said last night. Time did not seem to exist when I was with Dianna.

“Very well. When did they leave? Will they return soon?”

His eyes grew distant as if he could sense them even now. “Perhaps it is best if they enjoy their time together. Yejedin is a small dimension compared to others you and your father have overseen. They shouldn’t be needed.”

I bit the edge of my lip, still able to taste Dianna from this morning. We truly were insatiable. It didn’t matter where or how many times I took her. I needed more. Even now, my body practically begged me to return to her. She claimed she didn’t have her powers, but the scratches across my back and the bite marks spoke otherwise.

Maybe Roccurem was right. I should let them relax and spend time together. I knew that once this was over, there would be many changes.

“I suppose you are right,” I said and turned to leave.

“How is she?” Roccurem asked, stopping me in my tracks. I spun toward him. His eyes scanned me from head to toe as if searching for something. His gaze paused on my hand before darting away.

The now normal flare of jealousy erupted within my gut, setting my temper aflame. For some reason, I saw Roccurem as a threat. It was a ridiculous notion, but that didn’t seem to matter. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. “Why?” My tone sounded rough and aggressive, even to my own ears.

“You have nothing to worry about from me, god king. My curiosity is no threat to you.”

“I apologize. I know my reaction is not rational. Dianna makes me,” I paused and gave a rueful chuckle, trying to come up with the correct word, “crazy, it seems.”

Roccurem smiled. “It is quite normal, considering the situation.”

I realized with a start that it was the first time I’d ever seen him smile. I cleared my throat and, careful to temper my tone, said, “Dianna is good, given the circumstances. She’s opened up more, but I know it is still not enough. She still keeps a part of herself hidden. No matter how intimate we have become, there is still a part of her, even given all my powers, that I cannot reach. I think guilt still eats at her, although I do not know its source.”

“It will take time,” Roccurem counseled with a small nod.

“Before, when you told us of the prophecy, you said there is a part of her that would never be healed. Is that still the same? Is that this part I cannot touch?”

“Death changes all, god king. You know that. The prophecy is more convoluted than even I can perceive. A mass of words, new and old.”

“I see.” I nodded before turning to head out.

“I would not agonize oneself over that part of the prophecy, god king,” Roccurem said. Then, before I could ask what he meant, he was gone.



“I HAVE MISSED THE AGE OF ARROGANT GODS. YOUR POWER MAKES YOU feel safe and secure, but your hubris will be your downfall, like so many others.”

“Yeah, you have said that.” I bit into the crisp fruit.

He had begged for it, for any food. This was just a small demonstration of the torture I had threatened him with if he did not start speaking.

“Now. Are you sure you can’t recall a thing from the break?”

I tossed the core to the edge of his cell. His large, glassy eyes tracked it as I rolled it back and forth beneath my boot.

Porphyrrion sighed and slammed his backside to the floor of the cell. One powerful arm rested under his chin as he stared daggers at me. “I remember the sound of thunder cracking. Four times I counted. Then a mighty wind. All I know is prisoners were released, all but a few like me who were not so lucky. I assumed the others starved and perished.

“But not you?”

“No, not me. How can you not know?”

My foot stilled. “Know what?”

“That your family is full of liars and killers and cheats, Samkiel.”

I sighed, folding my arms as I leaned against the wall. “And how do you know so much about my family?”

“Who do you think made this place? Carved and imbued with the power of the gods and meant to entrap all who dared fight them. One being. The World Bringer. Your father.”

I pushed from the wall. “You lie.”

“I have no reason to lie. Three generals ran this place: one who sheds blood, one who controls it, and one who feasts on it. Only two stayed after the Great War. Then one came back, took the prisoners from here, and rained fire on Rasheirim.”

“How would you know that if all you heard was the crack of thunder?”

Porphyrrion leaned as close to the cobalt bars as he dared, a line of spit dangling from his jaws as he hissed, “Because I know the smell of royalty trash.”

“So you are claiming my father made this prison, hid it from every realm, then broke in to set prisoners free, only to end up with his ashes spread amongst the stars?”

He said nothing.

“You’re wrong, and I know the Kings of Yejedin had a part in this. Perhaps you are mistaken about who let who out.”

Porphyrion snorted. “No, you are wrong. The Kings of Yejedin are not that strong compared to the General.”

I wiped my hand across my face, growing frustrated. “The General? More fables?”

“Says the idiot king who knows nothing.”

I lifted my blade, the pure silver gleaming in this darkened hall. “Speak to me like that once more, and I take a limb.”

Porphyrion swallowed and scooted back but continued, “How you have The Hand, Unir had Generals. Three. They helped shape the cosmos. One General made the kings. The General of Unir that feeds on blood can shape terrifying creatures with his blood.”

“Shape creatures with his blood?”

Porphyrion’s massive nostrils flared. “Yes, and you reek of one of them.”

Dianna. My throat went dry.

“Kaden was one of my father’s Generals?”

“If that is its name, then I suppose.” Porphyrion scratched at his elbow. “The General never spoke to us here. I only saw that spiked armor of black and orange as he passed by. But he made other terrifying creatures before he made the kings. He made Apphellon, the one that controlled minds.”

He had to be talking about Alistair.

“Haldnunen was the one who controlled the dead,” Porphyrion said. Or Tobias in Dianna’s world

“There was also Gewyrnon, the one that could control plagues and sickness, and Ittshare, the one that could bend ice. I don’t know what happened to all of them. We giants fought with them, and you see where I remain. The past is blurry when you’ve been left here to rot for so long.”

“Is there anything else you can remember?”

“No.” He folded his massive arms across his chest, and I knew he was not lying this time.

I sighed. “Very well then. It seems our time here is done. I can offer you two options. One, you stay here and continue to rot, or I can grant you release in the form of the afterlife.”

“I am tired, royal trash. I wish for no more torture, and I’ve heard Iassulyn is not pleasant.”

“No, it’s not. I can offer oblivion.”

Porphyrion nodded, and I saw the relief in his eyes. With a flick of my wrist, the dark death blade appeared in my hand, pulsating as if it had its own heartbeat. Tendrils of wispy violet energy danced around it, seeking a target.

“The famed sword of legends. What an honor.”

“Death will hopefully give you the peace you did not have in this life.”

“Save your pity, royal trash. You cannot fool me. None of you could, and I know why you smell like the General’s beast, why you find comfort with it. You are nothing but a monster to us, too.”

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SEVENTY-FIVE

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DIANNA



N everra used a bit of her energy to open the front door, and we snuck in. We didn't see a security guard as we made our way down to the lower levels, but when we reached the bottom floor, we heard a whistle and the jingle of keys. We ducked around the corner, hugging the wall as the guard passed. His head remained down, focused on some game on his tablet, the multi-color display lighting up from a win. Neverra smiled and shrugged at me as we darted past him and hurried down the hall, obviously having fun in our little adventure.

We stopped at another large door, and Neverra kicked it, nearly knocking it from its hinges. Dim yellow light spilled from the empty room.

"Neverra! It's called breaking and entering, but you don't actually have to break things," I hissed.

She turned, the tip of her long ponytail swinging across her leather jacket. "What? It was locked, and we already disarmed the security system. Vincent is truly paranoid. I think he has a problem."

I shook my head and took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I held the flashlight a little tighter, half expecting the blare of an alarm and the pounding of feet, but nothing came. If Samkiel found out I'd gone back to Onuna without him, he would be upset. But I had to know, and I didn't want anyone to know what we were doing in case I was wrong.

We stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind us. Gloom filled the warehouse over half of the overhead lights burned out.

"Thanks for sneaking away with me," I whispered as we took in the rows of boxes and filing cabinets.

She smiled. “Thanks for calling. I’m surprised you had time since Logan said you and Samkiel had been going at it like beasts in heat.”

I turned the flashlight on her, nearly blinding her. “How does he know that?”

She covered her eyes and grinned. “He went with Cameron the other day to check on Samkiel. You two had been missing for three days, and they got worried.”

“Three days?” I nearly squeaked.

“You know what you are doing is good if you lose track of time.” Neverra laughed and started down the aisle formed by the shelves.

I stood, trying to grasp the fact I had lost so much time. That had never happened to me, but even as I felt my face flush, I had no regrets.

Good didn’t come close. Good was a nice and cozy feeling afterward. What Samkiel and I had done was not so easily described. Samkiel’s body on mine was like air in my lungs. Not a want, but a need, and I knew he felt it too. Over and over, we came together, drawn by something primal, unable to get enough of each other. It was a frenzy of need, and no matter how sore I was or how often he healed me, I couldn’t stop. We couldn’t stop and struggled to untangle ourselves to even eat. I blamed it on all the pent-up tension we had carried for so long.

I shook my head, dislodging the images sweeping through my brain, and followed after Neverra, the flashlight illuminating the boxes on the shelves. “Thank you for that, by the way. The clothes and you all keeping the council busy.”

Neverra smiled. “That’s what friends are for, to help their friends get laid.”

My laugh escaped before I could stop it, and I covered my mouth to muffle the sound.

Neverra beamed as I struggled to control my laughter. “Why did you want to do this?” she asked.

“I had a dream.”

“A dream?” Neverra whispered. “We are breaking the law because of a dream?”

“It wasn’t just any dream. Tobias said something when we were in Yejedin, and in the dream, there was this chant, over and over, and... It felt so real.”

Neverra stopped, bristling with protective energy. “What did he say?” she asked, her voice taking on a steely edge.

I swallowed, not meeting her gaze even if I could feel it boring into me. “That Gabby is not my sister.”

Neverra appeared at my side, but I didn’t look at her. I started shifting boxes, looking for my family’s surname.

“Oh, Dianna. You know he was evil. Evil bad guys say stuff to distract us all the time.”

I kept searching. “Tobias hated me. Truly hated me. He would use anything he could to throw words at me. He considered it a bonus if he could harm me with the truth.”

I was quiet for a moment. I just needed to find my family’s name in these archives. My fingers skimmed over the last names on the front of some boxes.

“I am sorry for all you had to endure, Dianna,” Neverra said. I didn’t hear pity in her voice, just compassion, care, and her own pain at Gabby’s loss.

“It’s fine. I’d do it again for her if I had to. It was worth it for the time we had together, but more than that, Gabby made the world better. She made me better.”

“You know you will always have a family with us,” she said gently as if afraid I would rebuff her. “If you want it.”

I turned toward her, shining the flashlight in her direction so I could see her face. I opened my mouth to respond but snapped it closed when the beam of light landed on the name written neatly on the box above her shoulder.

Essam.

She caught my pause and looked behind her, pointing at the box. “Is that it?”

I nodded and stepped forward to pull it down from the shelf. We knelt, and I lifted the lid. Neverra held her light steady over the box as I dug through the worn pages.

“My mom and dad worked in a lot of the temples. They were both healers, but my dad also dabbled in a few extra businesses on the side to help. One was supplying weapons to the royal guards. He showed me how to hold my first dagger. I’m not surprised so many files still exist, but what I need is—”

A scream split the hushed silence of the warehouse a moment before the door flew off its hinges and crashed against the wall. Talons tapped on the floor, and I didn't need Otherworld senses to smell them.

Irvikuva

We turned our flashlights off, and Neverra brushed her hand against my wrist.

"Hold on to my hand. We are leaving."

I clasped her hand and rose to my feet, hearing more and more feet shuffling across the stone floor.

Neverra backed us slowly into a small alcove. "There's too many of them," Neverra whispered.

"How many? I can't see."

"Twelve. And they are huge."

I swallowed and peered into the darkened corners of the warehouse. The yellow lights flickered, and I saw a tail whip to the side. Yup, definitely bigger. A phantom chill went through me as I remembered those claws and fangs ripping into me, dragging me back to Kaden.

One of them chortled, a hysterical, almost laugh that made me want to flee. I heard a crash as something was thrown, followed by a chorus of hisses—the box. I'd touched it, and they smelled it. Now those papers I so desperately needed were scattered beneath their feet.

"I can distract them long enough—"

"No." I swallowed, the chattering noises they made growing louder. "We have to leave."

"Wait," Neverra whispered.

"No, I don't care. I'm not risking you." I meant every word. He could summon a portal and drag us both back. I wouldn't let Kaden take her back to Yejedin. I wouldn't put her at risk for my own selfish reasons.

Not like I had Gabby.

Her eyes softened as if she saw everything I thought.

She nodded. "Toward the back, I saw an exit. We can make it once the biggest one passes the third shelf over there."

I looked around the corner, seeing what she meant as the swinging yellow light flashed between the darkness and monsters.

"Okay. Tell me when."

We watched and waited. As soon as those clawed feet passed, we darted out and ran for the exit.

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DIANNA



Neverra landed outside the palace and placed me on my feet, both of us swaying with exhaustion. The Irvikuva had chased us through the building. We'd made it out, and Neverra had shot into the sky. A flurry of wings had followed, the creatures screeching their frustration and hatred as we made our escape.

We entered the main foyer. Samkiel and I had christened each room, leaving a path of destruction in our wake. After we untangled ourselves from each other, we put the house back to rights.

"Thanks for going with me, Neverra. Even if it was a complete waste."

I plopped on the couch and sighed.

She sat down, angling her body toward me. "I wouldn't say it was a complete waste," she said, pulling something from her back pocket.

She handed me a thick stack of folded paper. I gave her a puzzled look but took it from her. She watched as I unwrapped it and scanned the documents, shock hitting me when I saw my family's name.

"How?" I asked breathlessly.

"I grabbed them as soon as we heard the commotion. I hope some of these are what you need."

My arms went around her before I realized what I was doing. Her laugh was soft and filled with surprise, but she hugged me back.

"Thank you." I released her and sank to the floor, spreading out the pages she'd snatched. Neverra joined me, and we searched through the documents. I let out a small cry of victory when I found a bundle that contained my family's birth records. Neverra leaned close as I read through them, my breath hitching when I came to the lineage.

“What does that mean?” she asked, her brow furrowing as she focused on the records that listed my mother, father, and Gabby but not me. I flipped to the next page and found a separate document used in Eoria and eventually across Onuna—a right of ownership for a child that wasn’t yours. It had my name neatly written across the top.

I placed the pages down, my stomach twisting.

“It means,” I swallowed and sat back, “that Tobias was right. I was adopted.”

Neverra’s eyes widened. “Oh.”



I SAT ON THE COUCH, CHEWING ON MY THUMBNAIL AND STARING AT THE neat stack of papers. Such a small thing to define my life, or was it even my life? I had no idea. A million and one thoughts ran through my mind, all screaming and hateful. One last hurtful barb Tobias had thrown at me.

Neverra had finally left to clean up and check on Logan, but I’d had to force her to go. She hadn’t wanted to leave me alone, but I didn’t want the company. So I did what I always had when something happened. I retreated inward, where I could protect myself behind my impenetrable scales, teeth, and claws. There, I was safe, even if they were only mental right now.

I showered and threw on one of Samkiel’s shirts. It engulfed me, his scent bringing me comfort. Back on the couch, I pulled my thighs to my chest and rested my head on my knees, wrapping my arms around my legs. Who was I? Mer-Ka wasn’t my name. Dianna wasn’t my name. Who were my real parents, my real family? And why did no one tell me? Gabby looked like me. I knew it, but maybe I was wrong.

The wounds on my heart had just begun to heal, and now it felt like they’d ripped open again. They festered, and that cold, unfeeling rage threatened to overwhelm me again. Pain speared through me, and I struck out, toppling the table and scattering the papers across the floor. Lies. My whole life had been nothing but lies. This was just another one, but it felt so much worse. My chest ached like it was seconds away from caving in on itself.

I heard the now-familiar whistle of a god riding the wind. I had not realized it, but subconsciously I listened for that sound. My gaze snapped to the window, and as I tracked the silver light across the sky, the devastating and destructive rage eased. A cooling calm settled over me, a balm against my aching heart. The beast inside me felt him near, knew we were safe, and decided to rest instead.

My first instinct was to hide the documents, but Samkiel wasn't Kaden. He wouldn't be mad at me. He wouldn't punish me for seeking this information. Samkiel would never make me feel less than, but he would be upset with me when he found out I'd gone to Onuna without him and ran into the damned Irvikuva.

I took a shuddering breath. In the intimate moments we had spent over the last days, we had made promises to each other, both spoken and unspoken. We had promised to talk and turn to each other in times of need. I picked up the papers and righted the table. Hearing his armored boots against the stone floor, I set the documents on the tabletop and went to meet him.

Samkiel saw me and stopped. I didn't know why I was nervous. Maybe it was that I'd never had someone to share anything with besides my sister, and now I was raw knowing she wasn't truly my sister.

Samkiel's helmet melted away, revealing the beauty of his face. Gods, I could barely comprehend what I felt for this man. He looked me up and down, curiosity and sparks of silver glinting in his eyes. "It's yours," I said, touching the hem of the shirt.

"I see that. I think I might prefer this over the small lacy items you wear, but only slightly." Samkiel closed the distance between us in two long strides and bent to kiss me. I turned my head, shaking it.

"Hey," he cupped my chin, turning my face toward him, "don't do that. Don't pull away from me. We are not going back to that. Kiss me, Dianna."

I pressed my fingers to his lips as he leaned down again, stopping him. I looked up at him through my lashes and whispered, "I did something."

His brows drew together as he mumbled against my fingers, "What did you do?"

I dropped my hand to his chest and looked down, staring at the bright armor. "You can't get upset."

His voice dropped an octave. "I make no promises."

I sighed and met his gaze. "I went to Onuna again."

“Dianna.” His eyes flared pure silver as he stood up straighter. “Who took you?”

I waved him off, unfazed by the power display. “It’s not important.”

“We talked about this. Dianna, you could....”

I didn’t know what he saw in my eyes, but his words trailed off, and he fell silent. I held out my hand. “Will you please sit with me?”

The silver in his eyes died, his protective anger dissipating, leaving behind only worry. He nodded and took my hand, his larger one engulfing mine, the metal of his rings and armor cool against my fingers. I led him to the living room, and we sat, angling our bodies toward one another. Samkiel still wore his armor as if he were so comfortable in it that he didn’t notice, or he was so focused on me that it wasn’t a priority.

“I had a dream last night,” I said, picking up the papers that screamed my reality.

“Oh? Is that why you kicked me?”

My smirk only lasted a moment, disappearing as I placed the documents between us.

“Tobias said something to me in the cavern, but so much had happened that I didn’t pay it any attention, or maybe I buried it. I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t want to believe it, but last night after... well, you know, I slept, really slept. I dreamed I was in this dark place, and then I heard all of these voices. It sounded like many beings chanting.”

“Chanting what?”

I placed the paper right side up and turned it toward him. He leaned forward, scanning it, a hint of confusion tightening the corners of his eyes.

“That she’s not mine. These papers say that she isn’t my sister.”

He picked up the document to better read it. He didn’t say anything, but when he looked up at me, I saw a flicker of anger had returned to his eyes. Even a week ago, that would have devastated me and sent me scuttling back behind walls to safeguard my heart, but whatever had shifted between us had given me insight into him. Samkiel was not mad at me; he was mad because something had dared to hurt me. He would lock me away and protect me from the world if he could.

“If this is real, if what I’m dreaming is real, then I saw something else.”

Samkiel waited.

“I saw a blood-red moon on a world that wasn’t this one or Onuna. I mean, it could just be my brain because Kaden had the werewolves looking

into lunar cycles. So, of course, why would I not dream of moons? But there was another word whispered. The same word—an equinox.”

“Equinox?”

My shoulders slumped, and I twisted my fingers together. “I don’t know what it means, or even if it is important, but there were these figures in my dream.”

Samkiel went unnaturally still. “How many figures?”

“Three. I couldn’t see their faces, but they wore crowns.” His jaw clenched, and I knew him well enough to see worry darken his features. “You’ve seen them too.”

“I have and the blood-red moon.”

I didn’t ask why he hadn’t told me, nor was I mad. These last few months had been pure chaos for both of us, but we were united again. We could talk about this stuff again, and that gave me some peace.

“Okay, so we share psychic dreams now, too? Add that to our list of weird.”

His lip twisted in amusement, but then he grew thoughtful, rubbing his hand across his chin. “Neverra said that when she was in Yejedin, she had heard mention of a big happening. It could be this equinox. But we have checked, and no rare celestial events are happening anytime soon. Nothing powerful enough to fuel a ritual.”

I exhaled slowly and sat back, trying to remember the details of the dream. They seemed so hazy and far away now. “I don’t know, Samkiel. Maybe it was just a dream, my mind finally trying to process all that had happened and jumbling up events. But my instincts are telling me there is more to it.”

“I don’t doubt you, Dianna. But the moon could just be a symbol. Dreams are interpreted as the viewer sees fit. The moon represents change and passage of time. It is a power able to shape the tides. You have experienced a lot of changes and upheavals, important and life-altering ones.”

I placed my hand on my chin as I sighed. “You’re so smart.”

He gave me a sheepish grin. “Flirt.”

“Okay, well, it’s a start, I guess.” I reached for the papers, but his hand clasped over mine.

“Dianna.”

“Yes?”

“You should have taken me with you.” He glared at me, and I lowered my gaze, staring at the document beneath our hands. “This isn’t something you should learn or have to go through alone.”

I shrugged. “I wasn’t alone. Neverra was there.”

“Neverra took you?” He cocked his head to the side, more curious than angry, but something else was bothering me.

I ignored his question, unable to contain the pain of my doubts. “Does this mean Gabby isn’t my sister? I mean, I know what I’m looking at, and I know what it says, but—”

“This changes nothing. *Nothing*, Dianna. She still is and will always be your sister. The same one you grew up with, the same one you experienced life with, the same one you died for, lived for, and fought for. Blood is the least of what makes a family. Trust me.”

I did trust him. Samkiel would always tell me the truth. I leaned forward and grabbed the neckline of his armor. Pulling him toward me, I kissed him. Once. Twice. Three times before I sat back down.

“Now you kiss me?”

“I needed to tell you what I had done before you kissed me. You needed to know because I did not want you to feel deceived or manipulated. I know what that is, and I would not have you feel that at my hands, Samkiel.” I gave him an angelic smile and started to gather the documents. “Plus, you were being nice.”

“Thank you for protecting my heart, Dianna,” he said, his eyes brilliant with an emotion I was afraid to name. “And, I’m always nice. You, on the other hand...”

I glared at him. His returning grin was brilliant and playful. For the first time, I noticed the thin layer of dust on his face. I wiped at my lips, my hand coming away with a gray line smeared across the back.

“Why do you taste terrible?” I asked with a grimace, really looking him over for the first time tonight. Gray dust coated his armor, the only shiny spot, my handprint on his chest, directly over his heart.

“There she is.”

“What happened to you? Are you okay?”

He chuckled, the deep masculine sound resonating in my soul. “Sorry, and yes, I’m fine.”

“Then why are you disgusting?” I asked, arching a single brow.

“I thought that was a quality you favored in me?”

Heat flared, burning away the sadness that had gripped me so viciously.
“Hmm, maybe. I can think of a few others, though.”

The corners of his mouth lifted in an evil grin. “I think you need to show me.”

My stomach flipped every time Samkiel smiled, but the ones he flashed when he thought something filthy were downright devious, and they made my entire body run hot.

“Maybe after you shower. I don’t have my super magical powers, and I refuse to get an infection because you’re gross.”

His laugh reverberated across my skin, my soul. “I’d just heal you.”

“Mm-hmm.” I stood and held out my hand to him. “Come on.”

He took my hand and allowed me to pull him to his feet. He didn’t fight me as we headed upstairs, and he laughed when I shoved him into the bathroom. I started the shower as he stripped behind me. Once the water was warm enough, I stepped out of the way, and he walked in. I turned and grabbed a cloth from the counter. Wetting it, I wiped the dirt from my mouth and face. I watched Samkiel in the bathroom mirror as he rinsed the grime from that beautiful, powerful body.

He caught me looking and smiled. “You know you don’t have to ask. Come join me,” he said, temptation itself.

“I already showered. You’re the one who got home late.” I placed the cloth down and turned toward him, leaning back against the counter.

Suddenly, every bit of his attention focused on me. He stilled, water flowing over the carved muscles of his chest and thighs.

“What?” I asked, cocking my head.

“Home?” he asked, his voice husky and low, but I heard him.

I hadn’t even thought about it. The word had slipped out easily. I stared into the deep gray of his eyes and realized that he had become my home.

I didn’t bother trying to hide it. I was a terrible liar, anyway. “That’s what it feels like with you.”

He smiled as if I’d just handed him a priceless gift.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, don’t make that face.” His smile widened, joyful and triumphant. “Now it’s your turn.” I folded my arms. “What happened today?”

Samkiel’s smile faltered, and he reached for a bottle of shampoo. “I killed Porphyrion.”

Samkiel had told me about Porphyron the other night while we ate—the giant they'd found locked up in Yejedin. I pushed from the counter and joined him in the shower, running my hands over his body, looking for wounds this time.

A growl of pleasure rumbled in his chest as my fingers danced over the slick hard ridges and planes of muscles. I put my hands on my hips, ignoring the water soaking my hair and clothes.

“Are you hurt? I told you—”

“You told me what?”

I glared and pinched his side. He jerked away and glared at me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, and you have no right to take me to task for doing something risky when you traveled back to Onuna while Kaden is hunting you,” he said, rubbing the shampoo into his hair, his biceps flexing.

I pursed my lips and flicked water at him before sitting on the shower bench. “Fair.”

He chuckled and ducked his head, stepping beneath the water to rinse the soap from his hair. I watched the water cascade over his shoulders and down the sleek, powerful lines of his back and—

“He told me about Kaden and who he really is.”

Cool dread crawled over me, replacing the warmth of my desire.

“What?”

He turned toward me and picked up the soap, rubbing it over his abdomen. “You won’t believe it.”

“Who is he?”

“One of my father’s ex-generals.”

“Your father?”

He nodded as he washed his groin. He handled his cock with brisk practicality, but I still had to glance away from how mouthwatering he looked.

“Yes, along with two others who presumably died in the Gods War.” He lathered one powerful muscled thigh, then the other. “Kaden created the Kings of Yejedin, which is why they were so fiercely loyal to him. It makes sense now why he hates me so much. If there was a falling out with my father, or if he did not support my birth.” He sighed. “Just more ancient enemies, as if I do not have enough.”

“One,” I said, holding up my finger. Samkiel glanced toward me, reaching for his feet. “One powerful enemy left. I killed Tobias and Alistair, so as soon as whatever the fuck is blocking me is gone, I’ll—” I stopped. I wasn’t alone anymore. No. I needed to learn that, too. “We will kill him, too.”

He grinned. “Flirt.”

I smiled as he stepped under the full spray, a weird sense of relief washing over me. I knew I should care more about Kaden being some overpowered general, but the truth was, I didn’t give a shit about Kaden. Not anymore. I only cared about this man.

A lock on a door in a house rattled.

“Well,” I said, unable to deal with the strength of my reaction to him right now. “At least we have some answers now.”

“He said something else, though. Of course, he reminded me how my family had lied, but he also talked about me, what I’ve done, what I was trained to do, and who I am. Then I proved him right by ending him. It just makes me feel....” He paused, and I caught the change in his mood.

“Makes you feel like the old you?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “I wanted to be Liam after Rashearim fell, but every time I turn around, I am reminded that I am and will always be Samkiel. The World Ender. Feared among stars and realms. A king. A conqueror. I don’t want to be feared.” He sighed and turned the water off. “I just want to help people.”

“You do. You have.” I stood up and grabbed two towels. Stepping in front of him, I handed him one for his hair and dragged the other towel over his shoulders and arms. “You’re the strongest being I know.” I slid the soft cloth over his chest and abdomen as he rubbed at his hair. “You are truly good, no matter what label the old gods or the world give you.” I dropped to my knees, drying off his thighs, one leg at a time. “You’re never scared of anything.”

“Debatable.” Samkiel’s voice had dropped an octave. His cock twitched, and I smiled up at him, happy to see those storm-colored eyes sparking with desire rather than swimming in pain.

I stood and moved around him. I dried the water from his broad shoulders and back. “You are brave and sweet, and you have saved my life more than once. You risk your life for others with no regard for what happens to you.” I pulled on his arm, turning him to face me. “I’ve heard

the stories. Gods, I've seen half of them in the blooddreams." I wrapped the towel around him and tugged him closer. "You are both equal parts your mother and father. Strong and resilient like him. Kind and compassionate like her. You're a protector, a guardian, and," I reached up and wrapped my hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down to me as I went to my tiptoes, "my best friend."

A smile lit his face, chasing the shadows from his eyes. I ran my thumb against his jaw. "I liked everything until that last part," he said.

It took a moment for it to register. "Oh, gods, the friend word? Still?" I pushed playfully at his face.

He shrugged one of those powerful shoulders and slid his hand down my back to pull me closer. "Call me something else."

"Hmm. Egotistical? Self-righteous. Demanding?" His eyes narrowed. "Don't look at me like that. Who else will keep you humble?" I smiled widely, tapping his cheek and turning from him.

I didn't feel the air move, but I felt the sting when he popped my ass. The noise I let out wasn't in pain. I rubbed my butt and turned around to flip him off.

He lifted a single brow as if in challenge, and I ran, nearly slipping on the floor. I had barely cleared the bathroom door when I felt his arms go around me, lifting me off my feet. I squealed as he tossed me onto the bed and jumped on top of me. He gripped my hands and pulled them above my head when I tried to push him away. He settled over me with a wide grin. I glared up at him even as bubbles of happiness burst within me. "Cheater."

I tasted his laughter as his mouth claimed mine in a fiery kiss. I was panting when he pulled back.

"Is my kiss better now?" he asked, raising on his elbow.

"Could be better," I said, my words belied by the shakiness of my voice and the way I writhed beneath him.

Samkiel chuckled and released my wrists. His fingers feathered across my skin as he brushed the hair from my face. He said nothing for a long moment as he just looked at me. Sometimes the way he touched and held me was more intimate than sex.

"There is something else I want to talk to you about."

My eyes narrowed. "I know that face."

"What face?"

“The Samkiel plotting face. It’s the deep scowl of an ancient battle-worn king, and it looks like this.” I forced my brows together, drawing another laugh from him. “It usually means someone said something you didn’t like. Given the giant you visited, I assume it’s him. You have another face where your eyes kind of gloss over, and you go off to wherever in that head of yours. Usually, that one means I can get away with anything.”

He chuckled. “Fair.”

“Yup, there is also your thinking face. It’s similar to the one you have now, which probably means one of two things. Either you have a plan that will likely upset me, or you’re annoyed and want to be anywhere but here. Given that lovely third appendage currently hard and pressed against my stomach, I will call you a liar if you tell me you don’t want to be here.”

“You would be right. I am perfectly happy right here.” He pressed his cock against me. “You truly pay that much attention to me?”

I slid my hands over his chest. “I notice everything about you.”

Samkiel brushed a light kiss against my lips, and I felt the emotion in it. I licked at his lower lip, eager to taste it as well. I sighed and whispered against his mouth, “So, I’m not going to like this, am I?”

He shook his head. “I am afraid not, my Dianna.”

My humor died, replaced by worry. “What is it?”

“There were things that Porphyrrion said in Yejedin, things I need to know the truth of. I am growing tired of hearing rumors of family secrets that I know nothing about. There is a deity related to the Formless Ones I can visit, but it is not without risk. It’s out of the physical realm, the entrance safeguarded in the council halls.”

I tipped my head. “How can you get to them if the realms are sealed?”

“The physical ones are, but not the mental ones. This one requires extreme focus and power, a level above meditation to visit. It may take a few days or even a week. To leave is as delicate a task as it is to go in. You could rip the mind doing it improperly. I’m not sure how long it will take, but I promise to return as quickly as possible.”

I didn’t ask why we hadn’t used this said deity before. As soon as we’d left Roccurem’s, everything had changed.

“Okay.” I sighed. “So just be careful and don’t rush. I understand if it takes a while. Just don’t overdo it and promise to come back to me.”

“Promise.” He twirled a strand of my hair between his fingers.

“That wasn’t so bad. Why were you nervous?”

“Well,” he paused, “we have agreed not to lie or keep things from one another, but I am also aware of your protectiveness of me.”

I squinted at him, my suspicions rising. “Okay...”

“There was a brief previous relation with said deity. Let’s just remember that I was a very lonely being before I met you.”

I smacked him on his shoulder. “You could have led with that.”

“Volatile.” He laughed before grabbing my face and crushing his lips against mine. The kiss was hard, demanding, and brief. He pulled back to whisper against my lips, “Why does it excite me so when you get jealous?”

“Because you’re insane, and you like pain.” I bit his bottom lip to prove my point, which made him chuckle even as his cock twitched against my stomach.

“Okay, so you’re going to see an ex-girlfriend in a mental realm where I can’t reach you. Sounds fun.”

“Not an ex-girlfriend. The deity has no sex, really. They can be any and everything you desire. Besides, it was merely one time.”

I reached between us, grabbed his cock, and squeezed. “Oh, even better.”

“Jealous.” He groaned and nipped the tip of my nose.

“Yes, but I have no right to be. I did a lot of things to make you hate me before we actually got to be together. Plus, you’re over a thousand years old, Samkiel. I can’t kill all your past lovers. Even if I want to.”

“You want to?”

I nodded. I had decided not to hide any part of myself from him. Not anymore. I stroked him, loving the feel of silk over steel, throbbing and hot. “Yes.”

His chest rumbled with a small laugh that ended in a hiss. “See what I mean? So sexy.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Why didn’t we use these guys before?”

He shook his head. “You’re not helping me concentrate.”

I twisted my hand on a downward stroke. “Try.”

He groaned even as his hips thrust, pushing his cock further into my hand. “Roccurem speaks in riddles half the time, and the Higher One usually asks for something in return. If I want answers, I will have to pay the price, and it varies.”

My hand stopped. “What price?”

“I don’t know.” He swallowed, taking a shuddering breath. “But if the price is too high, I’ll leave, but there are too many secrets, Dianna, too many things my father kept from me.”

“Okay. I just wish I had my powers. Maybe I could go with you and incinerate them if they try to keep you.”

Samkiel reached between us and pulled my hand away from his cock. He pressed my palm to the center of his chest. “You’re always with me.”

I rolled my eyes and groaned.

“You’re so mean to me.” He laughed.

“Call it a lesson in humility,” I said, but I kept my hand on his chest, feeling that slow rhythmic beat within my soul. I gave him a wry smile and said with all honesty, “I can’t give you pretty words. I don’t know how anymore.”

His expression softened, and he placed his hand over mine. “I know.”

“I want to be honest with you, too, because that does not mean I care any less for you.”

“I know.”

I shifted my hips and lifted a single leg, pressing my knee against his chest. He glanced down right before I pushed with enough force to flip him onto his back. A soft gasp left his lips as I straddled him. “But I can show you in my own way every day if you let me.”

“Dangerous woman.” A wicked smile curved his lips, his abs flexing as he started to sit up.

My hand splayed on his chest, stopping him, his mouth a few inches from mine. I pressed him back onto the bed.

“Stay.”

“Is that an order?”

“Yes,” I said haughtily.

His chest vibrated as he chuckled, and I knew he remembered the words he had spoken to me weeks ago. That egotistical grin didn’t leave his lips as he folded his arms behind his head, the muscles of his biceps bunched as if he had to struggle to keep himself from disobeying.

I lifted my hands to the buttons of the shirt I wore, undoing them one by one. Samkiel’s eyes followed every movement I made as if he was memorizing each inch of skin I bared. I reached the last button and let the damp shirt slip from my shoulders.

My hair fell in waves around me, covering my breasts. Samkiel reached up to move my hair out of the way, but I playfully slapped his hand.

“No. You don’t touch me until I say so.”

I watched his eyes go molten silver and his tongue shift behind his teeth as he smirked. He was new to being told what to do. I blamed it on his crown more than anything, but I was in control right now, and he seemed to enjoy it. I felt him throb and harden even more beneath me.

I reached between us, stroking at his length. He groaned as my thumb ran along the sensitive underside and swept over the head, spreading the bead of moisture that gathered at the tip. His cock jerked in my hand.

“I haven’t even really touched you yet, and you’re already throbbing for me.”

“You don’t have to touch me for that. Everything about you is enticing.”

The smile I flashed him was downright devious before I slid down his body and lowered my head. I lapped at the head of his cock, tasting the drops of moisture that gathered there, but I did not take him into my mouth.

“Fuck,” he hissed, his hips jerking and his hand fisting in the comforter. “Please, Dianna.”

I denied him, my tongue swirling over the thick crown again. He growled and thrust against my mouth. I teased him, licking and kissing at every inch of him, up and down the heavy shaft, exploring the thick vein that pulsed against my lips while never taking him fully in my mouth. I grew hotter and slicker with every hushed moan and curse that slipped past his lips.

His eyes fixated on me, hot and predatory, and I looked up at him through the veil of my lashes, smiling as I took another long lick from base to tip. I dipped low again, my tongue sliding over his balls in a long, slow, luxurious lick. His cock twitched in my hand.

“You’re such a fucking tease.” He groaned and fisted the sheets with one hand, draping his other arm over his face.

“Yeah?” I asked, lapping up the shaft. I swirled my tongue over the head before placing a kiss to the tip and then another against the sensitive underside.

He jerked beneath me, every muscle in his arms, abdomen, and legs tight and straining.

“Suck me, Dianna.”

I smiled, his cock resting against my lips. “No.”

His groan sent molten heat to my core. “Please.”

I ignored him, flicking my tongue once more.

“Do you wish for me to beg? I’ll beg.” Samkiel panted.

My hand stroked him idly, continuing my torture.

“Kings don’t beg.”

His hips thrust helplessly. “I will for you.”

“Yeah?” I asked. My grip tightened at the base of his cock, flicking my tongue teasingly against his shaft.

“Yes,” Samkiel hissed.

“Tempting, but no.”

He groaned, his arms flexing as he practically wrapped them around his head, trying to keep himself from touching me.

“I think I could make you come like this.”

He nodded, his storm-colored eyes burning bright silver.

Another slow, agonizing lick and I saw the lines beneath his skin flare and flicker. Control he had, but it was slipping.

“Do you want to?”

He shook his head.

I gave the head of his cock one last kiss and pushed up, sliding along his body until I straddled him. He dropped his arm from his face, and I leaned in to claim his mouth. His resolve broke as he cupped my face, damn near devouring my mouth. I moaned into the kiss, his tongue sweeping across mine before sucking on it in a rhythm we’d memorized these last few days.

Reaching between us, I rubbed the head of his cock against my sex, letting him feel just how wet I was before positioning him at my entrance. I sank down on him inch by inch, the sound that left me not quite mortal.

“Dianna,” he groaned as I fully sheathed him inside me, my body clenching around him in sweet welcome.

I braced my hands on either side of his head and lifted, dragging the hot grip of my pussy along his cock before slamming back down, ripping a harsh moan from both of us.

“I’ll never get used to how good this feels,” I panted.

“Good.” His head falls back against the pillows as I pick up my pace. His hands gripped my sides, steadyng me, but never moved lower as if he wanted me to take every bit of him for myself. I wanted to show him I did care. Even if words failed me, I wanted to prove to him I was his.

I leaned back, adjusting my legs to ride him differently. I placed one hand on his powerful thigh, and the other I pressed against my lower abdomen. Samkiel lifted his head, watching the way my body took him in. I grabbed his hand, placing it between my breast over my heart.

“Yours,” I breathed, rolling my hips, my heart racing beneath his palm.

“Mine,” he agreed, and it sounded like a vow. The look on his face took my breath away, and I knew I would never forget it. I would remember it until I was dust between the stars.

I shifted Samkiel’s hand to my breast. He squeezed and pinched at my nipple, and I eased my pace, riding him deep and slow. The storm that raged in his eyes could bury ships.

“Yours,” I whispered, pressing his hand against my breast.

I wrapped my fingers around his thick wrist, dragging his hand down my torso, guiding it to my center, where we were joined. I didn’t break eye contact, holding his gaze as pleasure scorched my veins.

“Yours.” The word came out on a whimper, the feel of his fingers against the sensitive flesh stretched so tight around his cock, making my eyes roll back.

“Mine.” His thumb brushed lightly over my clit, sending a shockwave of electricity through me that had my brain short-circuiting. I clenched around him, my body bathing his cock in a rush of liquid heat. His eyes glowed, and I moaned, biting at my lip, trying to keep my eyes on him. I wanted him to know, to see, that even if I could not say the words he so desperately wanted, he owned me, mind, body, and soul.

As if he could read my mind, Samkiel’s hands grabbed my hips, and he drove himself into me with such force I almost blacked out from the pleasure of it. Samkiel’s lips crashed against mine. We fit so perfectly in every way.

I couldn’t breathe or think as he devoured my mouth, his tongue tangling with mine. His hands dropped to my ass, squeezing so tightly I knew he would leave marks. With ridiculous ease, he lifted me up and down on his cock.

“*Fuck! Yes! Please, Sami,*” I screamed, ripping my mouth from his.

He held me tighter, his large hands controlling my hips as he drove into me so hard I saw stars. I leaned my head back and realized I wasn’t just imagining it. The ceiling was gone, the galaxy twisting and sparking above.

Samkiel fisted my hair in one hand, forcing me to look at him. “I told you I would take you beneath the stars,” he growled, his thrusts powerful and steady. “I meant it.”

His mouth covered mine, claiming every scream, every gasp, and every whimper. He consumed me and my pleasure.

“Lean back, Dianna,” he demanded. “Show me what’s mine again. I want to see it.”

A shudder went through me at his words. My pussy clamped down on him as I placed my hands on his thighs and readjusted my legs. It was easy to move with him like this when I was fucking soaked for him, and he knew it, too. His gaze focused on where his cock disappeared inside me. He bit his bottom lip, and his eyes blazed.

“You have such a pretty pussy, baby. I love watching my cock disappear in and out.” His hands gripped my hips, his rings biting into my skin. “You take me so well.” He moaned, his elegant face savage with hunger. “You were made for me. Only me.”

His power aligned with mine, his presence surrounding and sustaining me. His hands were everywhere at once. Literally. Clever fingers brushed a piece of my hair that had fallen forward to the side and caressed the underside of my breasts, trailing in decreasing circles until they reached my dusky-tipped nipples. He rolled the sensitive tips between thumbs and forefingers.

Another set of fingers cupped my ass, tracing the crease where my buttocks met my thighs, easing around to the front and teasing the sensitized skin of my inner thighs before trailing to my clit. He changed the tempo and pace of his thrusts, watching me hungrily. His fingers made small, deliberate circles around the swollen bud, making my toes curl and pushing me to the verge of coming.

I felt the phantom touch of his hot, moist lips suckling at my pulse. At the same time, large hands cupped my breasts, squeezing gently in tandem as my nipples were sucked and nipped.

Oh, my gods.

He was everywhere, hard-edged and hungry, taking my body with tender greed.

“Sami,” I moaned, my nails digging into his thighs.

“That’s it, baby. Say my name. Tell me who makes you feel this good. Tell me who you belong to.”

“Samkiel.” His name left my lips breathlessly as he drove deeper inside me. “Samkiel.” The second time louder, as he hit that spot only he could reach. My belly clenched, pleasure shooting through my legs and back again as I screamed his name louder, “Samkiel!” I sounded like I felt—completely insane.

“Fuck me, Dianna,” he groaned, his fingers tightening on my hips. “Ride my cock, baby.”

He was always so polite, but he was absolutely filthy when I had him like this.

I closed my eyes and flung out my hands, groping uselessly, desperate for something to hold on to. Samkiel clasped my hands in his warm, firm grip as he played my body like a beloved instrument. I increased my speed, driving myself harder onto him, moving with a primal instinctive rhythm in a dance as old as time.

“Gods, yes. Yes, yes, yes. Just like that.” He panted.

He felt so good and right, his thick, hard cock filling me up. At the same time, those phantom touches explored the most private areas of my body, flicking at my clit, sucking at my nipples, and stroking tenderly down my back. All the while, he held my hands, anchoring me to him. Somebody was swearing, an incoherent stream of profanity, and I thought it might be me.

“Oh, Dianna, baby.” He gasped my name. “You fuck me so good.”

Even in the midst of my frantic need, the pure sound of his voice pulled at me, and I opened my eyes.

Samkiel glowed, the lines of silver pulsing with each pump of his powerful heart. His eyes were crystalline and diamond bright, glowing with power and emotion. My breath caught, the sight of him so out of control my undoing.

I flung my head back and shrieked, muscles trembling from the strength of my release. I clenched around him, my body demanding that he join me. Samkiel grunted and started to speak in a beautiful, fluid language. He let go of my hands and gripped my hips with bruising force. He pulled me down and thrust once, twice, before coming so hard it nearly pushed me over the edge again.

My body shook as I watched his abs tighten, his muscles flexing as his release barreled through him. I didn’t know who screamed whose name first, only that we were both falling as the bedframe snapped beneath us. I

lurched forward, Samkiel catching me, as he always did before we rolled to the floor.

Samkiel's back hit the floor with a thud, and he lay sprawled beneath me, his chest slick with sweat and heaving. I glanced at the broken bed and back to him as I panted on his chest, hair clinging to my sweat-drenched face. I couldn't help the laugh that left my lips.

"We broke it again."

He grunted, his eyes heavy-lidded, just a hint of silver glittering through the thick fall of his lashes. "I'll make us a new bed before I leave."

I laughed as my arms went around him, hugging him tighter. "This is the third one."

He made an incomprehensible noise.

We both lay there, tremors racking our bodies as we came down from the high. My breathing matched his, along with my heartbeat.

"I also have another idea," I whispered.

"You always ask me questions after you ravage me because you know I'll say yes."

"I mean, I'm not denying that."

His laugh rumbled beneath my ear.

I turned my head and placed my hands beneath my chin as I looked at him. "Just something to do before you leave."

He forced his eyes open and regarded me. "What is it?"

SEVENTY-SEVEN

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IMOGEN



Xavier had taped together the pictures of the runes the celestials had taken, mapping out different cells and structures. Cameron strolled in with an oversized bag of snacks in hand. He stopped beside Neverra, offering her some. She smiled at him before grabbing something from the bag and turning back to Xavier.

“Okay, that’s most of them. Half of the words are older than even us.”

I flipped through the large codex translation book. I had been using it to translate Elianna’s journal but failed to make much headway.

“Most don’t make sense. I think it’s just a jumble of words and symbols,” Vincent said, towering over me to read over my shoulder. He’d tied his hair back, but small pieces had escaped the knot. Vincent usually only pulled it back like that when he was in a bad mood or stressed. “What if it is a language, and we are just looking at it wrong?” he asked, pointing to the text I had highlighted.

I turned my head to the side, and that’s when I saw it.

“You’re right.”

Cameron laughed around a mouthful of chips. “Ha! Vincent right? Who would have thought?”

Vincent flipped him off. Cameron leaned back and propped his feet up on the table with a lazy grin.

“Isn’t it weird Kaden had a whole archive on Samkiel and the other gods?” Cameron asked, crunching loudly on more chips. Neverra leaned over and grabbed the bag from him. She sat back, sharing the salty snack with Logan.

"Wasn't there a rumor that Unir and Nismera were, ya know..." Cameron made a lewd motion with his hands that I ignored.

Logan nodded. "There were rumblings."

"Please. The gods had meetings all the time that lasted days. Cameron just assumes everyone is fucking," Vincent said with a scowl.

"Most are," Cameron said. "All I'm saying is, what if Kaden is a secret child of Unir?"

Tension built behind my eyes. "You do know how babies work, right?" I asked Cameron.

"Yeah, Immy, just like you and—"

I sent him a death glare. He chuckled, and I flipped another page in the journal. "If he had a child, it would be documented. Also, Kaden is an Ig'Morruthen. How would that even work?"

Cameron shrugged. "I mean, we all know he was like Samkiel before he met Zasyn. So I don't know, Imogen, but if he was a secret, that is why it wouldn't be documented."

Neverra snickered. "Regardless of Cameron's brilliant theory, I highly doubt it."

"I think he's older than Unir himself, especially if he can open portals. So, who says he didn't make Yejedin? The kings follow him, right?" Vincent added before taking a seat.

"That's a good point, Vincent. Unir had a long list of enemies," Neverra said.

Logan popped a chip into his mouth and swallowed before saying, "That makes more sense."

Cameron sighs and digs into the bag, looking for more snacks.

Neverra pulled a book from the stack next to her. She flipped to a page she had marked and turned it toward us. "I found a brief history of Samkiel's great-grandfather. It recounts how he went insane and blamed the gods for some future darkness that would taint and ruin the bloodline. He spread his lies and eradicated thousands before they dethroned him."

I placed a hand under my chin. "That could also create a legion of enemies."

"Phanthar, Samkiel's grandfather, took the throne next, which we all know, but you know what they say. Cut the hand, and the blood that follows trickles down to the child."

"Yeah, that makes no sense," Cameron chided.

I glared at him. “Well, I didn’t make it up.”

“Oh.” Cameron sat up a tad bit straighter. “Wouldn’t it suck if Kaden was like Samkiel’s long-lost uncle or something?”

The room stilled. Even Logan stopped with a chip raised halfway to his mouth.

Cameron glanced at all of us and then sighed. “He’s right behind me, isn’t he?”

I nodded.

“Kaden is not blood kin or whatever Cameron has concocted in his brain,” Samkiel said calmly.

Cameron leaned his head back to meet Samkiel’s glare.

“How do you know?” Logan asked before the rest of us could.

“Porphyron informed me.”

“You went back? Alone?” Vincent asked.

Samkiel nodded. “He informed me that Kaden was one of my father’s generals. He was there with him before the Gods War. Kaden created the Kings of Yejedin.”

The room fell deathly still.

“He said some other things, but I need to get those sorted before discussing them.”

Xavier scratched the back of his head. “He made the Kings? Thats—”

“Power,” Cameron finished. They traded a look but quickly glanced away. I didn’t know what had happened between them, but they hadn’t talked much these last few days.

“Yes, power that I need to figure out,” Samkiel said.

Cameron exhaled a breath on a low whistle.

“We collected more symbols from that destroyed room we found, but mostly it looks like a jumbled mess,” I said, spreading the photos on the table. Samkiel walked around the table, studying the images before lifting one.

“Spells,” Samkiel said.

“You think so?”

Samkiel nodded. “Or enchantments. I am not sure what they do, but I am pretty sure that is what they are.”

“What if it’s more?” Neverra asked.

Samkiel threw a look toward her that had Logan stiffening. Neverra swallowed as if she knew she was in trouble.

Neverra cleared her throat and lifted her chin before continuing. “When Dianna and I went to Onuna, his beasts showed up. They wanted Dianna. I know we discussed the possibility of rituals, but what if that’s why he is so desperate to get her back? What if he needs her for whatever he wants to do?”

Everyone sat frozen with shock. A crack sounded from the corner of the room, and I wondered what he had fractured.

Neverra had gone back to Onuna, and she had taken Dianna. Not only that, but those hideous creatures Kaden controlled had gotten close to them.

“When was this?” Logan all but yelled next to her. “Nev.”

Neverra tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “She asked me, okay? It was short notice, and I couldn’t say no. She saved me, or planned to, at least. Listen, we didn’t know they would show up.”

Cameron’s eyes darted between Samkiel, who looked like a statue on the verge of exploding, and Neverra. “Well, at least I’m not the only one in trouble.”

“Look, you all can be mad at me. That’s fine, but Dianna is my friend, or at least we’re trying to be. Gabby was my friend, too. I only wanted to help them both.” Neverra didn’t break eye contact with Samkiel, even as Logan practically boiled beside her. Her words seemed to calm the storm that raged behind Samkiel’s eyes. He placed his hands on the table, leaning on his fists, and shook his head.

“All I’m saying is something comes for Dianna every time she steps foot on Onuna.”

“That means Kaden is watching,” Vincent interrupted.

Neverra nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking. You told us before how desperately he wants her back. What if she is, and has always been, the key to whatever he is planning?”

Samkiel cocked his head as if a memory assaulted him. “I had my theories regarding that.”

Vincent closed the book in front of him, gleeful that we had something of a lead. “We should head back to Onuna. Search until we find him. He has to be there.”

Samkiel tapped his knuckles against the table. “I’m staying. I have something I need to do, and I’m not leaving Dianna.”

Logan still seethed. We could all feel his quiet rage. “Okay, when do we leave?”

“After dinner,” Samkiel said.

We all looked at each other.

“Dinner?” Vincent asked, almost hesitantly.

“Yes,” he said. “It was actually Dianna’s idea, but I wish a peaceful evening for us all after everything. Something fun, something other than research and work for days on end. I think we could all use some downtime before we tackle this most recent problem.”

My lips twisted. Fun. I smiled at Neverra, who was already looking at me. It had been so long since we’d all gotten together and done something really fun.

“I’ll pass,” Vincent said, going back to his book.

I felt the growing bubble of excitement in the room pop. My gift from Athos was often a curse. Cameron received the hunter’s drive, that extra enhanced sense of smell and ability to track that made even gods envious. But me? I got pure empathy. If someone’s aura changed, I felt it. I could feel emotions on some basic level, which made me great in council meetings and negotiations. Liars? I could sense every false truth they spat.

Right now, Samkiel’s basic chemistry seemed to be altering. Not unpleasantly, but something waiting patiently to be known, something powerful and life-altering. Then the pieces clicked. My breath caught, and a smile spread so far across my face it pinched my cheeks. *Finally, I thought.*

My joy was short-lived as Samkiel turned toward Vincent, focusing wholly on him.

“I apologize if that came out incorrectly, but it was not a request,” Samkiel said. Logan sat up a bit straighter, getting ready to do what he often did and act as a barrier between them.

I knew what was coming. There has been so much tension between them lately. Everyone could feel it.

“As I said, I’ll pass. I don’t want to fight, but let’s not pretend that we’re not just ignoring the fact that Dianna’s a mass murderer and almost destroyed the world. I’d rather pack and get to Onuna early.”

Samkiel sighed and placed his hands on his hips. “Vincent.”

Vincent shook his head and glanced around the room at all of us. “You guys can pretend all you want, but I refuse to.”

Even Xavier’s ordinarily calm demeanor slipped. “Dude.”

Vincent slammed his book closed. “What? Why am I the bad guy when I am the only one thinking rationally? This isn’t some random person

Samkiel decided he enjoyed for the time being. She's a fucking Queen of Yejedin. We know Kaden is a general now, your father's, from what the giant said, and that he's strong enough to make something like her. So no, I don't care about stupid dinner parties, and you all shouldn't either." Vincent got to his feet, glaring at Samkiel. "You know, I bet she even has her powers. I used to respect you. But now she has you wrapped around her fucking finger like a whipped dog, doing whatever *she* wishes, using our resources to chase after her, and for what? Pussy? Your father would be ashamed."

Lightning split the air, the flash of light so bright it was blinding. When I could see again, Samkiel had Vincent pinned. The table beneath him cracked in half. Lightning sizzled at the edges of the room, Samkiel's face mere inches from Vincent's.

"The next words from your mouth need to be an apology," Samkiel growled, menace dripping from each word.

Vincent didn't back down, holding Samkiel's gaze defiantly. "Or what? Listen, I get it. It was fun when we were all younger, but we aren't anymore. She's Kaden's blood, no matter what you feel or how often you fuck her. Do you think pretty words will stop her the next time she gets volatile? She's a ticking time bomb. I'm just the only one not blind to it. You're our king, our protector, and you're going to get us all killed. What happened on Rasheirim is going to happen again, and all because of *her*."

Samkiel's fist connecting with Vincent's face sent shockwaves through the room. Chairs toppled as Logan, and I jumped to our feet.

Samkiel released Vincent, realizing what he'd done. Logan was already at his side, pushing him back by his shoulder. I remembered the quick-tempered young king we all grew up with. His eyes burned silver as he shrugged Logan's hand off and focused on Vincent as if he faced an enemy.

Vincent struggled to his feet, none of us moving to help him. Books and papers skittered to the floor.

"See what I mean?" he spat, wiping his hand across his split cheek. "You're all idiots."

He adjusted his council garbs and glared at Samkiel a moment longer. Then, without saying another word, he stormed off, yanking the doors almost off their hinges.

Samkiel wiped his hands over his face before lifting one and correcting the room. Neverra, Xavier, and Cameron picked up the scattered books and

papers as Logan thumped Samkiel on the chest and said something too low for me to hear. Samkiel took a deep breath, and they walked to the balcony.

I glanced toward the others. “I’ll talk to Vincent.”

Not waiting for them to respond, I rushed out of the room, jogging to catch up to Vincent.

“Vincent.”

“You know she tried to kill you, and you’re just as bad as them. I heard about the beach, Immy!”

“She was hurting. It’s different.”

“Oh, bullshit! You think she is the only person who has ever lost anyone? Cry me a fucking river,” he spat. “People hurt all the time. They don’t kill.”

“Hey, where is this coming from?” I sprinted to him. “Talk to me like we used to. We’re family.” I grabbed his arm, spinning him toward me. The cut on the left side of his jaw was already healing, but a bruise formed nonetheless. I reached up to touch it, but he shoved my hand aside, repudiating my touch, and unleashed.

“Don’t lecture me about family! What family? He has been gone for a thousand years. You, Xavier, and Cameron left, too. You three stayed here. How often did you visit, Imogen, huh? While Logan, Neverra, and I stayed on Onuna. Neverra never came to see you, either. Logan was the only one who even tried, and those were few and far between. Admit it. We haven’t been a family for a very long time.”

His words cut me deep, my own emotions heightened by the pain he was feeling. I felt it in the words he spoke, but there was something else as well—fear.

“We lost a lot, Vincent. You can’t fault how we chose to deal with the aftermath. And we’re trying now.”

“It’s too late, Immy.” He ran his hands across his head, disturbing the bun atop it. “It’s too late.”

“What’s wrong with you? I feel fear. What are you afraid of?”

He avoided my eyes, and I felt him try to shut down his emotions so I couldn’t read them. “We should be looking for a way to stop Kaden without worrying about anything else.”

“We are.”

“We’re not.” Vincent tipped his head back, taking a deep breath.

“This is more than just Kaden, isn’t it? More than Dianna?”

His head whipped toward me. “What? No.”
He was a terrible liar, especially to me. “Tell me what’s really wrong.”
Vincent’s smile was small and forced. His hand cupped the back of my head as he leaned forward, placing a kiss atop my head.
“Have fun at the dinner,” he whispered into my hair, and then he was gone, his boots echoing down the hall.

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SEVENTY-EIGHT

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DIANNA



“**Y**ou’re quiet.” I half turned on the chair I was standing on, hanging another string of big clear bulbs.

Samkiel grunted behind me, unwinding a few more sets of lights. “You are aware I can just put the decorations up there, correct? You do not need to balance on a flimsy chair.”

I scoffed as I clipped the last bit in place. I turned and placed my hands on my hips. “Yeah, but that takes all the fun out of it. It’s a holiday on Onuna, and if we are going to do this dinner, it needs to be perfect.”

He smiled or attempted one, at least.

“What’s wrong with you? You’ve been quiet since you got back from the council.” He handed me another set of lights, and I stretched to clip them in place. “I thought you’d be happy with everyone coming over.”

He glanced down at the lights he held for me, his thumb flicking over one large bulb. “Everyone is coming except Vincent, I believe.”

Oh, so that was what it was. I glanced at him. “Not surprised there. He hates me.”

“He’s... emotional, but so am I, I suppose.”

That got my attention. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I might have... attacked him?”

I almost fell off my chair. Samkiel reached out to steady me. “What?”

“He said some things about you. I just reacted.”

“Oh.”

I could only imagine the colorful things Vincent said about me. I knew his dislike came from centuries of being sworn enemies, but at times, it

seemed to go deeper. Samkiel stared at the bulbs in his hands. They flickered to life, light dancing in them for just a moment before going out.

“So, no, he’s not coming, but it’s more because of me than you. He blames me for leaving, and he’s right. I left them all, secluding myself for a thousand years after Rashearin fell.”

“Samkiel, you know better th—”

“I’m trying, Dianna. I am, but I can’t keep from feeling as if all I do is fail. One decision I make affects another, and so on and so on. Anything I do... Vincent’s right. I don’t know what I’m doing. My father always knew what to do and how to act. If he saw me now, what I am, how I’d failed. He would be disappointed. It’s not enough.”

His powerful shoulders slumped, the literal weight of worlds resting on them. He dropped his head, hiding the unshed tears in his eyes.

“Hey, it’s enough. *You are enough,*” I said, jumping off my chair. I placed my hands on his arms, and he glanced down at me. “You lost your world and your father in a war you feel you caused. Trust me. You could have done a lot worse. You know, like go on a murderous rampage.”

Samkiel’s lips twitched, but he didn’t smile. “I suppose. I just wish they were all here. But I understand things have changed, and everything is different.”

That part hit me hard. Everything was different. Here I was, trying to make this time with Samkiel’s family special and important, doing things I had done when Gabby and I would celebrate The Fall. The lights always made her happy. I thought it would do the same for all of us. Even the dishes I forced him to help me make when he returned meant something.

“*No one can be mad when they have delicious food. It’s basic science.*”

“*That’s not science, Gabby.*”

“*Who has a degree? Yeah, that’s right.*”

The memory came and left, and I let it, accepting both the pain and the warmth that came with it. I sighed. “I get it. Everything has changed, and you miss your family.”

“I do.”

“Maybe separating will be good for you all. As they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Perhaps.”

“Or,” I squeezed his arms, “I can kill him. Just say the word.”

He looked down as he shook his head. “That will only prove his point.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll wear a pretty dress tonight to make you feel better.”

He gave me a small smile, a crack in that thick, heavy armor. “You’re too kind.”

I stepped forward, the lights between us glowing from his power as I whispered, “With nothing on underneath.”

The lights burned brighter, illuminating both of us.

“I’m healed.”

I laughed and placed my hand against his cheek, wanting to protect him as furiously as he had always protected me. The darkest part of me, made of razor teeth, claws, and armored scales, seemed to grin widely at the thought of just how far I knew I would go to do just that. So I let a tiny sliver in that cracked locked door shine through when I spoke next. “I am sorry, though. I wish I could make it better, truly.”

“It’s not you. Things were rough long before you. Thank you for this. That you are doing all of this for us means a lot. It’s nice.” Samkiel glanced around the large deck, the tan railing made of the same pale stone as the palace.

I winked at him. “I’m a nice girl.”

Samkiel grinned, and every light I had hung up fell, the cord dragging them down one by one as if the universe disagreed.

“Well,” I said in a disgusted huff. Samkiel laughed, and I shook my head. “Just fix it, please.”

Samkiel’s smile never wavered as he lifted one hand and snapped his fingers. The lights hung themselves, draped perfectly along the awning and the railing, glowing with a soft, warm light. A large table appeared in the middle of the deck, the place settings and flowers flawless.

I stared. “You know, if this god thing doesn’t work out, you could also have a career in party planning.”

He chuckled, low and deep. “It is perfect,” he said, but he didn’t look at the lights or the arrangements, just at me.

We turned away, heading back into the house, and even without my powers, I felt him behind me like always. I went to the large fridge, taking out an assortment of dishes we had prepared earlier.

“I hope they like it. I’m doing this for all of you. They have been kind to me, even when I didn’t deserve it, and Gabby....” I paused, my throat closing. “Stay here,” I said, deciding to bring down another layer of walls.

I ran upstairs to the one dresser where I kept some old clothes and one of Gabby's shirts. My fingers found the note I'd buried at the bottom of the pile. When I returned, Samkiel was still in the same place, waiting. Samkiel always waited for me. I stopped in front of him, the warmth of his power enveloping me. I held up the crumpled piece of my heart.

He looked at me and took the note. Watching him unfold the paper made my chest ache. His eyes met mine once more before he read, and the seconds felt like years. He folded it as if it were the most precious thing he had ever held.

"She loved them. She felt like she had a family with them, a home, and she wanted that for me, too. So I want to do something nice for those who cared for someone so precious to me. Especially when I have not been so kind."

His hands cupped my face and kissed my lips, his forehead resting against mine, grounding me in his taste, scent, and touch.

"This is beautiful, Dianna. Thank you for sharing."

I nodded, a sliver of calm trying to overcome the recent rush of emotions. I laid my head against his chest, and we held each other. "You show me your dark secrets, and I show you mine."

"That indeed."

"I hope it gets better. For both of us."

Samkiel swayed with me in his arms. "It will. Trust me. This is not something you just recover from in months or even years, but I will be here with you every step of the way, whatever you need, just like you have been for me. You led me out of my darkness, Dianna. Now let me lead you, or I can follow you into the dark, but there is no me without you. Not anymore. Do you understand?"

I shook my head. "No, I think you need to remind me. Preferably naked."

He laughed for the first time since he had returned. "Perhaps later. If you're nice."

"So, that means I can't kill Vincent?"

His hand stroked my back. "No, you can't kill Vincent."

"Fine," I said with a disappointed sigh.



I FIXED THE BACK STRAPS OF THE TINY BLACK DRESS I HAD SAMKIEL MAKE me. I told him he could only look and not touch until later since he forbade me from killing Vincent. He claimed I was torturing him and got me back by wearing a button-up white shirt and dark slacks that fit too fucking well.

Everyone arrived by one, all dressed up and devastatingly beautiful. I almost forgot they were mere celestials, given they all looked damn near godly in their finery.

I passed out drinks, nervous and desperate for tonight to go well. They stood around the kitchen, talking and laughing together. They had so many stories of battles and the time they'd spent together. If written, they could fill a library. After a few glasses of wine, I relaxed. I was still giggling over a story Xavier told me that involved Cameron and Imogen getting caught shooting at some old god's favorite tapestry when the room went quiet.

Vincent walked in.

He wore slacks and a loose-fitting shirt. Samkiel stopped mid-sentence when he made eye contact with Vincent.

“I brought cake,” Vincent said with a small shrug, holding up a pink box as if unsure of what else to say. “Cameron likes chocolate, and that’s all they had.”

Cameron pushed past me. “Fuck yes, I do.”

“No.” The wine glass in my hand shattered, my temper snapping along with it. I focused on him. The predatory drive was so innate in me that I would shred his skin from the bone if I had my damn powers. Fire or not, my attitude was not something I’d lost with my powers.

“Dianna,” Samkiel said from behind me. Every eye, including Vincent’s, was on me.

I strode toward Vincent, crashing to a halt in front of him. “I don’t care if you loathe me, but disrespecting someone who would *die* for you is lower than low, even for you.”

“Dianna.” I felt Samkiel’s hand on my arm as he pulled me away from Vincent.

Vincent didn’t speak, didn’t move.

“I’ve done some terrible things and worked for slimy lesser creatures, but you take the cake. Literally. So what? All your animosity comes back because you can’t lead? It’s not his fault you feel less of yourself. You have a problem with me. You take it up with me. Even you should have enough balls to do that.”

I couldn’t tell if it was Cameron or Xavier who covered a laugh with a cough, and I didn’t care. I waited for Vincent to snap back or storm out, but he did neither.

His eyes focused above me. “I came to apologize for what I said. I was out of line, and I’m sorry.”

“Alright. It’s not forgiven, but it’s a start.” Samkiel pulled me back against him before saying, “You also need to apologize for what you said about Dianna.”

Vincent looked at me next. “I’m sorry.”

I knew I didn’t need the apology, but Samkiel was protective, and those words would help cool his rage long enough for them to try to work through whatever tension lay between them. I knew he wanted his friend back. Vincent was a part of his family, and he would forgive him.

Samkiel stepped forward, taking the cake from Vincent’s hands. “There is plenty of food. Cameron hasn’t gotten to all of it yet.”

“Hey!”

And just like that, everyone relaxed. I caught Cameron and Xavier exchanging some coins and chuckling to themselves. Imogen’s face had paled, but the color was slowly returning. Logan clapped Samkiel on the back, whispering something. Vincent went to join them, but I reached out, grabbing his arm and stopping him. I leaned in close and hissed, “You throw his father in his face again or hurt him again, and I won’t need my powers to rip your tongue from your skull.”

He said nothing, only nodded as he stepped away. Cameron tugged the cake from Samkiel’s hands, and the box went flying.

I took a deep breath, calming the rage bubbling in my blood. Samkiel looked at me over Logan’s shoulder, and I plastered a smile on my face, knowing he’d heard my threat to Vincent.

Samkiel looked away and smiled as Vincent handed him a drink, both of them laughing at something Logan had said.

“Men,” Neverra said with a sigh, watching Cameron join them with a giant piece of cake in his hand. “They don’t stay mad at each other long.”



DINNER WENT SMOOTHLY. AS WE SAT AROUND CHATTING AND EATING dessert, I noticed Neverra glance at Samkiel and his nod to both her and Logan. Imogen's head turned toward them as if she had sensed a shift in the atmosphere. Neverra cleared her throat and stood, Logan rising at her side. She lifted her wine glass. "Samkiel called this dinner, but we have news, too. Logan and I want to try for a baby."

Cameron damned near choked. "Wait, are you pregnant now?"

"No," Logan said with a small, nervous smile that was absolutely charming. "Key word, we are going to *try*. I still have to get the procedure reversed."

Imogen's smile was so bright it was contagious. "That's amazing, Nev! I get to be an aunt."

Xavier laughed. "Oh, your child will be so spoiled."

Vincent shuffled in his seat but said nothing as he lifted his glass in salute.

Cameron seemed to still be processing the news. Then his face turned dark. "Is that why we are here tonight?" he asked.

"That's not why I called you all here," Samkiel said, his voice taking on an edge. All of them sat up straighter and stiffened as if expecting an order. "I know things have been chaotic, to say the least, but it has been that way for some time now. I left when I knew I should have stayed."

I shifted, sliding my leg against his in a small act of support and comfort. "We have secured Yejedin. New runes have been put in place, and cells are available if we ever need them. Although, I highly doubt we will need them. I do not plan on capturing Kaden. When this is over, he will be executed immediately." Samkiel paused and looked at each of them in turn. I could see love, pride, and pain in his eyes. "There will be no more use for The Hand after that."

The room erupted in chatter, everyone speaking at once. Samkiel held up his hand, and everyone grew quiet once more. Even Vincent looked shocked and a little lost.

“The point I am trying to make is that Kaden is the last link. Once that is severed, peace will return to Onuna and this realm. That means The Hand will not be needed.”

Concern and disbelief consumed everyone except Logan and Neverra. All I saw there was relief.

“I want a life for you all without the threat of war and distress. I do not believe in my heart that you all were made to fight forever, nor should you. You should have peace and love. You all deserve it. That’s all I ever wanted for any of you, and you can have that once this is done. A life. A semi-normal one, at least.”

“But what would we do?” Xavier leaned across the table. “This has been our life since... well, forever.”

“Whatever you wish. No longer held by burdens of servitude to the highest order. No orders. I want what’s best for you, for all of you. I want you to have a family and grow old.” Samkiel stopped and smiled. “Well, older, anyway.”

That seemed to lighten the mood for a moment.

“You are my family. I cannot be selfish with all of you. You have been growing apart for a while now, it seems. I know I carry much of the blame for that. I left you all here to pick up pieces you should have never had to deal with. A thousand years of cleaning up my mess. No more.”

Logan and Neverra beamed at each other. Imogen sighed so heavily that I was afraid she was about to cry. Cameron had his hands over his face, and Xavier was poking at the leftover food on his plate. Vincent stared at Samkiel as if seeing him for the first time.

“I mean, we will still be family, right?” Xavier looked up, near desperation in his eyes as his gaze landed on everyone at the table before settling on Samkiel.

“Of course. That will never change.”

“And we can still visit each other. You know, check in?” Cameron asked next, dropping his hands.

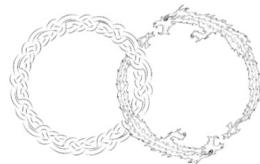
“Yes.” Samkiel smiled. “I thought perhaps we could have our own holiday. Something special for all of us. A day that no matter what happens, we can come back together, even for a short time.”

Xavier smiled, nodding. “I would like that.”

“Me too,” Imogen said, her voice sounding a bit choked. Logan and Neverra agreed enthusiastically. Vincent and Cameron chimed in, both of

them unusually quiet. Samkiel nodded and moved on to planning, discussing what dates would work best for them all and what they may do with their futures.

I sat quietly, watching the room. They laughed and joked about any and everything. The tension eased, but I could feel the change even without my powers. The spark of joy that had permeated the gathering earlier in the night had faded.



I RESTED MY ARMS ON THE STONE RAILING AND SIPPED MY WINE, NEEDING A moment to myself. I could hear them all inside, yelling over a game Cameron had picked.

A star far off in the distance seemed to twinkle as I stared at the night sky.

“You know, even the shadows don’t move that way, right?” I said.

“I apologize. You seemed to wish to be alone.”

I shrugged and turned to lean against the railing, facing Roccurum. Even the fate had dressed up tonight. I glanced back into the house and caught Samkiel staring at me. It may have been the angle I was leaning with my dress riding up my thighs, but I didn’t think he even noticed Roccurum at my side. Or maybe it was just a trick of fate.

“Longing looks between lovers,” Reggie said, motioning to Samkiel. Cameron punched Samkiel in the shoulder, his hands waving as he berated him for not paying attention.

I smiled, watching the two of them argue good-naturedly. “What are you doing here?”

“Samkiel allowed me to attend if I wished.”

I almost choked on the wine. “Allowed?”

“Why yes, he forbade me from seeing you. I feel it was in large part due to his feelings for you and concern for your well-being.”

“Or he’s a jealous ass.”

“Do not blame him. There are reasons he cannot control that part of him.”

“Yeah, I have seen that part of him.”

“It seems appropriate timing for both of you.”

I laughed and took another sip of wine.

“How are you....” Reggie paused as if a thousand questions ran through his skull, “feeling?”

I cocked my head. “Concern for my well-being?”

He waited, perfectly comfortable with the silence.

“If I say I’m good, I feel guilty because she isn’t here, and when I look at them and how happy and kind they are to me, I feel even worse for what I put them through because of him.”

“And then?”

I watched Samkiel move toward the kitchen. I could hear their laughter from here, even if it was a murmured mess. “And then I feel cold and ruthless because I know the part of me that ripped through Onuna and Yejedin is not gone, even if I can’t call fire or change my form. She’s here to stay, and that is especially apparent considering my threats to eviscerate Vincent.”

“Does that upset you?”

I shook my head. “No, for the first time in a long time, I know who I am. I like me. It’s everyone else I’m worried about. I reacted so quickly earlier, and I know if anyone ever hurt him, family or not, I would rip them to pieces and sleep like a baby afterward. So,” I tipped my wineglass in a toast, “I feel a multitude of things.”

Reggie’s smile, the first real one I’d seen from him, shined a fraction brighter as he tipped his head. “I would expect no less from you.”

“Does that make me a monster?”

Reggie shook his head. “No, that makes you a protector.”

I placed my glass down on the thick stone wall and rubbed my hands together. Reggie’s eyes darted toward them as if searching for something. I glanced down at my hands. No flames, no tickle or glimmer of my power or strength, yet Reggie stared at them as if they would burst into flame at any moment. Before I could question him, the glass door slid wide open.

“Why are you out here by yourself?” Xavier asked, stepping outside.

I turned to tell him I wasn’t alone, but Reggie was already gone, not even a trail of smoke left in his wake.

Instead, I lifted a brow and said, “Are you watching me?”

“I people-watch. Also, you bailed on the game Cameron is forcing everyone to play.”

“Stalker.”

Xavier laughed as he walked to my side, carrying a plate full of cake and two forks. “Want to share?”

They were all so damned nice. I wasn’t used to it and doubted I ever would be.

Xavier gave me a small smile and simply waited, his eyes filled with hopeful kindness. I didn’t realize it had been weighing on me, and I hadn’t planned on saying it, but the words slipped out.

“I’m sorry about the dream eaters. About what they made you see.”

Shock flashed across Xavier’s face. “I’ve never had an Ig’Morruthen apologize to me before. They mostly try to kill or eat us.”

“Well, the night is young.”

Xavier laughed and picked up a fork, cutting off a small slice. “That threat toward Vincent was pretty funny, though. It’s not often he gets put in his place. He needs it sometimes.”

“I am serious, though. About my apology.” My hands gripped the rail behind me. “Samkiel loves you, all of you, so,” I paused for a second to take a deep breath, “hurting you all would hurt him, and I don’t want to hurt him.”

Xavier bowed slightly. “Well, I’m honored.”

Xavier leaned against the railing next to me, and we watched the others in the kitchen. Cameron made some weird gesture and Imogen laughed. Vincent rolled his eyes behind them, all of them gathering snacks. Samkiel, as always, looked for me. He saw who I was with and stayed with Logan and Neverra.

“It was a hard adjustment when Samkiel first got us all together. We were all so scared to say or do the wrong thing. Being under the thumbs of gods was not a pleasant experience for most of us. Vincent the least.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, I heard about that.”

“He lashed out more than usual. I think he’s just afraid of you.”

I nodded. “He is right to be. You all should be.”

Xavier stilled.

“Gabby and I had little for a very long time after my parents died. I had her, and I loved her very much. Then I lost her. I am very protective of the things I care about, and losing her didn’t help my overprotective instincts. If

I had my powers, I would have ripped Vincent's tongue from his head for how he spoke to Samkiel and not thought twice about it. Samkiel is kind, sweet, and very caring. He is good and doesn't deserve to be treated like that. Not by me, not by family, not by anyone."

Xavier didn't even flinch, his eyes tracking Cameron. He held the plate out toward me. "I understand."

I picked up the fork and cut the rich cake, taking a bite.

"Sunshine," he said.

I nodded as we watched the two people we knew we couldn't live without.

"Sunshine."



AS THE NIGHT BEGAN WINDING DOWN AND EVERYONE GOT READY TO HEAD home, Neverra gestured me close, digging through her handbag.

"I got it just in time," she whispered, handing me the small box. "It's a great idea, and it only took Logan and me a few hours to track down the booth."

"I'm glad Logan isn't mad anymore. Sorry about getting you in trouble."

She waved it off. "Don't worry about it. That's what friends are for. Besides, Logan loves makeup sex, so we are fine."

I laughed. "I really appreciate it. Everything," I told her, meaning far more than just the last few weeks.

She smiled softly, her eyes filled with understanding. "While we were there, I got this done, too. I gave Immy one, and I have one. This one is for you if you want it," she said hesitantly, digging through her bag again and pulling out a picture frame. It was the picture she'd taken the night she and Imogen had stayed over. I took the frame, my heart clenching.

"Now you have two more sisters," Neverra said.

I hugged her, and she giggled, surprised.

"Sorry," I said, pulling back.

"Don't be." She put her purse over her shoulder. "Goodnight, Dianna."

“Night,” I said and waved.

Neverra turned and hurried to Logan. He held out his hand, and she walked into his arms. He wrapped her in a hug, brushing a kiss to her hair before they walked away. I went back inside and placed the picture on the mantle beside the one of Gabby and me at the beach. I had moved it downstairs so she could be a part of our home.

“You are right, Gabby. I like them.”

A star twinkled at me through the open window. I blew it a kiss and headed upstairs with the small box.

The room was quiet, the lights off, which meant he hadn’t moved since he came up here. They flickered on as I walked in. A smile broke across my face to see Samkiel sprawled out face first on the bed. I took a running leap and jumped on his back, making him groan.

“That didn’t hurt, you big baby.” I wrapped my arms around him, placing a kiss to his cheek.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“Depends on what we are talking about.”

I raised my hand, popping him on the shoulder as he laughed beneath me.

“No,” he said, his eyes still closed. “It could have been a lot worse, given you threatened Vincent in front of The Hand.”

“You’re lucky that is all I did after what he said to you.” I sat up, running my fingers up and down his spine.

“What about what he said about you?”

“I’ve been insulted by far scarier men.” My finger traced a line across his back, the muscles beneath it twitching. “One even called me a worm and said I was beneath him, although he stays beneath me more often than not now.”

Samkiel’s laugh filled the room. He flipped underneath me, his hands cupping my hips.

“I got you something,” I said, wiggling against him.

“Did you now?” He shifted underneath me. “Is it beneath this pretty little dress?”

I laughed and pushed off him. I padded toward the long thick curtains dancing across the floor at the window.

“Guess you will just have to find out,” I said, swaying my hips ever so slightly to tease him.

By the time I parted the curtains, allowing the moonlight to cast a glow inside, Samkiel was behind me.

I turned and looked up at him, placing my hand on his chest. “The Celebration of the Fall is coming up.”

Samkiel made a noise deep in his throat that told me exactly how he felt about it. He had plenty of reasons to hate it, which was just another reason I’d done this.

“And,” I said, pulling his attention back to me, “tradition dictates that you exchange gifts. Mostly to celebrate life as a gift, blah, blah, blah, but Gabby and I always got each other something, even when I was a million miles away from her. There was an outpost where she’d send me stuff every year. I mostly hid the gifts or lied and said I bought them myself, so I wouldn’t have to listen to Kaden. Anyway, like I said, it is tradition.”

He brushed back a long strand of my hair, his touch soothing the pain that came with the memories. I pulled out the box Neverra and Imogen helped me get. Imogen—thank the old gods—distracted the council while Neverra and Logan snuck out. I opened the box, took out the layered silver pendant necklace, and held it up.

“What is that?” he asked.

“I know you kept those pictures from the festival, and I burned them. So I asked Neverra to go back to the festival booth and get another copy. They keep them on file for years. She got another copy and had them pressed into this pendant.” I held it a tad higher. The flat, dark green images shimmered in the moonlight. “It’s from a jeweler outside of Veistran near Naaririel. He can make anything into jewelry, press photos or carve words. I always wanted something from there. It was where lovers would go to purchase items for each other, but I....” I trailed off and shook my head. “I just thought if you’re going to keep them, at least now they won’t get lost.”

Samkiel stared at me and then at the necklace I held between us. He stared so long my heart quickened. I rolled back on my heels, wondering if I’d made another mistake. Maybe it was too much? Maybe I was too much.

I pulled it closer to me. “Well, if you hate it—”

“No.” Samkiel snatched it from me as if I was about to toss away a precious jewel. He clasped it around his neck, his eyes never leaving mine. The small, flat silver pendant rested in the dip between his collarbones, covering a tiny scar. He placed his hand over it, and power radiated beneath

his palm. Small pulses of light ran along the chain, coating it in a bright silver glow.

“There, now it shall never come off.”

I beamed and reached out to touch the pendant reverently, relief and that warm emotion burning away the rise of insecurity.

“Well, unless I am decapitated, I suppose.”

I smacked him on the chest. “Samkiel! Oh my gods, why would you say that?”

He rubbed the spot on his chest as if wounded, but he beamed at me.

“I am merely stating.”

I narrowed my eyes and stepped toward him, but he dodged. I countered, reaching for him again. He grabbed my wrists and locked them in one big hand, pulling me into him, my chest flushed with his.

“It’s perfect,” he whispered, releasing my hands before he cupped my face and placed a kiss to my forehead. “I was unaware of the tradition. I did not get you anything.”

“You don’t have to get me anything.” I placed my hand against the broad wall of muscle of his chest, his heart beating beneath my palm, the rhythm seeming to match mine. “This is priceless to me.”

“Dianna being sweet. Who would have thought?”

“Right? I am absolutely terrible,” I said with pride.

He leaned down, stopping a hair’s breadth away from my lips. “Absolutely maddening.”

A feather-light kiss brushed my lips, one barely there. My entire body swam with heat.

His eyes turned molten as he pulled back. He cupped my face, his thumb caressing my cheek, the slow, tender motion more searing than any kiss or intimate touch. When Samkiel looked at me, it was as if he saw into my very soul and cared for every single part—the good, the bad, the ugly, and the cruel.

A cord inside me snapped, one that existed behind a wall of stone and flame.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

“I’m sorry I left,” I said. His thumb stilled against my cheek. “I promise to stay if things get bad. I won’t leave you ever again.”

Samkiel studied my face, relief filling his eyes as if he’d been waiting for me to say it for a while now. It was a comfort that I hadn’t known he

needed, but I would make sure he didn't doubt my commitment in the future.

He raised his hand between us, extending his small finger. "Pinky promise? A dark-haired beauty told me long ago that it is practically the law in her world."

I grinned and grasped his finger with mine. "Pinky promise."

He yanked me forward, our hands pressed between us as he sealed the vow with a kiss.

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SEVENTY-NINE

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CAMERON



The walk away from Samkiel's home was quiet. We all planned to go back tonight and pack before heading to Onuna. Logan and Neverra walked arm-in-arm in front of us. They stopped on the path, chatting with Imogen, their laughter carrying on the flower-scented breeze. Imogen kissed Neverra's cheek and hugged Logan. I heard her tell them goodnight before she shot into the sky, her light the first to go.

"Well, that was fun," Vincent said from behind Xavier and me. I just nodded, my hands in my pockets as Xavier and I walked toward the end of the bridge.

"Yeah, Xavier and I had a bet on when she would make you cry. Although I didn't see a tear, it was damn near close to you pissing your pants," I said, tossing a taunting look over my shoulder at him. Vincent sneered but didn't say anything.

Xavier laughed as he tossed the coin he'd won from me into the air.

"I'm glad you two can find humor in this. It still only proves my point. She is volatile," Vincent said, his voice harsh.

I shrugged. "I had fun even if the dinner took a turn." It was an understatement. My chest still ached at Samkiel's words. The Hand was no longer needed. I shook my head, clearing it. "You were quieter than normal, Vin."

"What am I supposed to say? Congratulations on not being a dick like the other gods? Thanks for giving us our freedom? Samkiel never kept us like pets, but this felt different, more permanent."

Xavier grunted in agreement. "Yeah, it did."

The three of us stopped at the end of the bridge. The breeze died down, and the trees went quiet.

"I mean, that's the plan. If Kaden is dead, there are no more big bad monsters to fight. No more worlds in danger of being destroyed. Dianna leveled the Otherworldly playing field, killing almost all of his lackeys. What else is there?"

Vincent glanced back at the palace. "There are always more monsters to face."

I snorted. "You really have a hard-on for her, don't you?"

Vincent's head whipped toward me as Xavier muffled a laugh. "Absolutely not, but she is still Kaden's blood, which means her powers are only dormant. Not gone. What happens if she truly unleashes, huh?"

"Vincent," Xavier said, reaching out and gripping his shoulder. "She isn't Nismera."

Vincent glanced at Xavier's hand before shaking it off, his face twisting with the normal angry expression that we all knew so well. "You know what I mean. Even with Kaden gone, there will always be one monster left."

Xavier didn't back down, either. "Yeah, and if that happens, which I doubt since she could have killed us all after her sister died, Samkiel can handle her."

I scratched my ear, glancing back at the palace. "And from the sounds coming from the palace right now, I think he has already started."

Vincent's lip curled in disgust, cobalt lines flaring across his body. "Whatever." He took to the night sky in a gleam of light, leaving Xavier and me alone.

"I still think he has a hard-on for her."

Xavier chuckled, placing his hands in his pocket once more. "I think he is overprotective of us all and doesn't trust her, which makes sense. Even without her powers, she is terrifying."

I shrugged. "Well, he won't have to worry about it much longer. It seems we are all going our separate ways."

I waited for Xavier to take my bait, to proclaim they may all leave, but we would stay the same. My chest had felt tight from the moment we'd arrived. I smelled the tension long before I stepped into the palace, and I knew I wouldn't like it, and I didn't. I had never imagined that we would

not be together forever. It seemed I was wrong that we would stick through everything.

“Speaking of that. I need to talk to you.”

Xavier’s tone caught my attention, and I stood a bit straighter, no longer slouching against the bridge railing. “Talk to me? About Elianna? Listen—”

“No, well, yes, but not really.”

He looked at his feet and rubbed his brow. Was he nervous? Mad? My heart quickened. Or was it something else? Something we had both avoided addressing. I knew it had to do with Elianna, but like every other sexual relationship I’d had, it wasn’t serious.

“Xavi. What is it?”

Xavier took his hand out of his pocket, and I froze. He had been shifty all night, even sitting away from me at dinner, and now I knew why. He pulled out a ring and put it on his finger. My heart stopped. Regardless of if I wanted it to or not, it did. He rubbed a finger over the simple gold band.

“He asked me to marry him. Proposed, as the mortals say, a few weeks ago.”

“Weeks?”

“I was unsure at first and didn’t immediately say yes, but... Don’t look at me like that. I haven’t told anyone. I wanted to tonight, but after Logan and Neverra’s big announcement, followed by Samkiel’s, I didn’t think it was the right time, and honestly, I just wanted to tell you first.” He fiddled with the gold band. “I tell you everything.”

I couldn’t speak or move, unable to tear my gaze from that ring. It mocked me.

“I said yes. I feel like, more now than ever, it’s time for a fresh start. He is good to me, and I want a life, too, you know?”

I felt as if I was no longer in my body, blood pounding in my ears so loudly that it took a moment for what he said to register.

“You’re joking, right?” I snapped.

Xavier looked up, shocked. “What?”

“That’s—” I started and stopped. “Do you even truly know him? I mean, you guys haven’t been together that long. I didn’t think it was *that* serious.”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed, pain flashing across his features. “Wow, you mean like you and Elianna?”

I couldn't stop the words coming from my mouth. "That's what this is? You say yes because of a tryst?"

The pain disappeared, replaced by anger, and then his face went cold, all emotion locked away. "A tryst? Like all the ones you've had for centuries? It's always another girl, another guy, another being." It was the first time Xavier had ever snapped at me. The first time since we had met, become friends, or whatever we were. "You do this now? After everything, you want to confess something now?"

"Xavi—"

"Don't call me that. This is bullshit. You've been fucking Elianna and kept it from me when you tell me everything."

"Oh, come on, that means nothing."

"It meant something if you hid it. You knew my feelings and did nothing, or actually, you did everything but what you should have."

"That's not fair."

Everything seemed to come rushing to the surface. Every emotion and feeling we had kept hidden bubbled up, threatening to consume us.

"How is it not?"

"Because you're in a relationship, remember?"

"Yeah, I am. After how long, Cam?" He stopped and shook his head. "You know what? I am happy with him. He's nice and kind."

I tossed my hands up, rolling my eyes so hard I was afraid they would lock in my fucking skull. "Oh, bullshit. Any decent person should have those traits."

"And he chooses me," he snapped. "He has, and you know you have had years and years to tell me, to speak up, or to say something. You didn't."

He stopped pacing and raised a hand to his mouth. My heart hammered in my chest. How could I tell him I was terrified because of this, this exact moment? One where either he would reject me or I'd lose him forever because of what I did.

"I'm sorry." Even as I said the words, I knew they weren't the right ones. He dropped his hand from his face, and that's when I saw the shine of tears in his dark eyes.

"You knew I was waiting for you. I waited for you to even notice me like that, and when you didn't make a move, I respected your decision and what you could give me. I accepted you didn't want me. Now I'm with

someone who wants to be with me. He isn't afraid to tell me he loves me or that he wants a future with me. He fights for me."

It felt like he'd slapped me.

"Like I don't?" He was silent, too damn silent, as he ran a hand down his face. "Are you in love with him?" I asked.

"What?"

"Are you marrying him because you're in love with him, or are you settling?"

"Oh, fuck off, Cameron."

"Are you in love with him?" I shouted, emotion out, ruling me harder than any storm Samkiel could conjure. My heart broke when he didn't answer. He stared at me. *Please*, my heart begged, it cried, it screamed. *Please don't be in love with him. Please.*

"It doesn't matter." He dropped his gaze from mine. "It's too late. I am happy, and I am going to marry him. You had every opportunity over the centuries we've known each other, and I will not break someone's heart because you finally decided to speak up. It's not fair."

My shoulders slumped. I have been stabbed, damn near dismembered, and swallowed whole, but nothing hurt as much as those words. My chest felt like it had caved in on itself. Maybe he was right. I'd waited too long, my own insecurities eating away at me. What if it wasn't real for us? What if I messed it up like I had so many other things in my life? What if we weren't even amata, and I just kept him from the one he truly needed? Athos, like every other god and goddess, had said love made you weak and caused you to lose focus. What if they were right?

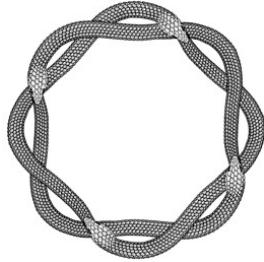
"You're right," I said as I lied and lied and lied.

Xavier looked at me as if I'd just shattered something in him too, but he only nodded before shooting into the sky and out of my life.

EIGHTY

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KADEN



“D o you like music, Roccurem?”

The fate merely shrugged. The suit he had on was a copy of the ones that most of the men below were wearing.

“The vibrations are pleasing at times, and sometimes not.”

A hundred bustling mortals shuffled toward their seats as the orchestra began to play. Instruments range from woodwinds, bowed string instruments, brass, and percussion, but my favorite was held by a female no more than thirty feet from me. Her arms moved as she readied the strings of her veslir. I stood on a balcony, several suit-and-tie mortals walking around behind me. Given how much had happened in the last few months, the gala was larger than I’d expected. I adjusted the thin lace mask on my face. It was identical to the ones everyone wore or held on a stick. Masquerade was the theme this evening. I folded my arms over my chest, the suit jacket bunching at my shoulders. The lights dimmed, and a mortal stepped onto the stage to announce the first act.

“You’re late,” I said, feeling him stop behind me.

“I got here as soon as I could.”

The music began slowly at first as everyone got settled in.

“Hmm,” I said, turning to face him. “Nice suit, Vincent.”

Vincent came to my side, as tense now as he was when he first started working for me. He gave Roccurem a once over, but the fate seemed to ignore him. He leaned forward, gripping the rails as he spoke.

“You are a fool to come out of hiding when everyone is looking for you.”

I ignored him, turning back toward the orchestra. The blonde woman began her solo, plucking at the strings of her veslir.

“I never understood music until coming to Onuna. The veslir has to be one of my favorite parts of this lowly world,” I said, nodding at the woman. “It’s the smallest in its family, but oh, the pitch is the highest. I feel as though it’s overlooked at times. Sure, people know its name, but not what it can truly do.”

“Is this another mind game?”

I slapped a hand on his shoulder, and he jumped. I spun him toward me. “No more games, buddy. The final act is about to begin, and I need you all where I want you.”

He nodded. “It’s done. The dream eaters did their part by planting the seeds of freedom in their minds.”

I squeezed his shoulder roughly, his bones groaning in my grip. He flinched beneath my hand. “Good. Good. I need them separated for what I have planned.”

“What happens to them? After?”

I smiled, turning back to watch the musician as she worked the instrument, coaxing beauty from it. “You know what happens. Don’t play dumb now. It’s not your strong suit.”

“Will it hurt?”

A smirk formed on my lips as I glanced toward him. “Don’t tell me, Vincent, the leader of Onuna and The Hand, suddenly has fucking cold feet.”

His jaw tightened. “I don’t have a choice in the matter.”

“You’re goddamn right, you don’t. You work for us. That’s it. Don’t ask me questions about the so-called family you are betraying. It’s none of your concern.” I slapped his arm twice and smiled.

Vincent remained quiet, watching the show below.

“That’s what I thought. We both know that once those realms open, you are going to wish you never aligned yourself with Samkiel.”

Vincent nodded and stepped back, straightening his jacket. “I’ll make sure they are separated.”

“Good.”

The music rose, and I turned back toward the orchestra, the dismissal clear. I heard him take a few steps and then stop.

“He is with her, you know? Fully. It didn’t separate them. If anything, it made them stronger.”

I felt the banister under my hands creak, the wood chipping beneath my claws.

“If they complete the third act and seal the bond, she will—”

“Leave, Vincent, before I do something that even I will regret,” I growled, feeling Roccurem shift beside me.

Vincent nodded and left the balcony area. I faced Roccurem, willing myself not to rip him to pieces and ruin everything we had built and worked for. Jealousy, hot, blinding, and violent, ripped through me.

“Did you know? You said turning her would prevent *that*. Killing her fraudulent sister was to prevent *that*. Do you have any fucking idea—”

“The mark is not on her finger. You overreact like a child would.” His eyes popped open, all six of them. “I have seen a multitude of possibilities, their bonding being the least likely. The time shall still pass.”

I growled, fangs erupting from my gums. “If The Order cannot—”

“The Order will have what they wished for,” Roccurem interjected. “What you all wished for. The death of Samkiel.”

I released the banister, small shards of wood falling onto the crowd below. The music reached its crescendo and fell, dropping the room into silence for a brief moment before the crowd below stood and applause rained. The woman bowed deeply as the curtains drew to a close.

EIGHTY-ONE

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DIANNA



I rolled over and reached out, only to find the bed empty. I frowned and sat up. "Sami?" I called, but there was no answer.

I tossed the covers off and stood to pad across the floor. Had he left for the Higher One already and not said goodbye?

"Sami?" I called again, grabbing a robe and tying it around myself. I skipped down the stairs and headed into the living room, but it was quiet. I checked the kitchen and the room he used as a small office. Nothing. I wrapped my arms around myself and walked back into the living room, freezing when I saw the pictures on the mantle vibrating.

I walked closer, seeing that they weren't just vibrating. They were melting. I took a step back, bumping into someone behind me. The room melted away.

I sidestepped and spun around. Gabby looked at me, paint splashed across her shirt.

I was back at the house where Gabby and I had lived. Only this time, it was a complete and utter disaster. The furniture was destroyed and in pieces, frames on the floor, shards of glass everywhere. It looked as if a tornado had ripped through the house.

I swallowed and asked her, "What are you doing?"

"Fixing the cracks. We're broken."

"What?"

She ignored me, humming as she slid her brush over a large crack in the wall. Cracks spread across every wall. Unease quivered through me.

"If we can't open the door, we can't fix the cracks," she mumbled as she painted, "and the world ends."

“What?” I shook my head. “I don’t know what that means.”

She hummed the song from our childhood.

A long, jagged darkness pulsed in the far corner. It had grown since the last time I had been here and spread like cancer through the house. It breathed, and I felt the rush of its breath blow against my hair.

At the end of the hall, past the kitchen and the wall where we’d carved our initials, faint light crept from beneath a door. I turned from Gabby, needing to see what was behind that door. I stopped in front of it, my hand reaching for the knob, but paused, unease growing.

“You won’t like what’s behind that door.” Gabby appeared at my side. Her hair was still in braided pigtails, and she still wore the same shirt and overalls covered in paint. She smiled and held up her brush. “You have to open that door,” she said, pointing down the hall at the door covered in chains and locks larger than my hands.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Then the cracks grow.” She hummed.

As if they listened, another fissure split the wall near us, heading toward that damned door. It stopped right at the top of the doorframe, spreading in spider-like veins.

“What is that?” I pointed at the cracks.

“It wants out.”

“What does?”

“Me.” Her eyes turned red, and her hair darkened, her features bleeding into mine before scales replaced skin and talons replaced her short nails. The Ig’Morruthen grew, filling up the entire house, but could not break free.

I realized the cracks were from her shifting and trying to break free. Thick heavy wings spread and pressed against the ceiling. Her long mauling jaws opened, ember flames burning behind her tongue. I didn’t even think before opening the door and falling through. The door slammed shut just as flames lit the space where I had stood. A howling scream filled with despair and rage nearly shattered the house. My ass hit the floor, the cries of the beast reverberating through my head. She begged for her freedom.

I stood and spun, wanting to escape this room. Shock froze my feet to the ground. I was no longer in our house. Water seeped from the cave walls, and I heard a stream hissing nearby. A thunderous roar ruptured the sky, startling me so badly that I stumbled and nearly fell again. A yawning hole formed above me, exposing a swirling mass of purple and silver stars.

The sky shimmered, violet and blue wisps of magic swirling above. Stars and planets floated far closer than I'd ever seen them. A roar resonated in the cave, but this time, thousands of others answered it. My heart lurched, and I covered my ears, the sound deafening. As it faded, the beating of wings took its place, the beasts waking from their slumber and taking to the sky, finally free.

Worlds, so many worlds, I could see it all, and it terrified me. The barrier between our realm and the next had opened.

No.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Kaden asked, appearing beside me.

"This isn't real."

"No, not yet, at least."

"I'm dreaming," I said and closed my eyes tightly, trying to will myself to wake up. "I'm dreaming."

"Are you?" My eyes snapped open. Kaden's head was tipped back, and I followed his gaze. Massively powerful creatures flew through the galaxy, curling around worlds and diving into them. "Or is it more?"

"What is this?" I demanded, pinning him in place with my glare.

Kaden grinned and nodded behind me. I looked over my shoulder, my stomach dropping. I moved so fast I didn't think my feet even touched the floor, stopping at the large stone altar that erupted from the middle of the room. Flowers, yellow and spotted, clung to the sides, but what was on top filled me with panic.

Samkiel.

He lay there perfectly still, his skin a deep, ashen gray. His body was clothed in ancient sacral garb with his hands clasped across his chest, a chest that didn't rise or fall.

I was at the stone slab in an instant, shaking him. Cold, he was so cold. I grabbed at his shoulders and arms, anything to make him wake up. A hot burning rage hit my gut, and the beast behind the door raged.

"What did you do!" I screamed at Kaden as he walked around the stone slab. His form was blurry from unshed tears, and if I had fangs, I would have bared them.

"What I promised." He stopped on the other side, staring down at Samkiel's remains. Kaden met my gaze, his eyes glowing crimson. Silhouetted figures formed behind him, walking in unison. It was an army, but that wasn't what made me step back. It was the two figures that flanked

him that sent terror shivering down my spine. They were as tall as Kaden, one just as muscular, the other a slender female shape but no less foreboding. Even with their features concealed in darkness, I felt the power radiating from them and knew without a doubt that whatever Kaden was, they were too. These were the three crowned figures from my last dream. “The last guardian is dead. No more protectors. No more peace. The end begins.”



MY EYES SHOT OPEN. MY BODY FLUSHED WITH HEAT AS IF MY INSIDES threatened to boil. I placed my hand over my heart, trying to slow the pounding beat. I sat up and looked at Samkiel stretched out asleep next to me. His mouth was slightly open, and his eyes danced behind his lids. Sleeping, dreaming, and alive. I lay back down as quietly as I could. No light showed in the dark bedroom. Sunrise was still hours away. I took a deep breath, trying to process what I’d just seen.

The last guardian is dead. No more protectors. No more peace.

I scooted closer to Samkiel, lifting his arm and tucking myself against his chest. His massive frame draped over mine as I wiggled, nestling further beneath him. His arms tightened around me as he adjusted, pulling me into the crook of his neck. I placed kisses on every part of him I could reach. Warm, heated flesh met my lips. Not gray. Not cold. Not dead. Alive.

Samkiel moaned, shifting his weight again, this time his hand curling in my hair. He pulled me back, his mouth slanting over mine.

I slid my hands over his sides, shoulders, and back. Not cold. Not dead. Alive. I kissed him harder before pulling back and whispering, “Bite me.”

His hand cupped my chin, turning my head. He lowered his head and licked at the curve where my neck met my shoulder. My breath caught, and I moaned as he bit and sucked hard enough to bruise. I just needed to know that I wasn’t dreaming, that he was not cold. Not dead. Alive! My hips rose, rubbing against him as he bit again, this time just below my collarbone.

“More,” I moaned.

Samkiel's mouth closed over my breast, sucking and grazing my nipple with his teeth. My back arched, his hand squeezing and plucking at the other nipple. I felt his smile against my skin as he started to travel lower, but I didn't want him like this, not this morning.

I pushed against his shoulders, and he lifted, his head cocked to the side. I grinned at him and turned, flipping onto my stomach. Samkiel groaned, realizing what I was doing. His strong, calloused hands slid over my back. I gripped the pillow under my head and lifted my ass, releasing a soft hiss when he slapped first one cheek and then the other.

"You're so beautiful." Heat danced across my skin in anticipation as he placed a kiss to the middle of my spine. "And all mine."

I nodded, gripping the pillow tighter.

Samkiel nipped at my skin, leaving a trail of blazing kisses down the center of my back. His hands gripped my ass painfully tight as he moved lower. His teeth raked over one cheek, then the next, biting my flesh before his tongue swept between.

I gasped at the darkly intimate touch, moaning at the sudden sensation. My hand snaked down the front of my body to my clit. I rubbed the small bud in quick circles, moving my hips in tandem with his mouth.

He grabbed my hand and pulled it away as he rose. "Stop. That is mine next."

A soft whimper escaped me as he gripped my hips and lifted them a fraction higher. I spread my legs wider, showing him every single part of me.

"You're so beautiful, Dianna."

"Hmm, you keep saying that."

"I mean it," he said, then his mouth descended onto my pussy. His tongue ran from my clit to my center. I buried my face against the pillow, muffling my low moans. I reached back, gripping his hair, forcing his mouth where I wanted it. His tongue speared into me, and I rocked back, pleasure tightening my belly.

"Fuck," I whimpered. "Sami. I'm going to come like this."

He laughed, the sound vibrating against my already overly sensitive flesh. Samkiel licked and sucked at my clit, every nerve so sensitive the sensations bordered on pain. This was what I needed to chase away nightmares of death and dying. I needed his touch to stave off the overwhelming dread and fear of losing someone else I lo—

Samkiel flicked his tongue just right, and my body shattered, pleasure ripping through me. He didn't stop as I trembled, his hands gripping my hips when I tried to pull away, relentlessly drawing another orgasm from me.

I panted, aftershocks rippling through me as Samkiel rose behind me. My body wept with my release, my inner thighs wet, but I knew we weren't done yet.

My hands snaked between my legs, reaching for him. I cupped his balls tenderly, very carefully sliding my nails over the sensitive skin before wrapping my hand around his shaft.

His groan sent another shiver through me, my body so attuned to him that even the sound of his pleasure made me pulse with need.

"Desperate are we?" he asked, his voice an octave lower and laden with hunger.

My only response was a nod and a few long, slow strokes up and down his shaft before I placed the thick crown of his cock at my entrance. I rubbed it up and down my swollen sex, coating him in my wetness.

"I need you," I whispered, looking at him over my shoulder. And I did. I always did. It was a truth I denied for far too long.

I felt his cock twitch in my hand at those three little words. "Take me," he demanded, his control slipping. "I am only ever yours to have."

I rocked back, taking him inch by glorious inch. We moaned in unison when he was fully seated. I clenched around him, adjusting to the fullness, welcoming the burn.

"Gods, Dianna," Samkiel gasped out, his hands tightening on my hips. "You feel so good."

I could only whimper as I began to rock back against him. He was so deep, almost too deep like this, but I didn't care. I needed to feel him, the heat of him.

Not dead. Not cold. Alive.

"Do you know how many times I have fantasized about every single part of you?"

I shook my head and lowered my shoulders to the bed, arching my back and lifting my ass, grinding back against him, wanting him as deep as possible.

Samkiel's hand came down hard on my ass. My body jerked at the contact, a rush of liquid heat bathing his cock at the sting. My hardened

nipples rubbed against the sheets, sending another wave of pleasure shivering through me.

I glanced over my shoulder as I thrust my hips backward. Samkiel's hands flexed, and I knew I would wear the marks of his grip. We rocked back and forth in a rhythm all our own. I looked over my shoulder, pushing back hard into his thrust. Samkiel's mouth hung open slightly, his gaze lowered, watching his cock disappear inside me. My hands fisted the sheets. With his every thrust, he hit that spot inside me, sending sharp, intense shocks of pleasure through my entire body.

"Take all of me," Samkiel ground out through his teeth.

I slammed my ass back hard against him and cried out, my whole body trembling.

"Good fucking girl." He groaned as he leaned forward, fistng a handful of my hair. My body arched, and I pushed up onto my hands. He held me right where he wanted me and took me harder, faster until I could only cry out his name. He hit some deep spot inside me that had me damn near sobbing with every thrust. Flesh pounded against flesh, the sound mixing with our cries of pleasure.

This was what I needed, what I wanted. To be completely owned by Samkiel, belonging to no other.

My body trembled, straining, reaching for my orgasm, the tight wet heat of my pussy clenching around him.

He yanked my hair, lifting me onto my knees and pulling me back against him.

"Choke me," I gasped out, his every thrust driving the breath from me.

He let go of my hair and wrapped his hand around my throat. I tipped my chin up and leaned into his palm. "Harder," I begged. I just needed to feel. He had to prove to me that this was real and I was not dreaming.

Samkiel's grip tightened, his rings biting into my skin, and all the while, he drove into me in a steady rhythm. I felt the phantom touch of his fingers between my thighs, spreading the lips of my sex around my clit before the flick of his tongue teased at the sensitive nub.

I nearly sobbed, overwhelmed with sensation and need. Reaching back, I grabbed his thighs, needing to hold on to something.

His voice was a hot, breathy whisper against my ear. "I am the only one that gets to touch you. Fuck you. Say it."

"Yes, you," I cried. "Only you."

He moved his power away from my clit, replacing it with his other hand drawing circles around my aching flesh. My cries turned into demands as he slammed into me. His rings pinched my throat as I begged him to go harder, faster. He met my every demand and more. It was too good. My pussy clenched every time he groaned, the sound intoxicating, knowing that they were because of me, for me.

“Do you want to come?”

I nodded and whimpered, feeling his hand flex against my throat.

“Beg me for it.”

“Please,” I cried, but his thrusting slowed, and that release I wanted slipped further from my reach.

“You can do better than that.”

“Samkiel!” I screamed, rocking my hips back to meet his every thrust. I could feel how close I got every time, and so could he. He withdrew until only the tip of his cock remained inside me, and his fingers stilled on my clit.

I slapped at his thigh. “Samkiel.”

He grabbed my hand and placed it where our bodies joined. I jolted at the feeling of our fingers against the swollen, ultra-sensitive flesh.

“Do you feel how wet you are for me?” He slid both of our hands to where the tip of his cock was still gripped inside of me.

I gasped and nodded, feeling my pussy clench around him, tempting him deeper.

He moved his hips, pushing his cock inside me at an agonizingly slow pace. “How easy it is for me to slip in and out of you. You’re dripping down me, baby.”

His mouth, that fucking mouth.

I clenched around him as he withdrew once more before sheathing himself inside me at the same tortuously slow pace.

“So tight.”

“Please,” I moaned, tossing my head back against his shoulder. “Please make me come, baby. Samkiel, please.”

Samkiel pushed me down on my stomach and thrust into me from behind, full, deep, and hard. The sound he let out was damn near primal, and something in me answered. He leaned over me, bracing his hands on either side of my head. I gripped his wrists for support, the bracelet he wore cold against my fingers.

The heat of his now familiar power moved under me, pinching at my nipples before moving lower. One sweep over my already aching clit, and I came undone. My body shook as my orgasm shot through me. My nails dug into his wrist as I came, my body feeling as if it would fly apart. That was okay. I knew he would put me back together.

His thrusts slowed, and then he slammed as deep as he could. He came, saying my name over and over as he emptied himself inside me. He lowered his head, pressing a kiss to the bruise and bite mark at the curve of my neck. His hands slipped beneath me, and he held me tight, his weight pressing me further into the bed. I'd never felt so needed, so cared for, so protected.

"Mm-hmm, wake me up like this every morning," he murmured against my neck.

I sighed and held tightly to his arms.

Silence fell, and a thought ripped through me, all my fears creeping back.

"Promise you'll come back to me." I didn't try to hide the pitch of insecurity in my voice. Not now, not after everything.

He shifted, holding me a fraction tighter, his head resting on my back.

"As if you could ever be rid of me."

"I'm serious."

"Dianna," he said, trailing kisses along my spine. He brushed my hair away from my face and gently turned me over. I trembled against him. "There is no force in this world or the next strong enough to keep me from you. Do you understand?"

His words soothed the dark, broken ache of the dream.

"Okay." I nodded once, my nose brushing his. "But if you don't come back, I'll have to destroy the world or do something drastic, and who is going to clean up that mess?"

He laughed before kissing me softly, his thumb caressing my face. "And you say you are not sweet."

"I'm not, but..." I didn't say it, didn't say what I wanted to, just letting the words trail off as I changed the subject. "Okay, shower, eat, and then you leave to visit your mystical ex."

He groaned and sat up, pulling me with him. I squealed as he tossed me over his shoulder and strode to the bathroom. "So jealous."

We showered, and I watched as he dressed. He placed a kiss on my lips, then my forehead, and I smiled one last time as he left for the Higher One. He shot away with a flash of bright light, and my stomach twisted. After that dream, I really wished I could have gone with him, but maybe I was just crazy. I'd lost Gabby. It was normal to fear losing him, yet some instinct insisted that it wasn't just a dream but an omen.

And a lock on a door in a house rattled.

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EIGHTY-TWO

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LOGAN



I brushed my teeth before spitting into the sink.

“I love the place you picked,” Nev called from the bedroom.

I turned the water on, rinsing the sink before wiping my mouth on the nearby cloth. “I thought it was a nice change from rolling mountains. What better place than close to the beach?”

Nev smiled at me as she tied her hair up. “We can go swimming when we aren’t hunting a psychopath.”

“You read my mind every time, baby.” I leaned over and kissed her.

“I know. That’s why I ordered us food while you were showering.”

“I love you.”

She smiled. “I love you, too.”

I kissed her cheeks before taking her hand and heading toward the bedroom door. Once downstairs, I started a fire. Onuna was frigid cold this time of year.

“Vincent is at Arariel talking with the ambassadors, so they don’t all freak out that we are back.”

“Sounds good,” I said, the flames catching and crawling higher. “What movie tonight?”

“Oh, how about—”

The doorbell rang, and I smiled at her. “Well, that was fast.”

“Grab my blanket, and I’ll get it,” Nev says, smiling at me before disappearing around the corner.

I shook my head and grabbed our bags from where we’d dropped them when we came in. Unzipping hers, I pulled out the large fleece blanket and stopped. The framed picture of her, Imogen, and Dianna was beneath it.

“Nev. You printed this?” I asked, turning toward the hall.

The picture dropped, crashing to the floor. Glass shattered around my feet as I summoned an ablaze weapon.

Neverra stood there, her skin aglow and eyes burning cobalt blue, but it was the man behind her that sent rage and terror tearing through me.

Kaden.

“Knock, knock,” Kaden said, placing his hands behind his back.

My lip curled up as I reached a hand toward Nev, silently telling her to come to me.

“You made a mistake coming here.”

“Did I?” Kaden asked, damn near amused. He took a step further inside, coming up behind Neverra. He leaned close to her neck, and my body froze. His eyes flicked up. “Lovely place you chose. I saw that blasted blue light dance across the sky and knew his precious family had returned. I couldn’t wait to see you all again.”

His hand reached out, moving the small strands of hair at the base of her neck. A flick of my ring and armor draped my body. I took a step forward and froze as I watched his mouth move, and Neverra leaped, her blade stopping mine.

“Nev.”

She pushed off of me, spinning her blade at her side in defense of *him*.

“What are you doing?”

Kaden walked around her as her eyes burned into mine.

“She can’t hear you,” Kaden said, sitting in the chair near the door. My heart thudded furiously against my breast. Growls and yips followed as those large beasts of his came into the house. Neverra stared at me, unafraid, lifeless, and unmoving. The bond between us was void and empty.

“What did you do to her?” My words leave a sharp cry.

One second he was sitting in the chair, and the next, he was in front of me, gripping my jaw so hard the armor plates near my cheeks cracked. “The same thing I am going to do to all of you.”

EIGHTY-THREE

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SAMKIEL

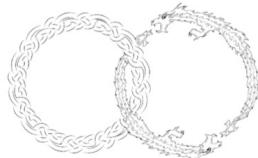


I snapped my fingers, hoping the gifts appeared as I'd planned. If sleep had found Dianna, she should be deep enough now that it wouldn't wake her. Either way, it was the least I could do. I lifted the pendant she had given me and kissed it for good luck. I just hoped I was not stuck here too long.

I exhaled and summoned a blade, sliding it across my palm. I drew a large circle on the floor, placing runes around the perimeter in my blood. A few moments and it was complete, the wound on my palm healing.

The council hall was quiet, everyone working away upstairs while The Hand returned to Onuna. I'd instructed the council members to leave me unbothered and posted a few guards outside the main doors, just in case I was out longer than I hoped. Any interruptions could be dangerous. I rolled my shoulders to loosen the tight muscles before stepping to the center of the ring. I sat, curling my legs under me and resting my hands on my knees, clearing my mind and calming my body before speaking the sacred words.

My mind drifted first to her, always her, then a swift, great current swept me away.



“YOU USE A LOT OF POWER TO COME SEE ME, GOD KING.” THE VOICE wavered in and out, echoing all around me.

A chill shivered up my spine and touched my mind. I stepped forward into the massive white room. It went on forever in both directions, with no end or creature in sight.

“I know, which is why we must keep this trip short.”

“You loved my dimension once.” The room shifted, and I was back at the palace in our room. “But it seems your heart belongs to another now.”

The bed shifted in this phantom place as Dianna rolled from it. Only it was not my Dianna.

“It does.”

The Higher One lifted one of her hands, running her fingers over her face. “She is beautiful. Is she yours?”

“Yes.”

The Higher One tsked, waving one long red-tipped finger at me as she walked forward. “Wrong again.”

“Must you take her shape?” I asked, my stomach churning.

“Why? Is it distracting?” Her hand trailed over a thin lace robe, exposing the matching lingerie beneath. It was a set that Dianna had asked me to make for her. The Higher One was playing in my brain, using my memories to their advantage.

“You can not distract me,” I said, the room vibrating. “You are not her.”

“Pity.” The Higher One looked at her nails. “So the prophecy is true. How sad.”

“Yes, yes, everyone is upset because I found someone I want to spend my life with. I grow tired of hearing it.”

“That is not the sad part.”

“What do you mean?”

The Higher One jumped onto the bed, placing one toned leg across another as it lay back. “You know the rules, nothing from me until....”

“What price do you ask of me for this information?”

The Higher One slid a hand across her thigh, then higher.

“If you cannot help me without that, our time here is done,” I said and turned to leave.

The Higher One laughed. “I’m kidding. I just wanted to see if you are serious, and you are. The Samkiel of old would have wasted no time accepting my advances.”

“I grow weary. What is your price, then?”

“I have no need for a price. I have seen, just like the fate has, what is to come. You are already about to pay a steep price, god king.”

“Am I to be punished because I went to Roccurem first? He speaks in prophecy and riddles. I do not need that from you.”

The Higher One sighed and rolled her eyes. “Roccurem was locked up for a reason. The fate is fickle.”

My blood ran cold.

“Explain.”

“The fate wishes for the old prophecy, for her to love you, but the seed has already taken root in her chest, festered and nurtured by a creature made of darkness. She is quite beautiful, Samkiel.” The Higher One raised a hand and petted her face. Dianna’s face. “But she is evil.”

I took a step forward. “No, she isn’t,” I growled.

“To you perhaps, but the verge of madness she walks is thin, and what she is willing to do for the ones she loves has no known bounds. She would slaughter your very family if they raised a hand to you. Is that love?”

“Love?”

The Higher One cocked her head and jumped from the bed.

“Have you told her that you love her yet?”

I glanced down.

“You’re afraid,” she whispered in shocked awe. Then her laughter echoed in the room, bouncing around in thousands of different voices. “For eons, your name has incited fear into the hearts of your enemies, and they have hunted for ways to make you feel the same without success. Now this,” the Higher One indicated the shell of Dianna she was wearing, “frightens you?”

I didn’t say anything, my throat going dry.

The Higher One shifts into swirling formless mist, its true form, and screams, “Tell me! You seek truths. Give me this one!”

“Yes!” I yelled to the maelstrom of smoke whipping around me.

The cloud shifted, returning to Dianna’s form.

“Yes, I am afraid. She left so easily before. Even if I say the words, what’s stopping her from leaving me again? Or what if she does not feel the same? So yes, I am afraid. I fear not monsters or realms or anything really, but that, her rejection, she terrifies me.”

“You share flesh like feverish beasts, yet wonder if she loves you?” The Higher One laughed. “Pathetic.”

“Just because I meet her physical needs does not dictate love.”

“Over a thousand years, you let no one get close, and now, even with all that ego and pride, you’re insecure.” She laughed once more. “This is better than any trade we could have made. The great protector has a weak spot in his armor.”

“Enough!” I said, losing my temper. “I did not come for ridicule. Either help me, or I am leaving.”

The Higher One shrugged. “Fine. Ask your question.”

“The giant said a creature broke through Yejedin, where Kaden and the other Kings of Yejedin resided. I need to know why and what beast.”

The Higher One walked back and forth with a knowing grin on her face.

“You still see Kaden as a King of Yejedin?”

I shook my head, confused. “No, I know he is one of my father’s generals.”

“Is he now?”

“What else could he be? Only the four kings could enter and leave their dimension.”

The Higher One held up a delicate finger. “Unless something was locked away with them. Something an old god wanted to hide. To forget.”

My gut lurched, and I swallowed the growing lump in my throat, knowing who’d broken that place open. I’d heard the whispers of the secrets but refused to consider any of the rumors.

“My father?”

That catlike grin returned as she spun back to me. “Bingo. We have a winner.”

“Why would he put his general there? Why would he protect the kings? The only reason would be to unleash chaos so they could defeat us in the war.”

“It was not the kings he wanted to protect, but what Kaden had made.”

“Kaden made the Kings of Yejedin. Yes, I know that.”

The Higher One nodded. “Your father lied when he said it was the Primordials. The Primordials saw the raw power Kaden possessed and knew its potential. Unir’s power grew tenfold with Kaden at his side, and they recognized the threat level. They challenged him, and your father wanted peace, so he locked them all away.” The Higher One formed before me, still wearing Dianna’s face. She reached out, her fingertips brushing my cheek.

I moved my head to the side, avoiding her touch. She pressed against my jaw, turning me to face her. “Think, Samkiel. Why would he lie to so many he claimed to care for? Why lie in the first place? Unless what he hid was so very precious to him. Wouldn’t you want to hide that which you loved so much if the entire realm wished it dead?”

My heart thudded. “Kaden was more than a general to him?”

The Higher One nodded.

My hands fisted. “A lover?”

“No.” She smiled widely and shook her head, her dark hair spilling over her shoulders. “A son.”

Son.

The word echoed through my skull.

Son.

My head reeled back, bile rising in my throat. “Kaden?”

“Is your brother.” A vile, cruel smile played on her lips.

Words did not come. My mind ran over a million and one scenarios before coming to a screeching halt. It all hit me at once. The portal, the power, his ability to create Dianna, heal her sister long enough to use her to control Dianna. He stayed far away from me because he knew I would sense and recognize the power so similar to mine. It was how he knew of the battle, The Hand, and about the Fall of Rashearim. Kaden was not the king I thought he was. No, it was so much worse.

He was my brother.

“How?” My voice sounded so far away.

“You are asking the wrong questions. Your next one should be about your other siblings. Siblings that still exist, maiming and destroying beyond the barriers of the realms you hold sealed.” The Higher One stepped back and raised her hand, holding up three fingers. “Unir had three children long before you, god king.”

“Three?” I choked the word out, holding my stomach. He hadn’t told me. No one told me. “My mother, she never said anything about my siblings. I didn’t know.”

The Higher One tilted its head. “Why would she? You are the only one born of flesh, god king.”

“But you just said—”

“Unir’s power far outreached even the gods closest to him. He saw a vision of the Great War. Only he didn’t realize he would be starting it when

he made his precious children. The Great War happened because of them. Unir formed a plan, a way to build weapons to destroy any threat once and for all. Long before you were ever thought of, it seems. But to create life without sharing life is forbidden. He proceeded anyway. He cared for the realms, his people, and others so much that he made a choice, and it ended up costing him everything. The universe takes its debts very seriously. You cannot gain that much without balancing the scales.”

I swayed, and my head began to throb, the shock and the power required to stay here this long taking their toll. But I had to stay. I had to know everything.

“Tell me what happened next.”

The Higher One glanced at me and went on. “Unir made children, creating gods by spontaneous creation. He made some of light so bright it could blind, and others he carved from darkness itself. Three of them were so strong that he lost control of them. Three born from blood—one that sheds it, one that bends it, and one that consumes it.”

One that consumes it—that was Kaden. But who were the other two?

“The others saw what Unir could do. Seeds of doubt spread about the powerful children that he made, and gods turned against gods. Unir hid his children, locking them away. All but one, and that one has lived under your nose for a very long time. In an attempt to bring peace, he sowed hatred and jealousy from those he’d created. Jealousy because true love came and bore fruit. A child so filled with light that it solidified their hate. *You* are that light. *Your* birth began the Gods War, and your *death* will unleash chaos itself.” The Higher One shrugged, picking at her nails. “I guess your name holds more merit now than ever. That’s kind of funny, huh?”

The room spun, my mind trying to process everything while balancing and holding onto this plane. I grabbed my head, willing myself to stay, blood dripping from my nose. I wiped it away and stood straighter.

“I just didn’t see. I thought he meant her. *This is how the world ends.* But it wasn’t her. It was never her.”

The Higher One looked at me curiously. “Who? Your amata?”

My heart stopped.

“My what?”

“Your amata. You know, this beautiful being,” she said, gesturing toward the facade of Dianna she wore. “You know, I really thought The

Order killed her as an infant, but here we are. Kind of funny, huh? She's definitely your type, though."

My entire world shifted.

The Higher One grinned. "You truly didn't know? It explains why you two have been so ravenous in your lovemaking and probably fighting. It's that mark trying to form and seal itself, bind your souls by any means necessary. Why do you think her fire doesn't burn you? Your lightning, your power, are they not the same? Thunder is only heat expanded. Nature always makes you in pairs, sometimes more. I mean, you are the creation to her ruination. It's synchronicity."

The words shattered my very soul. I had one. It was Dianna. It was always Dianna. Every thought, every feeling I had for her since the day I met her, why she touched every part of me, why I couldn't stop thinking about her. Everything fell into place as if I had found a key to a puzzle, and everything finally made sense. It was deeper than love in mortal terms. Dianna was part of my soul.

The Higher One went on as if she hadn't just unveiled something so important and special.

"I am surprised it took this long for you two to come together. You were both locked in the same realm. I really thought they would separate you further, especially since fate works for the One True King."

Fate. My head snapped toward the Higher One.

"Roccurem works for Kaden?" I was seething. This entire time? Rage flared in my blood, the tattoos on my body igniting with silver. He had been close to Dianna the entire time. The room shook, pain piercing my eyes and burrowing into my skull.

The Higher One laughed and shook her head. "Oh gods, no. Roccurem works for your father. The other two Moirai work for the One True King."

The other two Moirai? The fates. Roccurem's siblings.

"They're still alive?"

The Higher One nodded playfully, taking on more of Dianna's mannerisms. "Yup."

"This whole time, I have been lied to like a child. Important life-altering information kept from me. Why?" I hissed. Warm liquid dripped from my nose, my head throbbing as my body tried to force me back.

"It doesn't matter now. It's too late. The equinox crests soon." The Higher One moved, appearing in front of me. She reached out and grabbed

my hand, holding it up to examine it. “And I do not see the mark upon your finger. It seems your time has run out. I guess he really did do it.”

I yanked my hand away. “Do what?”

The room spun as I shook my head, fighting the pull of my body to wake me up. I took a step back, my vision blurring.

The Higher One stepped closer, her form bending.

“I cannot tell you how excited I am. How excited everyone is that you are finally going to die. You see, I was merely a distraction to keep you immobile while The Order worked. Because once you’re dead, I am finally free. We all are. Your father locked a lot of us away, trying to preserve a future for every living being. All he ended up doing was creating a legion that would destroy everything he sought to protect.”

My body bent, my knees hitting the floor. My shoulders ached as my arms were wrenched wide, held taut as if heavy chains clamped my wrists.

The Higher One glanced up, her hand reaching toward the tall white ceiling. “I miss the cosmos.”

“What is this?” It was a demand, not a question. The room trembled as my powers surged, trying to come to my defense.

The Higher One stepped in front of me, its image of Dianna melting. It dissipated into its shapeless, darkened mist, its voice echoing all around me. “The real tragedy is that you have no allies, false king. You never did. I guess you and your amata are alike in that way, too.”

The room shook as my mind, my being, slammed back into my body. I tried to sit up, a sharp, violent pain piercing my skull. I forced myself to turn, trying to push to my hands and knees, stopping when chains clattered against the polished stone floor. A rune-sealed circle encased me, my wrists chained, the other ends melded with the floor.

“Great. You’re awake. Now we can begin.”

My head snapped up, and for the first time, I noticed Elianna and the rest of the council standing outside the circle.

EIGHTY-FOUR

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CAMERON



That damned beeping. My hand reached out, slamming on the table near me until it stopped. I curled back under the bodies that surrounded me, the couple still sound asleep. The beeping started again.

“What the fuck?”

I tossed an arm off me and sat up, squinting into the darkened room. My phone. What time was it?

I shifted, untangling myself from the couple I had met hours ago at some bar I’d already forgotten the name of. All I knew was I wanted to get far away from the remains of Rashearin and Xavier. I just wanted to forget for a few hours. Obviously, my time was up, work intruding like always.

I grabbed my pants off the floor, pulling them on before finding my shirt. I barely had one arm through the sleeve before the beeping started again.

“I’m coming. Godsdamn.”

I reached for it right as the husband—I forgot his name—stirred on the bed, grabbing his wife. I didn’t remember her name, either.

I yawned but came fully alert when I saw the name flashing across my phone.

Xavier.

My heart raced, pounding against my ribs. Why would he be calling me? He’d made his choices perfectly clear. His name disappeared, the screen going dark. What if he was hurt?

The phone lit up again in my hand. I took a deep breath, rubbing a hand across my face before answering.

“You are a hard man to get a hold of.”

Fear filled me. That wasn’t Xavier. “Who are you? Why do you have Xavier’s phone?”

His laugh was damn near a purr. “Come to fifty-second street, and you’ll find out, little hunter.”

The line went dead, and I was out the door the next second.



THE NEON BAR SIGN FLICKERED, LIGHTS DANCING ON THE EMPTY STREET. Nothing stirred, not even the air, but my senses were on high alert. My rings vibrated, reacting to my unease. My instincts screamed danger, reminding me of the first time I’d encountered Dianna.

I pulled the door open and entered the bar without hesitating. The music assaulted me first, and then the smell hit me—blood and flesh, rotting flesh. Underlying that noxious scent was a hint of cinnamon, but with a dark, bitter element.

“Put the blade away. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

The man sprawled in a chair, not bothering to look at me. He tipped his head back, throwing down a shot of dark liquor. From his size, the power that smelled like Dianna, and the arrogance that wafted from him, I knew who he was.

“Kaden.”

He turned his head toward me, a slow, sinister smile forming on his lips. My blood ran cold. Red eyes glowed from every corner of the room, the large, winged beasts chirping at each other. Their massive jaws and rows of teeth snapped as they fed on the bodies scattered on the floor.

“They were hungry, and we have a long trip home.”

“What have you done to Xavier?”

He put his glass down. “You know, I was concerned that what Vincent told me about you was wrong.”

I swallowed. “Vincent?”

Kaden stood. He was taller than I had assumed. His power scraped against my skin like sandpaper. “I mean, it took you forever even to answer

your phone, and the way you smell... Tsk, tsk. Lover's quarrel?"

I gritted my teeth, raising my blade. "Where is he?"

Kaden's smile widened, and he nodded toward something behind me. "Turn around."

I stepped to the side and turned to keep him in my peripheral vision. Keeping my blade raised, I glanced to the side. Xavier stepped from the shadows, the cobalt glow of his eyes matching the tattoos flowing over his skin.

"Xavi?"

No response, but I hadn't really expected one. Not when he looked like that, felt like that. I couldn't explain it, but I couldn't feel him anymore. It was as if his spark had been snuffed out.

I glared at Kaden. "What did you do?" I demanded.

Kaden appeared in front of me, his scent making my nose curl. My blade rested against the center of his chest. He leaned in, pressing the metal further into his skin, his eyes blazing.

"Oh, just the tip?"

"What did you do to him?" I damn near screamed.

"Do it," he encouraged.

I wanted to skewer him but couldn't take the chance, not while he had Xavi.

"You're quivering, hunter." He smiled, and it was downright evil. "Is it because of him? Is it love?" He nodded knowingly at me, pursing his lips. "The fearless Hand of Rasheirim. Samkiel's royal guards. The keepers of peace and justice. Except here you all are, pretending to be anything but the weapons we created you to be. Have a seat. Let's talk."

Kaden took a step back and turned, heading to the bar. My gaze swung to Xavier. He walked by me without giving me a second glance. Ignoring me completely, he took a seat beside Kaden.

I finally got my body to move and sat on the other side of Kaden. He slid a glass toward me before pouring each of us a drink.

"Drink up. We have a long trip ahead of us."

I watched Xavier throw back his drink without a second thought. Kaden caught me looking and smiled as he gulped the shot.

"Don't worry about him. He's never been better."

"What did you do to him? Why won't he talk?"

Kaden lifted his hand, focusing on a point beyond me. A portal ripped open in the center of the room. A few of those hideous Irvikuva walked out on all fours, but the man who walked with them made my stomach lurch.

“The same thing I did with him.”

I could feel the color drain from my face. I never thought I’d see this person again. His eyes and skin burned cobalt blue, his hair falling well past his shoulders, a few thin pieces curling around his face. He had changed, but I would remember that broad nose, bronzed skin, and power anywhere. He was one of the oldest, most powerful celestials in existence, and we’d all thought him long dead.

“Azrael.” My body broke out in a cold sweat. “You’re still alive.”

Azrael ignored me as if I didn’t even exist. He walked toward us and sat on my other side.

Kaden shrugged and clenched his fist, closing the portal. “Let’s just say the lights are on, but nobody’s home.”

I swallowed and glanced at Xavier. I could call a blade forth fast enough to slash Kaden’s face. Maybe it would buy me enough time to grab Xavier and—

“I wouldn’t try anything, Cameron. Xavier won’t go with you, not anymore. He belongs to me now.”

“No, he doesn’t,” I all but spat, my fist curling on the bar.

“Want to bet? Isn’t that your thing? I have been keeping tabs on you and your little friends.”

“What?”

Before I could process the ramifications of his claim, he said, “Xavier, stand.”

Xavier slipped off the barstool and stood beside Kaden, his body relaxed, his stare vacant.

“Now take out a blade and slit your throat,” Kaden said calmly, pouring another drink.

I launched off my stool, sending it crashing to the floor as Xavier summoned a blade. I grabbed the hand he had wrapped around the hilt, holding the knife away from his throat. He struggled, trying to lean into it.

“Xavier!” I screamed, using every ounce of strength I had to keep him from doing what Kaden had asked. “Stop.”

Kaden sat sipping on his drink and watching us struggle. This was a game to him, a sick, fucking twisted game. Xavier fought me harder, but I

refused to allow him to hurt himself.

“Stop this,” I gritted out between my teeth.

Kaden slurped his drink obnoxiously loud. “What do I get?”

My muscles screamed with effort. “What do you want?”

“You know, I love love.” He tapped his finger against his glass. “So easy to manipulate.”

Sweat formed on my head, my feet slipping as Xavier strained against my hold.

“Xavier, put your blade away, and have a seat, please.”

Just like that, a switch flipped. Xavier’s blade withdrew into his ring, and he retook his seat, doing exactly what Kaden commanded. I dropped my hands, my heart beating wildly.

Kaden chuckled. “It hurts, doesn’t it?” he asked, nodding toward Xavier. “Seeing the one you love the most completely under the spell of another. It burns your gut, makes your heart race.”

“Is this some sick fucking game to you? Is this payback because you can’t have Dianna?”

“You and I are a lot alike, Cameron.”

“No, we aren’t.”

“We bury ourselves in others because we cannot have the one we truly want. We don’t feel worthy of them.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kaden smiled. “Don’t you?” He leaned back in his seat and gestured toward my empty chair. “Did you ever tell him why Kryella sent his entire unit to that desolate planet?”

Guilt and fear twisted through me. Kaden patted the seat near him and filled my glass again. Against my will, I sat.

“How do you know about that?”

“I know a lot of things, especially the guilt that eats away at your soul. Why do you think you aren’t good enough for him? You feel guilty for the family he lost, the sister he lost, but it wasn’t your fault. You only followed orders. Athos’s orders, right?”

I picked up my drink and downed it in one gulp.

“You try to drown your guilt with lovers and jokes, but the truth is you’re just as much of a monster as I.”

“What do you want?” I asked again, setting the empty glass down.

“I want you with me, and I think you’ll follow my rules willingly, too. You know why?”

My fingers traced the ridges on the glass. “Why?”

“Because you love him. You see, as I said, I love love. And I think you love him so much you’d do anything for him. Am I right?”

“I’ll ask again, what do you want?”

Kaden looked at me. “It’s not what I want. It’s what you will want, and you will have to want it for it to work. I think you will comply once you learn what’s coming. I think you will do anything to keep him safe.”

He raised his wrist to his mouth, his lips curling back, exposing canines, sharp and deadly. I knew what was coming, yet I let him force his blood upon me. My very soul seemed to burn. It screamed as I swallowed, and then there was nothing but absolute darkness. My last thought was of him. It was always him.

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EIGHTY-FIVE

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DIANNA



“... Time has run out.”

My body jerked up, yanking me from my sleep. I blinked, trying to get my eyes adjusted. The memory of the voice echoed in my head before disappearing completely. I rubbed a hand over my eyes and took a shaky breath. What was that?

I reached for Samkiel but came up empty-handed. Right, he was off mind walking with a super-powered deity who was also his ex. Sighing, I folded my hands in my lap and blew a strand of hair from my face. What could have woken me up so aggressively? I’d run around the whole damn perimeter of the castle until my legs and body gave out and then fallen so deeply asleep that I hadn’t even dreamed last night.

I sighed and looked around the room, my thoughts stuttering. Large white bows sat atop red boxes of varying sizes. They were stacked on top of each other and spread across the room. I gasped, surprise chasing away the lingering dread of the dream and my abrupt awakening.

I crawled toward the end of the bed, knocking the sheets off as I went. A tower of presents lined the foot of the bed, and I couldn’t stop my squeal of excitement. I picked up the closest box. It had a flower and a small note attached to it. I brushed the petals of the flower against my cheek before reading the card.

You spoke of gifts as a tradition, and I could not decide on just one thing to get you, so I got you a few of your favorite things.

Yours truly, Samkiel

I bit my bottom lip and tipped the flower to my nose, inhaling deeply. I jumped off the bed, my smile so wide it made my cheeks ache as I went

through every box. Samkiel had given me shoes so beautiful I couldn't believe they existed, perfume and jewelry I didn't know where I would wear, and dresses. So many dresses. There were a handful of lacy items with a small note filled with promises of pleasure.

I changed into a black lace set before pulling on a loose shirt and cream pants. My smile never wavered as I moved around the room, putting away everything he had gotten me. I picked up one large box and realized I must have missed this one. Ripping the lid off, I gasped and squealed, jumping up and down. I touched the long embroidered silver dress almost reverently. This was way too nice for dinner or anything I could think of, so why did he get it?

Music flooded the downstairs, a soft melody that had my head whipping toward the door. I placed the dress on the bed and hurried down the steps to investigate. Maybe his meeting hadn't taken as long as he thought it would, and he had come back early. If Samkiel had made me breakfast and was playing Celebration of The Fall music, I would have to admit that Gabby's stupid fairytale movies were indeed real.

My heart leaped into my throat, and my steps faltered on the stairs as the melody picked up. A single note, a swift change, and familiarity washed over me. My mind supplied the memory of a small music box bought on the streets of Eoria for two girls who used to hate the dead silence of the desert. It would have been a sweet gesture if Samkiel had left me with a simple song this morning. But no one knew this song.

Only Gabby and I.

And, of course, Kaden.

I stood in the open foyer, terror making me a bit faint. "It's about time you showed up."

Kaden stood in the middle of the room with a veslir tucked between his shoulder and cheek, playing that damn song. He spun, his long coat flaring around his thighs as he spotted me and smiled.

"Do you like it?" He pointed at the veslir in his hand. "I remember you loved this song. Played it over and over until that damn box broke."

I glanced around the room, checking my peripherals, but there were no Irvikuva. No flapping of wings or snapping jaws, just Kaden. I inched further into the room, looking for any object I could use to defend myself. If I could blind or distract him long enough, I could make it to the door. If I

could make it out, scream, something, maybe Samkiel would hear me. I was useless like this. Powerless.

“Since when did you learn to play?” I asked, squaring my shoulders and hoping my scent didn’t reveal how terrified I was.

Kaden’s grin widened, his fingers dancing over the strings. “I ate a veslirist, and then I, you know, *ate* a veslirist.”

I nodded and crept closer to the end table. Kaden was so self-absorbed he didn’t even notice. I used what strength I had and kicked the small table toward him. I didn’t wait to see if it landed, but I heard it hit something, and then he laughed.

“You can’t leave, Dianna,” he shouted as I sprinted toward the open door.

He was right. I didn’t get far. Two figures filled the doorway, and my blood ran cold. I skidded to a halt, nearly stumbling over my feet as disbelief swamped me.

“I am not surprised by Vincent’s betrayal,” I said, backpedaling. I shrugged as if my heart didn’t feel like it would burst from my chest. “But Cameron?” I shook my head. “That I didn’t see coming.”

“Eh, don’t blame the kid,” Kaden murmured behind me. “He is just in love. It’s honestly my favorite thing and the perfect weapon. If you find the one thing someone cannot live without and wield it, they will do anything. You should know.”

Cameron and Vincent herded me back into the foyer, and I turned to face Kaden. I folded my arms, trying to calm my racing heart.

Kaden set the veslir aside and sat on the couch with a sigh. He crossed one leg over the other and draped his arms along the back.

“Cameron, whatever he has promised you—”

Kaden made a clicking sound with his teeth and held up a hand, cutting me off. “Let’s not be rude now, Dianna. I gave you a pretty amazing life until you betrayed me.”

“Betrayed you?” I scoffed. “You kept me on a leash, dangling my sister in front of me so I’d do anything you say.”

“Technically, she is not your sister, but a fair point.” He shrugged. Gods, I detested him. “How did you like finding out about that? Vincent has Onuna wired. Every camera feed you can think of. It comes in handy when trying to hide or broadcast a televised event across worlds.”

My head whipped toward Vincent, and even Cameron seemed to be surprised. Vincent held my stare. He'd known the whole time. He'd been helping Kaden the whole time.

"I saw you and Neverra break into the warehouse for those files. How does it feel to have your whole world tipped upside down by the lies of your so-called family?"

"Rot in Iassulyn," I hissed at Kaden, tearing my eyes from Vincent and Cameron.

His smile widened, and he waved a hand toward the room, looking around. "It's a nice little home he has made here for the two of you, huh? You know, knowing him and his reputation, he just never seemed like the type to settle down. I've heard stories throughout the cosmos of how many it takes to truly satisfy him." He looked at me, no arrogance or cockiness marring his face. For once, Kaden had shocked me. "You should probably practice more."

I ignored his jab, worry replacing anger.

"Where is he?"

Kaden shrugged dismissively. "Detained."

"What do you want?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

"You." He sneered, his eyes sliding over my body, sending a shiver of disgust through me. "Grab her."

Cameron and Vincent lunged forward, each grabbing hold of my arms. I bent, trying to break their hold and failing miserably.

"Cameron. Stop," I begged, pleading at this point. I hoped I could reach Cameron. However, Vincent had hated me since day one.

"I wish I could," he said. "I really wish it was different, but it's not. He has him, and I can't let him stay there alone with them."

I paused in my struggle. "Him? What do you mean?" Then it hit me. "Xavier? He has Xavier?" His eyes darkened, no longer that lush cobalt blue but violent red. My heart sank. "Oh, Cameron."

"Was it worth it? For her? For Gabby? Giving up and forsaking everything. Becoming a monster. Was it worth it?" Cameron asked, his pain palpable. "I feel like it is for someone you love. Someone you can't live without. A fair trade, you know?"

My heart lodged in my throat.

"This is lovely, but we really have to be going," Kaden said, summoning a portal.

We fell, and my scream of rage was cut short. Cameron and Vincent landed, but my feet didn't touch the ground, the two of them easily holding me between them. Kaden landed in front of us and nodded toward a large stone slab. Seeing the wrist and ankle restraints, I kicked, struggled, and bit as they lifted me onto it.

I swallowed, reality hitting me like a punch in the face. "Cameron. Please. Please don't do this. Samkiel needs us."

"I'm so sorry, Dianna. Of all the people in the world, I know you'll understand," Cameron said, guilt dripping from his words.

Kaden stood with his hands in his pockets. "He would do anything for Xavier. Same as you for your sister-not-sister."

"How?" I ignored his jab, staring at Cameron, my heart breaking. How easily he'd fallen, just like me. "You've tried to make more, but you couldn't."

Kaden ran a hand across his jaw, the movement familiar and foreign all at once. "Well, as it turns out, I cannot turn mortals. If I try, we get the Irvikuva. Something about the bloodline falling so far from ours or whatever, but I can turn celestials. Well, desperate celestials. In order to work, my magic requires a selfish greed, a desire to do anything for their goal. Not many have that drive, determination, and commitment."

He smiled wide, displaying gleaming white teeth.

"Celestial?" I arched my back and craned my neck, trying to look at him. "But you turned me."

It didn't make sense.

"Yes, yes, I did. One thing about your forged adoption papers, they don't tell you everything." He looked toward the carved-out doorway, and a moment later, I heard two sets of heavy footsteps. "You were always a weapon, Dianna, just not mine."

Xavier and a man who looked oddly familiar stepped from the darkened hallway. Tall, lean, and built like the celestials, but time had carved deep lines at the edges of his eyes. His hair was as dark as mine, falling well past his broad, strong shoulders and curling at the ends. I inhaled sharply, not because his eyes glowed celestial blue but because I had spotted the book he held cradled in his hands. The same book Samkiel and I had searched for, the one I'd been willing to die for. I knew with perfect clarity who he was.

"Say hello to Daddy," Kaden gloated as my blood turned to ice.

Azrael.

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EIGHTY-SIX

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DIANNA



Kaden disappeared down that damned hall with my father. I struggled and screamed as Cameron grabbed my wrist, locking an obsidian cuff around it. I twisted and writhed, my back scraping against the cold stone slab. Vincent gripped my ankle so tight I knew it would bruise. My other foot shot out, kicking him in the chest. He locked the cuff in place, the blow not even phasing him.

“Don’t do this!” I screamed. “I don’t care about me, but what about Samkiel? He helped you, all of you.”

Cameron said nothing, but pain flashed in Vincent’s eyes, pain and regret he tried to mask. “I don’t have a choice.”

“Yes, yes, you do. We all do. Please. Kaden wants to kill him. If he dies, the world goes with it. Vincent, Cameron, please. Just think.”

Cameron hesitated, his hands on the cuff around my wrist. The struggle in him was clear, but then his eyes flicked to Xavier. He stood frozen in the corner, his eyes glazed and staring at nothing. There was no sign of the loving, playful man. Cameron bowed his head. “I won’t choose Samkiel over Xavi. I can’t. I’m sorry, Dianna.”

And there it was—the absolute, soul-shattering truth.

“Since when do you care about the world?” Vincent hissed, finally locking my ankle to the stone slab. “You were on a mission to destroy it, and now you care?”

I snapped my teeth at Vincent, wishing I could rip his throat out. “You better hope I don’t get out of this. I *will* kill you both if he dies.”

Vincent tightened the strap on my ankle painfully tight, and Cameron looked away. I growled and rested my head against the stone, frantically

cycling through my options. There had to be a way out of this. I had to get to Samkiel.

I took a deep breath and looked around the room. No, not a room, but a cave. Furniture littered the cavern, torches illuminating the rough-hewn walls in weak, flickering yellow light. Shock hit me again, and I swallowed hard. I recognized this place. It was part of one of the underground systems on the map. I had been in here before, but this cave was new. The stone slab they'd tied me to was the largest, but there were smaller ones around it. Against the walls were stacks of boxes and crates, half opened and discarded.

Out in the darkened hallway, heavy footsteps echoed against the stone. I strained to see into the shadows. The wretched, sick, twisted laugh of the Irvikuva seeped from the darkness, and goosebumps rose on my arms and legs. Wings rustled, their massive forms bursting into the cavern, bending through the air. They landed above us, their talons scraping and gripping the stone ceiling. Many pairs of red eyes suddenly appeared, staring balefully down at us, and I realized we had never been alone. The light from the torches didn't reach those heights, and for the first time, I realized that what I had thought were jagged stone formations were actually the Irvikuva. They hung like large bats, hungry and waiting for their master's command.

I lay on my back, methodically testing and pulling at my restraints as the footsteps drew closer. Kaden entered first, followed by Azrael, a ghastly, haunted look filling his eyes. My skin crawled when I saw the curved, malachite-gray spear and that damned book in Azrael's hands.

"You like it?" Kaden asked me, pointing to the jagged spear.

"It took a lot of iron to make it. Iron was one element needed to bind it. It's a fantastic conductor of heat and electricity, exactly what your precious Samkiel is made of. I mean, it's not complete yet, but when it is, we will have a god-killing weapon."

My heart pounded, my body breaking out in a cold sweat. There it was, everything I had feared. Kaden had made a weapon, and I had zero power to take it from him.

My breath hitched. "How?"

"Which part?"

Azrael didn't move, didn't flinch, as my eyes bored into him.

"Oh, that." Kaden waved a hand, glancing from father to daughter and back. He took the book from Azrael and walked toward me. "Azrael had a

dream, as most do. A premonition of a daughter who would change everything. Victoria never believed him, and they weren't trying, but you know celestials and their high sex drives."

Kaden stopped, a frown marring his features and drawing his brows together. He leaned in close above me, his arms folded around the book.

"Sorry, is this weird for you since it's your dad and all?" He shrugged before going on. "Anyway, Victoria learned she was pregnant, and your dear old dad freaked. You see, there was a prophecy of Samkiel's equal being born on the crest of a waning moon. The Order knew about it, but they kept it from Unir. Azrael worked for the true king and couldn't let anyone find out about his sweet baby girl. You'd have been slaughtered. So, being the loving parents they were, they sent their sweet child all the way to Onuna. Azrael landed so fast and hard out of fear that he laid waste to the surrounding environment. Did you never wonder why Eoria was the only desert on Onuna?"

I gulped, my heart racing and my body trembling at his words.

"Crazy, right? Think about it. Why have you never felt whole here among the mortals? Why have you never been sick? Why do you dream of stars and faraway worlds? You don't belong here. You never did."

Tears threatened to blur my vision. I looked at Azrael, tears filling my eyes and blurring his image, but I could still see that his features matched mine, and our hair was the same color and texture. My mind flashed to the stone carving of Victoria in the tomb and how I'd felt drawn to it.

I shook my head and sneered, "He is not my family. I had a mom, a dad," a single tear slid down my cheek, "and a sister."

Kaden shrugged. "Not your real family, although I will admit he picked a good family. A little taste of godly magic, and Gabby even resembled you. He needed somewhere to hide you, and Gabby and your pseudo-family gave you something to love. Azrael hid you for over twenty years before he and Victoria had another child. Ava, you remember her, right?"

Images of her decaying corpse flashed through my mind. My eyes closed as I tried to push down the bile and everything I had learned.

"Azrael did well, though. Not even Unir or the other gods knew about you or what you carried in your blood. It's your destiny to kill Samkiel. There had to be a loophole for Kryella's spell to work. It is always necessary to maintain a cosmic balance. If Samkiel had true immortality, then there had to be a way to break the spell. His blood closed the realms,

and the blood of his mate will open them. You know, it's funny. Azrael thought he was saving you by hiding you here, but the fates lied, tricked even him. They work for the true king too. They convinced Unir that Samkiel's mate was dead. It was perfect. Unir bound the spell to something he believed didn't exist, ensuring his precious boy stayed alive." Kaden paused, sliding his fingers along the curve of my cheek. I jerked away, his touch making my skin crawl. "Yet here you are."

My mind flashed back to the festival and the first time I asked Samkiel about amatas.

"So, basically, your other half?" I asked.

"In simple terms, I suppose, but it is much more than that. It's deeper. It is a connection that words cannot fully convey."

"Does everyone have one? Do you have one?"

"No. Despite your stories and legends, the universe is not that kind."

Samkiel's words raged in my head, and he was right. The universe was not that kind because it had separated us. Even Roccurrem's words made sense now. I was an abomination because I shouldn't exist. My mind raced, the pieces falling into place. "The book. That's why you wanted me to find it. You said we would know, that we would feel it, but it was me?"

He smiled and bit his bottom lip. "Of course. It's always been you. Azrael's daughter could find the book because it's made from his magic. Blood, Dianna, it is always about blood. It's the driving life force of every being in this realm or the next. It's why the others find me so terrifying. I could read every sin, every thought, with just a taste. The same taste you have. We're damned, Dianna. We always have been because we're too powerful, too unhinged, and uncontrollable. That's what the old gods preached and why they decided that eradication was the only way to ensure their survival." Kaden looked at the celestials. "Didn't work in their favor, though, did it? As soon as we knew the truth of you, I was sent to Onuna to take you."

"You sent the plague?"

He clicked his teeth. "No, how powerful do you think I am? I mean, the plague was a nice touch. Kill a bunch of mortals so we could find you easier. Then, of course, dear old Drake did what he did best, and here we are."

My breaths were coming too fast, too hard, and my chest ached. My entire life had been a lie. Here I'd been cursing and hating the celestials,

hating Samkiel, thinking they had taken my family and life from me when it was the monster in front of me all along.

I couldn't stop the tears this time, and I tried, again and again, to break my own wrists to get out. Kaden watched me, completely unfazed. His knuckles brushed my cheek, wiping away the angry tears I'd spilled.

"You're a monster," I sneered, rage seething in me.

"You think me a monster, but you have no idea what I did for you and what rules I broke. I had to wait a thousand years because you got under my skin—a thousand years with you. I thought I could use Ava instead of you at first. Then I could keep you. I'd convince them you were mine, not his. But even with her celestial blood, it wasn't enough. She was weak and damaged, so I fed her to Tobias. I halted plans for you, searched for that damned book, hoping there was another way that I could keep you."

His fingers slid idly across my jaw, and I struggled to get out of his grip. His eyes told me everything he said was true, though I knew Kaden, and he didn't lie.

"I love you. I do. In my own twisted way. I tried to push you away for centuries, but I can't get you out of my head, my flesh, my soul as damaged and dark as it is. You can look at me with hate and loathing, but I love you, Dianna. I always have."

Bile hit my gut, and I cringed away from him. I shook my head, my voice barely above a whisper. "We were never in love, Kaden. You don't treat someone you love how we treated each other. That's not love."

"Oh, but what you feel for him is love? You've known him for minutes compared to what we had."

"What Samkiel and I have is different. It's messy and painful at times, but it's real. He would never hurt me, no matter what I said or did. He would never hurt the people I love or use them against me. Samkiel's kind, he's good, and he cares. He cares about me and accepts every part of me—the good, the bad, and the ugly. He has seen it all and stayed. You broke me completely, Kaden. Every chance you got, you broke me. Samkiel healed me." I didn't cower beneath his angry stare. "That's. Love."

He recoiled back as if I had stabbed him square in the heart, and maybe I had. Behind those damned eyes, I saw every bit of his anger and frustration. The room shook, and I knew it wasn't from another doorway he was opening but pure, unadulterated rage. I didn't care. Not one bit, but I should've.

“I convinced them to let me keep you.”

“What?” I gasped. “You killed Gabby, Kaden, and if you kill Samkiel, do you really think I would ever forgive you? You might as well kill me, too, because if you don’t, I won’t stop until you are dead.”

He pushed off the stone slab and tossed the book to the side, sending it skittering across the floor. “You’ll forgive me. You’ll get over it. I’ll wait centuries if I have to, but you will be mine. What are a few thousand years between lovers, right?”

“You are insane,” I choked out, fighting against those damn restraints.

“Love,” he sighed, “it makes you crazy.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he knew nothing of love, but pain stole the words from me. Sharp spikes pierced my arms, legs, and back, agony slithering across every nerve, tearing a scream from my throat. I lay there, unable to move, feeling my blood pour from my body, hot, thick, and filled with my repressed power.

The room shook, rubble falling to the ground as the stone above me split, forming a fissure in the world. It gaped, and past the jagged edges, I saw unfamiliar stars, an open purple sky, and a glimpse of a red moon, whole and bright.

“Every thousand years, the equinox crests on the anniversary of the fall. Samkiel changed the universe itself when he slammed the realms closed. Now his death will open them all. No more boundaries, no more limits. No more guardians.”

No guardians, no protectors. No peace.

The words ricocheted within my skull.

The room trembled, and the ground shifted, steam hissing from the jagged cracks forming in the stone. The room glowed orange, heat filling the cavern. Two Irvikuva moved above me as Kaden lifted his hand. A smaller rectangular altar rose from the floor. Azrael stepped forward and fit the spear into the stone slab, and I soon realized it was the same mold used to make it.

Vincent and Cameron didn’t move from their spots, watching Azrael. The two Irvikuva moved around me, lifting two circular bowls. My vision blurred, my body tired and weak, and I realized what was in those bowls. Blood. My blood.

The Irvikuva stretched on their clawed toes, pouring my blood into the mold with the spear. Darkness crept in around the edges of my vision, and I

slipped in and out of unconsciousness. A hum vibrated the air, jerking me awake. I forced my eyes open to see Kaden lift the spear.

No longer coated in rustic metal, it shone with an iridescent glow. Runes glowed along the shaft, and sharp curved blades sprouted from both ends.

“It’s beautiful. I hope it’s painful as I rip him to pieces with it.”

“When I get out of this, I will kill you,” I groaned, pulling against my restraints hard enough to tear the skin beneath the cuffs.

“No, because when you wake up, I will be all you have left in this wretched world.”

Kaden looked up at the blood-red moon above. With a flick of the dark bracelet on his wrist, horned armor, thick, spiked, and reminiscent of his wyvern form, took hold of his body. Red eyes glared at me from the depths of his helmet. The Irvikuva started to howl and yip, their screeches and hoots echoing through the cavern.

Realization clicked, and my stomach sank. I was wrong, so wrong about him.

“Azrael, keep your daughter here until we return for you both. She is forbidden to leave,” Kaden commanded.

Azrael merely nodded. He was a soldier obeying orders, not a father.

My head rolled weakly toward Kaden. “I know who you are,” I whispered.

His clawed, gloved hand swept the hair from my face. “It doesn’t matter now.”

He held his hand out, a curling flame portal bursting into existence. Xavier jumped in first, followed by Cameron. Kaden took a few steps and swung those crimson eyes back to me. “Let chaos reign,” he said and disappeared, the words breaking my heart.

I knew what was about to happen, and I couldn’t do anything about it. My body ached, and I didn’t even have the strength to cry. I tried to move, to break free, but only managed to push the spikes deeper into me, shredding me. Dry sobs shuddered through me. I couldn’t save Gabby. I couldn’t save Samkiel. I couldn’t save anyone. Kaden had left, but his words remained, sinking into my skull, bones, heart, and soul. Consciousness faded, and the world went dark.

EIGHTY-SEVEN

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SAMKIEL



So many symbols, ancient damned symbols that made my heart race. No. I knew that language. It was the same language written on the cells of Yejedin. Chains bore into the walls, pulling my wrists so tight I couldn't move. I ground my teeth, knowing how futile it was.

"What is this?" I bellowed.

Elianna cocked her head. "I suppose they could be considered wards. Your father made them for the terribly evil creatures that dared to defy the gods." She laughed. "No, I'm joking. The language on the floor is a curse for the gods themselves. Unir made them to hold Primordials. They are unbreakable. Only the one who scribes them can break them, and I am not allowed to just yet."

I pulled one more time, the muscles in my arms flexing to the point of pain before I stopped.

"You can try, but not even all that pretty muscle can break them."

I cut a death glare at her before my eyes were drawn toward the far end of the council hall. The sight of them nearly ripped my heart out. I hadn't noticed them because I hadn't felt them.

Logan stood on one side, Imogen on the other, staring straight ahead with their arms folded over their chests. They wore battle gear, ready for war. It wasn't the attire or their body language that alarmed me. It was the empty hollow ache I felt as I looked into their eyes and felt not a single spark of magic in or around them.

"What did you do?" The words left my lips, filled with a promise of death.

Elianna looked at them and shrugged. “The words of Ezalan, of course. I always wondered why more gods didn’t use it and turn those pesky feelings off.”

My shoulders bunched as a breath of despair left me. “How could you do that to them? You know what it does, how it makes them feel.”

“It makes them feel nothing. All they know is to serve as they should have from the beginning of time. You, Unir, and the others wanted them to have feelings, completely ignoring their nature. They were made for war, Samkiel, and to war they will go.”

“I will *end* you for this, all of you,” I spat. I must have put more venom in my voice than I thought because the council members behind her stepped back.

“No. By the time we are through here, you will no longer be a threat, Samkiel. I knew we couldn’t fight you. Armies have tried and failed. The most powerful ruler in existence. The flesh-born son of Unir.” Elianna stared at the symbols on the floor, slowly walking from one side to the other. “Do you like these? We didn’t get a chance to use these on your father. I have been dying to try them out.”

“You,” I struggled to form the words. “You all betrayed him. Why?” I glared at every member of the council. Some met my eyes, and others avoided me completely.

“We didn’t betray him. We were never for him or you. Your council died with Rasheirim and was replaced by half of The Order.”

“The Order?” I shook my head. “I’ve heard of no such thing.”

“Of course not. The Order predates you, but we don’t have time for a history lesson.” She waved her hand, and Jiraiya stepped forward.

Jiraiya untied a small shimmering bag, and I smelled the graysands before he even began to pour.

“Why do you need the sands if I am locked here?”

Elianna smiled, clasping her hands in front of her. “This will help seal you inside, so when all that light bursts from your body killing you, it will open the portal we need. It will probably rip open the sky too, but who knows?”

He placed the sand on the floor, moving counterclockwise. It sparked as it hit, flashing a vibrant purple and flowing toward the symbols. I strained against the restraints, tracking Jiraiya as he circled me.

“You’d let this happen to Imogen? Let them take her?” My voice sounded as hurt as I felt. “Why?”

“It’s not personal,” he said, refusing to meet my eyes.

“She cares about you,” I spat, glancing at Imogen. Her hollow gaze was unrelentingly empty. “You hurt her for what? What does Elianna have on you?”

His eyes met mine, not an ounce of sympathy in them. “It is for The Order. For our king. Imogen is not important.”

“She is important to her family. They all are.”

Jiraiya said nothing else, stepping back and walking to the council steps.

“Enough of the small talk. The Equinox approaches,” Leviathan said, glancing up.

Elianna smirked and looked up. I followed her line of sight, shocked to see the top of the council hall slowly spin. “We have waited a thousand years.”

Debris trickled down, the cool night air sweeping in. The white ceiling shimmered before splitting and folding in on itself, revealing the blood-red moon and galaxy above. “The Equinox was the start of you, and now it will be our liberation from you. Worlds aligned when you were born, they aligned when you destroyed Rashearin, and now they will align for your death.” Elianna’s eyes went molten blue, and the celestial markings burst to life, swirling over her skin. Every council member behind her followed her lead, the hall glowing blue. “Your rule was a failure indeed. But it is high time for another rule. Your reign has been over for a while, Samkiel. The realms have a true ruler now, and once this realm opens, you’ll see just how much of a failure you truly are.”

“Do you really think killing me and opening the realms will bring you peace?” I summoned every bit of strength I had and strained against the chains holding my arms. The metal groaned but held.

“Who needs peace when we will have power?” I had never known what a cruel, heartless wench Elianna was.

The doors opened, and everyone looked behind me. The Order knelt, bowing their heads. I struggled to turn my head to look over my shoulder. Logan and Imogen stepped to each side, holding the doors wide. My heart shuddered in my chest, and time seemed to stop.

Cameron and Xavier.

Xavier's eyes were glazed and hollow, the same as Imogen's and Logan's, seeking and looking past here, past worlds. Cameron's gaze clashed with mine, but he looked away, unable to hold the connection. He focused on the shell that was Xavier. I no longer felt the bond that I had with The Hand. It felt as if the life had been sucked out of him, and I knew he had done something terrible for Xavier. I looked at each member of The Hand, my heart breaking tenfold. Their eyes do not meet mine, each of them standing at attention.

Soldiers, weapons of war, that's all they are.

The words of the old gods whispered through my mind, and now I could feel the separation between us. Some bond had ruptured.

Vincent walked in, Camilla in his grasp. I could still sense him on some level. He didn't meet my eyes, and why would he? He had betrayed his family, and he had betrayed me.

Camilla struggled in his grip but couldn't break free from him as he strode into the hall. She stumbled, trying to keep up, and glared up at him, her hands bound with the celestial chains. Her eyes met mine and widened, her face dropping, seeing where I was and how I was chained. Vincent pulled her to the side, dragging her toward the council.

"Well, I have to say I am impressed. The Order can do something right." Kaden strode through the door, half his body covered in thick, heavy-plated armor. An assortment of horns with sharp points twisted back from his helmet. I had seen that armor before when I was a teen. I remembered the picture clearly. My father had damn near broken my fingers as he slammed the book closed and snatched it from me. I'd never seen the book again, but I remembered the words written beneath the image.

Dragonbane Armor.

It was made for him, meant to break and tear armies, every bit the beast the Irvikuva were. My heart sank, and that was the only coherent thought I had before lightning shot from his hands. It was the same color as Dianna's flames. Power the same as mine, but oh so different bit and gnawed at my flesh.

I slumped forward and screamed, the sound echoing off the walls.

"Oh, he's a screamer." I heard Kaden say, circling me. "You are so fucking arrogant. You thought I would hide from you? From what? Fear? Absolutely not. I knew I couldn't be around you. You'd sense it, feel it, that good old family tie."

Another blinding bolt slammed into me, the circle encasing me lighting up bright orange. I gritted my teeth, feeling true and unrelenting agony. I hadn't experienced this type of pain in eons. Only a god could hurt another god this way. I gasped for air as the last wave subsided. My hands fisted in the cuffs as I tried to catch my breath.

The Order stood, watching and waiting silently.

"Tell me, brother, how does it feel to be chained and beaten?"

He kneeled in front of me as I panted from the pain still ricocheting through my nervous system.

Not the only child of Unir...

A son...

Brother...

How had I not seen it before? The walk, the gait, the frame, and the face, all of it and everything was familiar. My heart aches because his features bore a resemblance to one person and one person only—my father. Our father. He'd had so many lies, and he had damned the world, damned us all.

"No words? That's a first. I want to say I am sorry I'm late. I got distracted." Kaden sighed and stared at me. "That happens when spending time with Dianna, you know?"

My breathing stopped. The room stilled, and my blood pounded in my ears so loudly it nearly drowned everything out.

Dianna.

"Where. Is. She?" I snarled, the sound so primal the room shook, and the symbols encasing me vibrated. Everyone took notice. Even Kaden paused for a split second.

"I can smell her all over you." His eyes glowed a shade brighter, a look of pure disgust gracing his cold features.

"What have you done with her?" I could not tell if I was yelling or not. The fear I felt was all-consuming.

If he takes her, you'll never see her again...

He will drag her back in pieces if he has to...

My heart stuttered, the ache in my body forgotten. If he had touched her, hurt her, killed— No! I killed the thought. Dianna was okay. She was okay. She was okay. She had to be because I could not live if she was not.

Debris rained down, and everyone but The Hand glanced nervously around the room. I was unaware I'd unleashed, but the circle that held me

bent and shook—one rune, then another burnt to dust, the seal containing me fracturing. Parts of the building had split beneath the pressure of my panic and rage. Long cracks split the walls, floor, and ceiling. Pieces of stone and dust crumbled to the ground. What I had thought was my world shifting at the thought of losing her was the building itself threatening to crumble.

Kaden met my eyes again, something that looked like surprise passing through them. “You really do love her, don’t you?”

I kept pushing against the power beneath my skin. My head throbbed, and then my body gave out. The runes were too strong. I collapsed forward, my body only held up by the chains and cuffs.

“You know, Vincent told me how close Logan got to the truth. He wasn’t wrong about the frequencies. The only difference was it was made so all of them could hear. The real trick is in the mirrors. Actually, any reflective surface if you know how to use it right. They fear you two together. Because of what she is. What you are.” He tilted his head toward the sky. “You’ve seen the chaos beneath her skin. She is a tool of destruction, and you would hold all of that within your palm. You two are two sides of the same coin. I thought I could keep her and, in doing so, keep her from you. I wanted to change what fate had deemed as yours. However, destiny has a sense of humor, it seems. A being made of pure light and one carved from darkness. How fucking poetic.”

Kaden shook his head, a sneer twisting his features. I knew he would do his best to kill me. Not only had he been ordered to and believed the fate of the realms rested on my death, but he wanted Dianna.

“The plan was simple. I get the book, you return, I take The Hand from you, and you die miserable and alone, just like Father. But no. She cared when no one else had. I tried to push her away, you know. I took others in front of her and gave her the leeway to do the same. It didn’t help, not for me, at least. She made me *feel*. She made you feel, too. Except she loved you, it seems.”

Kaden stood in one fluid motion, taking a step back. I saw the flicker of energy, same as mine, the same as our father’s. He watched it dance across his knuckles. I had a second to prepare before pure, raging energy shot through my entire being, and I jerked back so hard it felt as if my spine would break. I didn’t know how long it went on, but once the power

withdrew, I collapsed, hanging limply in my chains as tremors wracked my body.

“You get *everything*, the crown, the throne, *her*. Why do you deserve that when we did all the work? We remade the world for him. We slaughtered the Primordials, yet you get the name, the title, and the praise. What makes you so godsdamn special?”

“Maybe,” I panted, “it’s because I am not a deranged prick.”

Kaden hit me with another bolt of energy, and my head snapped up, my insides boiling. He released me, and I sagged. Sweat slicked my skin and dripped from my hair, drenching every part of me. He roared, screaming his anger at me. He must have kept that anger buried for centuries. I tried to pull myself up, but between the binding circle and the energy he’d hit me with, I was weak. I needed time to heal and formulate a plan before he sent another blast through me. There had to be a way to get out of this, to save her, my family, and the world.

Kaden glanced down, running his hand over a dark bracelet on his wrist.

“I got a few gifts from Father. We all did. Most of them were made for war. It is easy to manipulate molecules and basic chemistry. We have the ability to disguise weapons as objects none would consider dangerous. Especially the god-killing ones.” He flicked his wrist, and a golden spear formed in his hands. Runes encased the staff, so small they looked like raised edges. It rang with familiar power and pure energy, my every sense drawn to it when I recognized the source. Dianna’s scent coated the blade.

Kaden didn’t hesitate, plunging the spear into my body. I felt the blade ram through my center, but it didn’t hurt as I had imagined it would. He gripped my hair and wrenched my head back, whispering against my ear, “It’s time to open the realms, Brother, and welcome our family home.”

One twist in my gut, a key fit for a lock that unleashed the entire cosmos. He ripped the spear’s blade out of my midsection and stepped back, his mouth falling open in pure awe. Thunder cracked and bellowed, threatening to fracture the sky, only it was me breaking. Suddenly, the pain hit me, some force ripping my power out of me. My head snapped back so hard it should have broken my neck. Every ounce of my power and life force burst from my mouth, nostrils, and eyes in a laser-sharp beam of light. It burrowed through the air and hit the sky, ripping the universe open.

EIGHTY-EIGHT

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SAMKIEL



Was death peaceful? I had often wondered during the endless aching nights when my grief was too much and sleep would not take me.

When existing seemed too much, long before she came into my life. But if death was peaceful, then this was indeed living. My body ached, pain radiating through me, threatening to tear my body apart. My veins screamed as if my blood had become acid. Sweat coated me, and I shook violently.

My vision blurred as I tried and failed to open my eyes several times. Was that the pain I felt? I could not tell. It was everywhere, all-consuming, and then came the voices and screams echoing through the cosmos. My father had damned the universe. He hadn't just locked them up; he'd sealed them away with all their suffering, and I was the key to their freedom.

A howling mass of roars filled the room. I heard wings, thick and heavy, flapping above. I struggled to open my eyes again, not remembering having closed them. When I succeeded, I cried out. Everything was awash in red as if I were looking through a filter. My nose and lips hurt. Too much raw power expelled too fast had burned every part of me as it escaped.

I heard the screams of celestials far away in the city, and my concerns for myself died. I needed to move and help them, but I was just so weak.

My eyelids felt so heavy, but I blinked and forced them open. Several silhouettes moved behind Kaden. The silhouettes made my heart shatter. I could have sworn I made out the forms of The Order leaving. The Hand, my family, stepped through the open gates carrying large crates. I could have sworn I saw Cameron take one last look at me kneeling on the floor and

back to Xavier before they left. Camilla tossed a small orb of green energy toward me as Vincent dragged her struggling form through the gate.

That small green orb bounced soundlessly. The small light came to a stop against my knee, and I heard her voice whisper, “*Hold on. She’s coming.*”

A form appeared before me, blocking my view of the gate and the silhouettes. I blinked, my eyes still struggling to heal and adjust. A blurry version of Roccurem leaned toward me as if he cared.

“Why?” I asked. The word cracked and broken, and the only one I had spoken.

“The fates serve the one true king, I am afraid. It is a law governed by your father and his fathers before him and cannot be broken.”

I nodded with effort, hurting more than I would let them know. “Kaden.”

Roccurem shook his head slowly. “No.”

“Then who?”

The room rocked. I looked past Roccurem to see Kaden drag the spear coated in my blood down the center of the room, splitting the very fabric of this realm in two. Creatures, large and small, rushed from the crevasse and took to the sky, roaring and screaming. My heart beat like a rabid beast in my chest, and my blood ran ice cold. I blinked again, convinced I was hallucinating. A being emerged from the fracture, followed by several larger males wearing the same armor as Kaden. Sharp, deadly war boots gripped her legs, ending high on her thighs. She wore thick, blood-slicked armor with skulls resting on her shoulders. Silver hair danced behind her in a phantom wind as she saw me and smiled. In her eyes, I saw rage so old that it had its own name. Wrath.

“Hello, World Ender,” she purred, shaking fleshy material from her sword. “I have *missed you.*”

I didn’t need perfect vision to know exactly who she was. Her voice erected nightmares filled with fear, death, and blood.

Nismera.

EIGHTY-NINE

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DIANNA



I cursed, throwing my hands up again. I had walked this damn sidewalk, ran, sprinted, trying to get out of my own fucking head. Samkiel was back on the remains of Rasheirim, possibly dying, and here I was, stuck in my own head. I screamed, and not a light in any house flickered.

Sighing, I turned back to the one place that kept pulling at me. The wooden door to the first home Gabby and I lived in slowly swung open. The creak of the hinges echoed, and I squared my shoulders.

“Fine. You want me to go into the stupid house? Then I’ll go into the stupid house.”

The wind blew the overgrown shrubs along the stone path Gabby and I had built brick by brick. The neighborhood was quiet, too quiet. I put my hands on my hips and stared at the house for a moment before starting up the path. The wooden boards of the porch groaned. I made it over the threshold and stepped inside, a chill running down my spine. The home was just how I had left it, how *we* had left it. A layer of dust coated the furniture, doors hung off their hinges in the abandoned kitchen, and the broken banister hung crooked along the stairs.

I took a step further inside, and the door closed behind me.

“I’m here. Now what? Are you going to take up more of my time, or can I leave and get back to my body now?”

My voice echoed in the room, but I received no response, not that I really expected one. Why was I stuck here? Was I dying?

I shook the thought from my head, focusing on our initials carved into the far wall. I walked across the room, reaching toward them but stopping

an inch away. My fingers curled into a fist, and I dropped my hand. What did they even mean now? Everything had been a lie.

“You know, when we were little, you always talked about locking away the things you didn’t want to think about. I just didn’t think you meant an actual house with doors,” Gabby said.

My heart skipped a beat at that voice, my breath hitching. No, it couldn’t be. I turned, half expecting a ghost, a shimmering form, but I never thought to find her whole, unbroken, and in front of me.

She pulled at the ends of the off-white flowy dress as she swayed. “We don’t really have a form where I am now, but I remember we wore matching dresses when we went to—”

Her words ended on a grunt as I grabbed her, my arms wrapping around her so tight not even I could breathe. My head rested on her shoulder, parts of her hair tickling my nose, and her smell, gods, that smell. I had forgotten the way she smelled. The last scent I had of her was cold and empty, with death already gripping her. Her arms wrapped around me, and I squeezed tighter.

“How?” The word left my mouth on a broken sob.

“We don’t have that much time.”

The house creaked once more, followed by breaking wood. I pulled back, both of us looking up. A crack started in the corner and slithered across the ceiling. I glanced around, noticing how many fractures had formed since the last time I’d been here. Spiderweb-like cracks ran down the walls and onto the floor.

“What’s happening?”

“You’ve suppressed too long, D.”

“What?”

A thump sounded from the hall. Gabby let me go and walked away, disappearing around the corner. The sound came again, and I chased after her.

Thump

Thump

Thump

I skidded to a stop, dim light spilling from beneath the door at the end of the hall. Chains crossed it, heavy padlocks hanging from them.

Gabby stood in front of the door, staring at it. “They said they had never heard of any being suppressing their powers before, but I told them they’d

never met anyone as stubborn as you.”

“What? Who said?”

The thump sounded again, and the door bulged outward, light glowing around the edges. More cracks formed as the door bent once more. It looked as if it was breathing.

“You locked it up in there. That part of you.”

“I had to,” I said, stepping back and looking at the ground. “I failed.”

Gabby put her hands on her hips as she turned to face me. “You’re being stupid and acting weak. That is not my sister.” She reached out and grabbed one of the locks.

I ran down the hall, clasping my hand over hers. “What are you doing?”

“Opening this damned door. We don’t have much time.”

“Gabby. Stop.”

Her head whipped to me with a look of pure determination. “No, you stop. There is no house with a locked door.”

“Gabby, can’t I just have a moment to be happy you’re here?”

“No, I need you to open the door, Dianna.” Her hands yanked on a lock so heavy it barely budged.

“Gabby.”

Wind howled in the house, more cracks forming. I felt that harrowing darkness lurking like a predator on the edge of a dark forest, waiting for its moment to pounce and devour me whole.

“I need you to admit that you shoved your powers so deep because you think you failed me, they failed me, and so you turned your back on them.”

I said nothing, tears swimming in my eyes.

“You know I’m not wrong. I know you. You’re the same woman who hit a boy twice her size when we were little because he stepped on my foot, the same one who stole an orange when mom said no because I cried I couldn’t have it. You are the same one who tied my sandals when I didn’t know how and the same one who gave me her shirt when mine ripped and took the blame so Mom wouldn’t be mad. This is you, every good and bad part is you, and I’m tired of you pretending to be something you are not. Regardless of how you feel, I love you for it, every single part, and so does he.”

A crack on the house spread above us, and she glanced up.

“That’s what scares you? You think no one could love you?”

The house shook, the floor buckling beneath our feet. A low-pitched growl made the hair on my arms stand up.

“No one should,” I said.

“Dianna.” Gabby dropped the lock, turning to me.

“Tell me I’m wrong.” My voice cracked. “You’ve seen everything I’ve done. You think I deserve love? I’m not good like you and him. I never have been.”

“You’re wrong, D.” Her gaze softened. “So so wrong.”

“You think I am?” I scoffed, the final part of me splitting wide open. “Okay. I’ll show you just how wrong you are.”

I ripped at the locks, chains, and bolts. Gabby stepped back as I tossed and threw the mass of metal to the side, leaving the cracked door bare. “Just know I’m sorry.”

She looked at me. “For what?”

“For what you’re about to learn.”

The door swung open. White stone shot through with gold swept forward, replacing the wooden floorboards of our home. A labyrinth of books and shelves hung on the walls, a staircase spiraling toward the upper levels. A large, oval table covered in scrolls and ancient texts sat in the middle. Gabby’s eyes went wide, and she turned toward me. “What is this?”

Voices rose inside the room, and Gabby whipped her head around to see what was here and what I had hidden.

“It’s when it happened.”

“When what happened?”

I nodded toward the balcony area where Samkiel and I stood. “I lied to Logan in the tunnel. In Yejedin. I did think about a future.”

My heart raged, and my eyes stung, but I clenched my fists, holding back the tears. I saw my Ig’Morruthen form step from the shadows. She walked on all fours, padding on silent paws, her body sleek and lithe. Her eyes burned ember red, and her coat was the color of night, with deep shadows of violet rosettes. She circled Gabby and me, coming to rest at my heels, her long tail swishing behind us.

We watched as Samkiel took a breath, then another, my hands steady on his forearms. I hadn’t noticed it then, but I saw it now. Samkiel looked at me as I spoke with so much admiration my heart clenched all over again.

“He had just recovered from his near earth-shattering panic attack after we’d gotten back from talking with Roccurem. He had almost lost himself

again. I calmed and comforted him like I did you during bad storms, and it worked. He was so scared, Gabby. So alone. This myth, this legend throughout the cosmos, was scared. He had the entire world on his shoulders, and all he wanted to do was help others. Samkiel doesn't care about himself. He never did. He was prepared to train armies and do anything to keep everyone safe, and there he was, breaking. I knew it then."

Gabby looked at me as I continued to watch. "Knew what?"

Fear squirmed through me, but I said it. "That I love him."

Gabby's eyes softened. "Dianna, why is that a bad memory? Why lock it away?"

I stared at the memory of Samkiel and me. A part of my heart shattered again as I looked at Gabby.

"Because something else happened, too. I knew I would do *anything* to make sure he never looked like that again. I never again wanted to see that kind of fear in his eyes. Never alone."

Gabby's eyes softened. "Dianna."

"It was just for a second that the thought crossed my mind. Only a second, but it made me the worst person in the entire world."

"Dianna, love isn't—"

I cut her off as the other me looked at her, too. "If Kaden had you and Samkiel? If he forced me to choose?" I took a shuddering breath. "I'd hesitate, and I did."

"What?"

Logan burst through the door, the memory of Samkiel and me fading. This time, the room spun, taking us to the memory I had fought to bury deeper than most of the others. Silver City, a city of skyscrapers and lights, sparkled outside the large window. I kneeled on the floor, immersed in what was happening on the screen. Kaden spoke, Gabby in his hands.

Gabby shifted uncomfortably. "Why this?"

"I stayed when he had you. I stayed with Samkiel in that damn city even after I saw this. There was more I could have done. I could have been scouring the city, could have hunted until my feet bled, but I chose to stay. And then, I chose against my need for vengeance in Yejedin, placing Logan and Neverra's safety over going after Kaden."

I lowered my head and turned slowly toward her. The beast at my feet dissipated into smoke and crawled up my body, soaking into my soul. Gabby swallowed and took a step back. I knew my powers had come back,

felt them fill me along with the pain of finally speaking about this. “Don’t you see? I let you die because I am selfish and cruel. Because I just wanted it to be over. For a split second, I wanted it to be over. You’d be dead, and Kaden would have no more power over me. I was just so tired of being used.” My face crumpled, tears blurring my vision. I had betrayed my sister, my heart, the one person I had loved the most.

“I’m so tired, Gabby. I was so tired of fighting and afraid of him using you against me. And for a second, I thought I could have Samkiel. I could have a life, and that was the evilest thought that had ever crossed my mind. It was only for a second, but I was happy. Then the guilt and the worry about you came rushing back and ate me alive. I have killed, maimed, and done things that would make people wish for death, but that thought, that single thought, was the worst in my entire existence. Maybe I could have saved you. I could have kept searching after Novas. Instead, I listened to him, stayed with him, went back to Silver City, and I killed you then. Not Kaden. Me. And I’ll never forgive myself.”

I expected her to scream at me and leave. To tell me I was the scum of the world and deserved every horrible, terrible thing that happened to me. That I deserved to rot forever, to die utterly alone and miserable. But she didn’t.

Gabby watched me sitting in front of the screen and shook her head. “That’s all?”

I gaped at her in shock. “What do you mean, is that all?”

She turned back to me, her face suffused with disbelief. “That’s it?”

I just stared at her.

She tossed her hands up, groaning in annoyance. “Oh my gods, Dianna, talk about survivor’s guilt. So what?”

“So what?” I didn’t have words. I opened and closed my mouth, trying and failing to make sense of her. “Gabby, I just told you something that has been eating me from the inside out, and you mock me? I—”

“You didn’t kill me.”

“But—”

She stepped closer, the room dissipating and reforming, taking us back to our old house. “You spent a thousand years taking care of me, looking out for me, and never yourself. Do you know what it means that you thought about yourself for one second? It means that some part of you is

normal. That's it. You were happy, and that's okay. You wanted a life? Great. About damn time."

"You're not mad at me?"

"No. How much stress do you think one person can take, Otherworld or not, before they just want a break? You didn't let me die, and you didn't kill me. Dianna, you would never harm me. Kaden did. You are not responsible for what Kaden did, and you had every right to be with Samkiel. To be happy. That is all I have ever wanted for you."

I dropped my gaze, a part of me unable to believe her.

"Hey, look at me," Gabby demanded, waiting for me to meet her gaze. "You protected me. You always have. This? What you're feeling. That is just grief. You love me, and you miss me, and you blame yourself. Okay, it's normal, it's real, it happens, but you gave me the best life, Dianna. The best one. A longer one than I would have ever had. It's okay to want a life too. It's okay that you love him. Just because this bad thing happened doesn't mean you are responsible."

My jaw clenched, struggling not to break, my emotions a roiling mass threatening to overwhelm me. Gabby reached out and took my hand, the familiar feeling helping to ground me.

"Kaden would have taken me, eventually. Someway, somehow, that was inevitable. You couldn't keep me safe forever, nor would I have let you. I lived, Dianna. For a thousand years, I lived, and you didn't. You have been a shell of what he wanted for so damn long, his fucking puppet. Then Samkiel comes along, and you laugh, smile, and *feel*. I couldn't have been happier. What kind of sister would I be if I didn't want you to be happy, too? You didn't kill me, D. You saved me. Only you let yourself die in the process. It's about time you live."

The dam broke, and I could no longer hold back the tears. They scalded my cheeks, but the relief was overwhelming. The weight I had been carrying lifted from my shoulders, and I crumpled beneath the lightness. Gabby caught me, her warm solid arms holding me as my body shuddered with choked sobs. I buried my face against her shoulder, so thankful she was here and not just another figment of my imagination, and wept. My body caved in on itself, and I wept until I had no more to give.

"I miss you so much. So much."

Her hands stroked over my hair. "I know. I miss you too."

"I don't know how to forgive myself. Even if it was only a second."

“Then don’t.”

I pulled back, wiping at my eyes.

She shrugged. “Hey, we’re all flawed in one way or the other. Be selfish, then. Love fearlessly and blindly, but love nonetheless. I would want nothing else for you. I think you are perfect the way you are. Flaws and all. So does he. There is nothing I would change... Well, maybe that trip to Nappale, but that’s it.”

I stifled a laugh as I sniffled. “I’m a terrible person.”

“No.” Her voice cracked as she smiled at me. “You’re just a girl who gave up everything she had for the ones she loved. You deserve to be loved in return.”

The house trembled violently, rocking us to the side and nearly toppling us to the floor. Pictures fell from the walls, the wind howling so loud I covered my ears. Whispers and roars rode on the air, sounding like Iassulyn had opened above us.

Gabby’s eyes turned a bright gold as she jumped to her feet. “The realms are opening.”

The words crashed into me. “Samkiel. Is he—”

She shook her head. “Not yet, but close.”

“I have to go,” I said, getting to my feet and sprinting toward the door.

Gabby ran after me, reaching out and grabbing my arm, and spinning me back toward her. I didn’t realize how fast I had moved, so fast that I’d almost made it to the front door. “Wait. D, the realms aren’t just open. Someone came back. Someone old, angry, and violent.”

“Who?”

She gulped. “Nismera.”

I moved past Gabby, even more desperate to get to him, but she stepped in front of me this time, stopping me.

“Dianna.”

“Gabby, I love you very, very much, but if you don’t let me go—”

“No, listen. You can’t fight her. Not alone. She is too strong. Even Kaden fears her. Unir was the only one that could even wound her, and he’s dead. Do you understand? She is a goddess of war and destruction. One of the first.”

“Okay, well, I have to try. I can’t let her get near him. She will kill him.”

“I know, but you can’t fight her. Not yet. You have to go to Samkiel. Get to him first, no matter what. Revenge can come later.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I’ve had help. I met Samkiel’s dad and mom. They’re pretty cool, actually.”

“You met Unir?” I gaped at her.

She nodded. “I don’t think I am allowed in the Valley of the Kings, but he took me after... He needed my help since I was the only one besides Samkiel that could reach you.”

Gabby’s body stiffened, and her gaze snapped up. I recognized the slight look of defiant anger that flashed in her eyes. If I had to guess, I would say some power had just reprimanded and forbidden her from saying more. When they met mine again, her eyes were glowing a bright yellow. “I shouldn’t have told you that. That’s not the point. Do you understand, though? Fight Nismera later, save Samkiel first. I need you to be powerful and vicious because they will be.”

I nodded, trying to absorb everything she’d just told me. “You know me, Gabs. I’ll rip them to pieces. Nobody touches someone I love.”

“That’s my sister.” She leaned back, smiling as she held my hands in hers. A golden glow formed around her, and I knew my time with her was up.

“Will I ever see you again?”

“I never left you.” A small smile played on her lips. “I am always with you, and I always will be. You’re my sister. Our bond is stronger than blood or any stupid paper that says otherwise. Remember, I love you.” Her hand slipped from mine as she stepped back. “And hey, if you are going to be a monster, at least be a damn good one.”

She dissolved into luminescent light and shot from the room.

I dropped my hands to my sides as my entire world shifted and shook. I thought my light in this life was gone, but I realized I had just been too blind to see I had another. He believed in me, cared for me, and never gave up on me. Now Kaden has threatened to take from me, and one that needed me right now.

NINETY

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DIANNA



My eyes shot open, power hot and blinding, ripping through every part of me. The blood-red moon gloated, shining through the hole in the ceiling. A jagged tear split the sky, exposing glimpses of a universe of violet and the darkest blue. Creatures moved in the void between planets and stars.

Yanking hard at my arms, I broke the metal cuffs around my wrists before sitting up to free my feet. I looked around, getting my bearings and deciding on my exit. I had to go, had to get to—

A hand grasped my throat, lifting me.

“You are forbidden to leave,” Azrael said. My father stared daggers at me. His cold steel-blue eyes bored into mine, and I could see the flicker of... pain. The pieces clicked in my mind, and I knew Azrael did not want to do this. He had no choice. My talons ripped into the flesh of his wrist, but his grip didn’t waver. I yanked my arm high and slammed my elbow against his arm hard enough I heard a bone snap. He dropped me but reached for me with his other hand. I ducked and rolled to my feet, both of us stumbling as the ground rolled.

Fuck. I didn’t have time for this. I had to get to Samkiel.

“You are forbidden to leave,” Azrael repeated, throwing his arm out to reset the bone.

I held out my hand as he took another step toward me. “Azrael.” I paused and swallowed hard. “Dad. You don’t want to do this. I can see it in your eyes.”

Azrael summoned not one but two ablaze weapons. “You are forbidden to leave,” he said, lurching forward, swinging the blades at me.

I side-stepped, forgetting how quickly I could move with my powers. Add that to the fact that I hadn't been training or eating properly, and I stumbled, one blade slicing across my forearm. I hissed and grabbed at the wound, blood pooling beneath my fingers.

"You are..." Azrael hesitated and slowed his forward charge. He took one more slow step toward me, then another. "Ayla."

I watched him warily, ready to dodge another hit. He stared at me, or actually at my arm. Something flickered in his gaze. I didn't know what it was, but it told me he was in there.

Ayla. Was that my name, my true name?

"Yes, it's me."

Azrael screamed and fell to his knees. Dropping the blades, he grasped at his head, his fingers curling into his long unkempt hair as he rocked back and forth. Cobalt blue lines flickered over his skin and flared in his eyes as he tried to gain control.

"See. You don't want to do this. It's me. Ayla. Your daughter. Just like Ava. You care about us." I didn't know if this was the right thing to say to him, but I had to try. "You care about Victoria and Rashearim."

His hands fisted in his hair, his arms shaking as he fought whoever had control of him. "Vic-Victoria."

"Yes."

"I-I remember you. I used to visit you when I could, disguised as another. I gave you your first dagger. A blade made on Rashearim. I tried to keep you safe, Ayla."

Azrael shuddered, clawing at his head, and whispered like a chant, "You are forbidden to leave." He screamed, sweat slicking his body as he fought, forcing that compulsion away. "I showed you where to stab to kill, and I need you to do it again. Now."

Azrael had come and seen me. How many times was it him with me and not who I thought was my father? I didn't speak and didn't move as he bent again. Vibrant blue blood dripped from his nose and ears.

The world shook, and I glanced up, steady myself against the wall. Samkiel needed me. I had to leave, but how could I leave Azrael like this?

"You..." Chunks of stone fell to the floor, the cavern breaking apart. A roar vibrated the air, and I felt the sound like a blow. Azrael shoved his sword into the ground, using it to steady himself as he got to his feet. "You have to kill me." He wiped at the blood under his nose as he stood. "The

words of Ezalan,” he grabbed at his head again, nearly going to his knees once more, “can only be broken in death. It was the most forbidden use of power. I wish I could have known you, Ayla.” Azrael screamed again, and I flinched. He grabbed at his head and bent. The tortured sound stopped, the sudden change more frightening than the sound of his pain.

The flickering across his skin stopped, the cobalt lines burning bright and solid instead. He looked at me again with no remorse or sorrow, just a celestial bound by duty.

“You are forbidden to leave.”

My heart twisted. I ached for this strong warrior. He had once been brilliant, crafting weapons of death and war, and now he was this shell, nothing more than a puppet controlled by a cruel master. I ached for the life that they had stripped from all of us. Kaden had much to answer for.

He swung his sword at me, and I dodged.

“If you can hear me in there, just know you gave me a good life, a good family.” He spun, and I rolled to the other side of the room. His blade hit the wall so hard it chipped the stone. “I loved them very much, so thank you.”

He stepped forward, and I released my hold on my beast, my form rippling.

“At least you can die knowing I was loved, too.”

Scales replaced skin, and fire consumed the cavern as it bellowed through my throat in a thunderous roar. A bright blue light shot into the sky, and I followed it, bursting through the cavern ceiling and racing toward the rift.

NINETY-ONE

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SAMKIEL



The council hall shuddered as more portals opened. Nismera's guards spilled into the room, marching in unison, their boots echoing against the stone. They filed out and pivoted toward the exit. I heard her whisper something about Onuna as they strode out under Nismera's orders, their weapons as sharp and twisted as they were. I groaned, trying to get up. They would destroy that planet, and I couldn't let them. I knew what would happen.

It's not enough. My father's words rang in my head.

And it wasn't.

Nismera had an army of Ig'Morruthens and beings to do her bidding, and I feared I'd merely seen a fraction of it. She stood to the side, her arms folded as she spoke to Kaden. An armored fist connected with my face, drowning out their hushed whispers. The dragonbane armor on his knuckles split my skin, and the force of the hit sent me crashing to the floor. Someone stepped on my outstretched hand, grinding it beneath a heavy boot. I groaned and pushed up as much as I could, spitting blood onto the floor. My body was so weak, and I was so tired. A talon-tipped hand clamped on the back of my skull, yanking it back by my hair.

Isaiah kneeled beside me in full armor except for his helmet. Kaden had introduced him as one of my brothers, and I could see the connection. He resembled Kaden in the face, but his build was a fraction leaner and a fraction taller. Short, tight curls graced the top of his head with a zigzag pattern clipped in on both sides. Isaiah's nose matched our father's and mine, and he had the same furrowed brow I had seen Unir wear so frequently.

My gut rolled. There, amidst all my pain, the flicker of familiarity seemed somehow wrong. Secrets. The world and I would pay dearly for the secrets my father kept.

“I remember when you were merely a mewling pup. Now, look at you.” Those damned red eyes danced across my face. “All grown up.”

“I don’t remember you at all,” I hissed.

Isaiah shrugged and smirked, displaying a single gleaming fang. He flicked his wrist, drawing a single forsaken blade. The tip was jagged, sharp, and carved from bone dark as night.

“Not a problem.”

He pressed his knee against the wound on my abdomen. I gritted my teeth, a fresh wave of agony washing over me. He pressed my arm to the floor, watching me the whole time. Isaiah placed the blade against my wrist. I bucked weakly, blood bubbling past my lips, my body shutting down. He pressed slowly, the devastatingly sharp blade slicing into my flesh. I tried to focus and keep from blacking out from the pain as he separated my hand at the wrist. My skin burned at the contact, but I did not scream. I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction.

Isaiah rose, standing proudly, a satisfied smirk on his lips. Nismera and the others glanced toward us. He ripped the rings from my fingers before tossing my severed hand across the room and walking to where Nismera stood.

“The Ring of Oblivion,” he offered her the dark ring like a gift, “as you requested.”

No.

I cradled my arm against my chest, sweat flowing into my eyes, my body trying to heal and failing. How could it? Most of my power danced through the universe, opening portals far beyond the reach of this world.

Isaiah placed the single obsidian ring in her palm, and she smiled. Kaden merely glanced at it.

My vision blurred as I lay on the floor, the agony in my body subsiding as I went numb. Not even my wrist or abdomen hurt as much now. The blood pooled around me was growing cool, and I was so tired. Sleep edged close, but I knew if I relaxed and let it take me, if I closed my eyes for a second, it would be over. I wouldn’t wake up. Something in me snapped, demanding I stay awake, stay here. It sounded like Dianna, but that couldn’t be real, and I was just so tired.

Nismera's sharp boots clacked against the floor as she neared, gripping her golden death spear. I tried to push myself up and failed. Her long, torn black cape flared behind her, the skulls on her shoulders anchoring it in place. Blood streaked the front of her armor. It was similar to Kaden's, only hers was more lithe, sharp, and deadly. She came to a stop, Kaden and Isaiah flanking her. Nismera spun her spear and slammed the tip into the floor. The runes containing me dissolved into the ground, a tiny bit of energy trying to crawl its way back to me. It wasn't enough, not nearly.

She sent a vicious glare at Kaden. "I'm a little disappointed you got rid of my army of the dead, my mind screamers. You promised me vampires, werewolves, dream eaters, yet I have nothing."

"You told me to kill the sister, and I did. That was the consequence of your command."

"Don't be so hard on him, Mera. He brought you The Hand, the Ring of Oblivion, and soon the head of Samkiel," Isaiah interjected.

Nismera ordered the hit on Dianna's sister? My mind reeled. Why? What grudge could she have against Dianna? My head throbbed as the pieces rearranged themselves in my mind, and everything finally made sense. Now I understood the broadcast and why Vincent had tried to get us to ignore it. Logan had been right. When Kaden took Gabby's life, it wasn't just watched by the entire world. It was to send a message to Nismera.

I wanted to ask, scream, and rage, but I was so tired. My vision blurred as the room shook again. More warriors exited the portal, arranging themselves around the room. A general with the shape and build of an upright reptile stopped at Nismera's side. Its long snout parted, exposing sharp conical teeth as it sneered at me.

I blinked as another creature approached, this one taller than her, its muscular build covered in feathers, talons tipping both his fingers and toes. He cocked his head, his bird-like eyes focusing on me with a raptor's gaze. "He does not seem that impressive," he said in the ancient language.

"He never was." Nismera glanced at me dismissively. "Are all the relics secure?"

"Yes, my king," the feathered one answered.

"Excellent." Nismera smiled. "Gather the rest of your fleet. We move to Yaegomar once we finish here."

"Yes, my king." He bowed in a susurration of feathers before leaving.

The reptilian general grunted. "What of this world and Onuna?"

“We claim it. Erase anything he has built. I want to kill any hope this realm or the next has of their precious lost king. Besides, it’s been a long trip. I am sure my beasts are hungry.”

Her smile was as vile as I remembered. The general beside her lifted a single clawed hand, and Gryhpors emerged from the tunnel. He turned on his heel, the thick-plated, scaled, legless creatures following him out. I felt the remains of Rasheirim tremble in revulsion.

“Would you like to see another world fall before I snuff that pretty light out entirely?”

My heart beat rapidly in my chest as an idea formed. I could use the last sliver of power I had left to sustain me for a little while longer, or I could use it for one last act of defiance. I could save the people on Onuna. It was Dianna’s world. She’d shared it with me, showing me its blinding lights and overzealous mortals. I had grown to treasure all of it. They would not meet Nismera’s wrath or pay like Dianna and her sister had. No one should have to pay for my family’s mistakes again. I couldn’t stop what was to come for everyone, but I could for those on Onuna.

She laughed as she saw the light build in my hand. “Do you think you’re in any state to fight me, Samkiel?”

“No, but I won’t let you destroy them.”

I whispered a chant, one my father had taught me so long ago. He had hoped I would never need to use it, and it was ironic I had to use it because of his secrets. I needed to save as many as I could. Light burst from my hand, bathing this world and Onuna in silver light. I could send them away. I only hoped I could wrench all of them from her treacherous grip. If the realms were opened, I knew at least one world they would be safe on. At least one.

The chant done, I closed my hand into a fist, and the last bit of energy I had tore from me. I sagged to the floor, my heart feeling as if it would stop any second.

“You will not have any more blood while I live.”

Nismera, Kaden, and Isaiah stared in shock as waves of light shot toward the sky. I smiled, my task complete.

“Unir sat on a throne that resembled the sun and carried a staff that could build worlds. He tried to carve peace when he truly was nothing more than the monsters he claimed to hunt,” Nismera said, spitting cold, heartless

venom at me. She tapped her talon-gloved hand on that golden-tipped spear. “You’re just like him, and you will die like him.”

She dragged the curved tip of her blade across my cheek toward my neck. The cold iron bit into my throat as she ran the blade across the same scar she had made the last time we met. The same wound that had nearly decapitated me so long ago. She flicked the necklace Dianna had given me to the side, unaware of how important it was to me.

“Does this bring back memories?” She twisted the golden spear in her hand, pressing into my flesh. “Do you remember how my steel feels, Samkiel? I have thought of it plenty. That battlefield. How, if I could have just been a second quicker, your blood would have soaked the dirt? I would have loved to have seen Unir’s face when he realized his most precious thing in the world was dead. The thought brings me pure joy.” She pressed the spear’s tip harder against my neck, and I gritted my teeth. “I hope he is watching from the heavens above and weeps when I reclaim *my* crown, *my* throne.”

I knew what was coming and had no strength to even stand, much less fight to stop it. Nismera’s grin turned vicious. Time slowed, and I looked at the three wide-open portals behind her. The same ones The Hand, my family, had gone through. I’d never see them again. My power was gone, and I could feel my life draining away. Even if Nismera’s blade missed, I was still done.

“I have not killed a god in ages. Let’s see if I still got it.” Nismera pulled her arm back, ready to thrust that spear through my neck and finish what she had started long ago.

My last dying thought as that blade came closer was not the cruel grins of my enemies or the traitorous family that stood around me. No, it was of her.

Dianna.

Her laugh. Her warmth. The way she tasted, the way she felt. How she had held me, healing wounds that hadn’t mended in centuries. The way she spoke to me. How she had taken me across Onuna. The multicolored lights of a festival that was too loud but with her was fun. How she showed me the sweetest food. Cared for me. A small gift given on a balcony I had made by hand in a castle just for her. The short brief time we spent truly together and how maybe she could have loved me if time had allowed it. I remembered her smile and the way her nose scrunched when she was

annoyed with the things I said. Her playfulness when she swatted at me for the comments she secretly loved.

Paradise, that's what she was to me and what I'd so desperately miss. I knew that even in death, I'd find no peace in the afterlife, for there was no peace without her. My only regret was not telling her sooner how deeply she'd burrowed into my heart, becoming a piece of my soul.

A sharp roar blasted through the air, followed by a snap and a crunch. Nismera paused, and we all looked toward the doorway. The reptilian general's large, sharp-toothed head rolled by. It came to a stop, its tongue lolling and the whites of its eyes showing.

"Gross, I will never get this out from under my nails."

A jolt went through me, my battered and bruised heart struggling to pound in my chest.

Dianna.

I almost wept. But no, she couldn't be here. Not with them.

Nismera's lip curled in a snarl as she looked at her dead general and back.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Was that yours?"

Dianna's shoes squeaked across the floor, soaked in the blood of all that had stood in her way. Her crimson eyes met mine, and my heart clenched at the sight of her. Her powers were back with a vengeance.

Isaiah seemed dumbfounded, and all of them took a step back. Whoever the general was, it was enough to make Nismera's seconds pause. Nismera glared at Kaden, menace rolling off of her in waves. Kaden lowered his head in submission.

"Gods, you all really do talk a lot. I guess it's all the egos," Dianna said, shaking blood and gore from her hands. Her lip curled in disgust, and she brushed a piece of flesh off her shoulder. "But, I will admit, it did save me some time. Especially since I had to eat and disembowel so many monsters to get here." She strolled into the room, and everyone went silent. Nismera gripped her spear so tight her knuckles turned white.

"Di—" I tried to warn her not to fight, not them, not Nismera, but my words died when Nismera kicked me in the side of the head so hard my vision blurred. I didn't need to see to know that Dianna was closer now. I could sense her and all her power, waiting, coiled, and ready to strike.

"You come for your wounded amata. How cute," Nismera hissed.

I tried and failed to raise my head. The best I could manage was to turn my head so I could see Dianna. She glanced at me, signaling with one hand for me to stay down and be still.

“What can I say? I am protective of what’s mine. Everyone in this room has made a mistake in touching him. I’m sure Kaden can enlighten you on the consequences.”

Nismera’s laugh echoed off the council walls. “Oh, what a naïve half-wit you are. Do you really think you frighten me, child?”

Dianna didn’t flinch. She smiled and took a step to the side. Nismera and the others followed her every move, taking a step away from me. “That’s it? That’s your line? You know, I have seen you in his nightmares and heard stories about the powerful Nismera. Come on. I’ll give you another try. Tell me you’re going to rip my skin from my bones or something.”

If I could have laughed, I would have. Of course, Dianna would insult and taunt one of the most terrifying goddesses known in our realm.

Nismera’s back stiffened. She took another step toward Dianna, the generals at her side. Isaiah summoned his helmet back, all of them ready to take her on Nismera’s command. I saw then what Dianna was doing. She was baiting a trap and moving them away from me.

My smart, beautiful girl.

“You are arrogant, just like him,” Nismera all but spit.

“I’ve been told I have a mouth.”

Nismera’s small chuckle was riddled with annoyance. She spun her golden spear, keeping pace with Dianna. “I am glad you are here. Now I get to kill Samkiel’s mate in front of him. That will bring me joy.”

“You know, I gave you another try, but if that is your evil, intimidating speech, it’s lackluster, to say the least.” Dianna’s eyes burned a shade darker. “I can do better. I see a room full of overgrown children pretending to be rulers. You all stand around here, whining about your daddy issues. For fuck’s sake, you all had to bind Samkiel to *beat* him. You think that’s power? Please. You’re all pathetic.”

That was all it took. Nismera handled insults like she handled everything else—with extreme violence. She lifted her spear and pointed at Dianna. The others charged. Fear for her shivered through me. I grimaced, trying to push myself to my feet. I would not let her die alone. She had come for me, come back for me. If we died, we died together.

It turned out that my efforts were not needed. The room exploded in a milky white burst, stars and dust scattering in every direction, shielding Dianna and me.

Roccurem.

A thunderous roar ripped through the room, Nismera voicing her rage. Roccurem cried out in pain, and the flare of white light was nearly blinding. The room came rushing back, blinded generals bumping into each other.

Nismera's eyes burned, glowing silver veins running through the burning white. She snarled, looking for Dianna and the fate that had just betrayed her. Unable to locate her targets, her head whipped toward me. She shoved her own generals out of the way. Hate twisted her features as she stomped toward me, but it was too late. Dianna was quicker. Dianna slid across the floor. Her arms wrapped around me, and Nismera's blood-curdling scream shattered the remaining windows as the floor beneath us opened, swallowing us whole.

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NINETY-TWO

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DIANNA. O DAYS.



My body hit the ground, Samkiel landing on top of me so I could take the brunt of the fall. The portal above us closed, blocking my view of Nismera raging at our escape. I stood, taking Samkiel with me. It was just like Eoria when I'd rushed into a room full of monsters to save Gabby. Only this time, it was for Samkiel. I'd almost been too late. The memory of Nismera standing over his damaged, bloody, and beaten body with that spear held against his throat had turned my insides liquid with fear. It had helped that they had only bothered to post a few guards. Nismera's arrogance had definitely worked in my favor. I had killed and eaten them quickly, but even with the boost from feeding, I had been severely outmatched, my skin crawling from the power pulsating in the room. But I didn't care and didn't hesitate. Samkiel was dying.

I'd overused my power again and summoned a portal, trying to get as far away from them as possible. I couldn't think about Roccurem and what he had done. He had saved us. For once, someone had betrayed *for me*, and it meant more than I could say.

My feet skidded as I tried to keep us moving, supporting almost all of Samkiel's weight. It terrified me. Samkiel would never lean so heavily on me if he could help it. My body ached from my wounds and using it as a battering ram to gain entrance to Rashearin. Slashes remained on my shoulder and side but were slowly healing.

Samkiel grabbed his midsection with his remaining hand, grunting in pain as he turned to look at me. His eyes caught on my shoulder. "You're hurt."

He was worried about me? Of course, he was. His life was slipping away, and I was his only concern.

“Says the one with the gaping wound and a missing hand.”

My foot slipped on the jagged rocks, water cascading down the stone walls on either side of us, making everything slick. I struggled to support Samkiel’s body weight and run down the damned tunnel. I didn’t even know where we were. My only thought had been as far away as possible.

The world shook again, and I heard the roars of creatures I couldn’t even imagine. The realms were opening, and the entire universe was bleeding. We were so fucked. We took a step, then another, before Samkiel’s legs completely gave out.

No!

I caught him, his weight slamming me to my knees, but I refused to let him hit the ground. We had to keep going, but when I tried to lift him, he gritted his teeth, holding back a cry of pain. I stopped, afraid to move him, my eyes darting, searching in vain for somewhere safe. Who was I kidding? There was nowhere that was safe now.

His hair was several shades lighter as if the power ripped from him had also taken the color. He was so bruised and mangled, the skin around his eyes and mouth burnt, his nose broken and skewed to the side. So much blood soaked his council garbs that my heart clenched—my poor baby.

Samkiel rested his head on my shoulder, and a whimper escaped me. “You’re so warm, and I am so cold.” His voice sounded as cracked as the skin around his eyes.

“Gods don’t get cold.” I heard myself say, my voice broken and jagged as if a part of me was cracking wide open. I didn’t know what to do or how to heal him. Samkiel was the healer. I was a creature of destruction. His normally golden skin had turned that damned shade of gray I’d seen in my dream.

“We do,” he took a gasping, rattling breath, “when we die.”

The sound that escaped me was primal. A cry of fear, pain, and grief that any living creature would recognize.

“Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that. Where did they get you? Let me look. Let me help.”

I shifted beneath him, holding him with one hand and searching his body with the other. I ripped the sodden council garbs open, exposing his torso. My breath rushed out of me on a sob. A brutal, jagged cut dissected

his abdomen, deep, devastating, and still bleeding. Dark spiderweb-like veins branched from the wound, the skin cracking and dry. Why wasn't he healing?

I held my hand above the gash and called on my power. The edges of the wound blistered, but the bleeding continued.

Samkiel jerked and gritted his teeth so hard I saw blood. I stopped, dropping my hand and holding him closer.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Fuck. Why isn't it working?" I pushed impatiently at my hair, tucking it behind my ears with a bloodstained hand, smearing my face with his blood. Desperately, I looked around for help, knowing there was none to be had.

"It's okay."

"Can you heal yourself? Use what power you have left?"

He shook his head weakly. "I don't have any power left."

"What does that mean?" He didn't answer, his eyes closing. "Samkiel," I cried, shaking him, "what does that mean?"

His chest rose and fell too slowly. "What's left of me," he stopped, "my father bound to the realms. My entire life force. Why I was so tired after the spell was made."

Rage flooded me, pure and blinding. I would rip Unir to pieces if he were still alive. My nails transformed into talons. I hated them. I hated all of them. Selfish, selfish gods. How could he do that to his own son?

"You have to leave. Nismera will come for you. They all will."

"No, I won't leave you. I'll never leave you again, okay? I promised."

He nodded and turned in to me, trying to get closer.

"I can feel them. The realms cracking, opening. So many. There are so many. He locked them all away."

"Okay, well, we will face that together, too. Just tell me how to help you. Please."

I pulled him closer, frissons of fear going through me with his every labored breath. If only I could will my own heat and life into him.

"You are my whole world." He looked up at me, and my heart shattered. His once vibrant gray eyes had darkened as his skin paled. "I-I haven't stopped thinking about you since I met you. Being with you, I finally felt what I wanted and had searched forever for. You woke me up and gave me reason. You made me feel like I was enough. I never felt like the World

Ender with you. I never felt less. You are what I've been searching for my entire life. You, Dianna, had my heart long before I ever touched yours."

"Sami." I couldn't hold back my tears. My chest heaved, and I tried once more to close his wound. He hissed in pain and grabbed my hand, stopping me.

"I wish I had never left when my world fell. Maybe I would have heard you. Maybe it would have been me to find you and Gabby. I would have loved you then, too."

Love.

Love.

That word. That damned word.

My heart shattered, my soul erupting into a million pieces, and every broken piece belonged to him. I dropped my head to his, pressing my forehead to his. I focused, trying to pour myself into him and stop what I knew was coming. Tears blurred my vision, scalding my cheeks as they continued to fall.

"You have horrible taste in women," I choked out through sobs.

His body shook, and a wet gurgling sound bubbled from his lips as if he was trying to laugh even this close to death. That one movement, that one sound, and then complete stillness. Samkiel sagged against me, his hand dropping from my arm, and the world went quiet.

My nightmares were coming true. Samkiel wore the same clothes, only now I knew it was his council garbs. His face, oh gods, all the color was gone from his skin. I had lost him.

No, I couldn't.

If I could just stop the bleeding, I could... I moved my hands, using my power to try to cauterize the wound again. Samkiel didn't jerk this time, did not move or twitch. Pulling back, I saw the wound wasn't bleeding anymore, but not because I had healed him. He just had nothing left in him.

I curled over him and laid my head against his chest, listening for a heartbeat, but I couldn't hear anything over the pounding of my own heart. I cradled him closer, one hand beneath him, the other on his face.

"Samkiel." I tapped his cheek. He was cold. He was too cold. Like her. "Samkiel." Another tap. "Samkiel." A teardrop fell, leaving a trail across his cheek as it slid away. "Sami," I said, my voice breaking.

The world stopped shaking, every realm wide open now that he was gone.

“It will not work.”

My head whipped up, and I stared at Roccurem. His form shimmered before solidifying again. I gasped as he slid down the wall. Half his form wafted off of him in tendrils. Nismera had not missed in her rage. Roccurem smiled, half of his face nothing but a swirling dark mass. I was losing him, too.

“I wanted to repay the debt I owed Unir for protecting me. I did everything in my power to bring you and Samkiel together to avoid all of this. But I had to do it in a way Nismera and her legion would not see. A whisper on the wind to get Zekiel to that cavern. A small idea of a bond sealed in blood, prolonging the trip you and Samkiel would take to search for the book. A push, sending you to the vampires you thought were friends. A kiss from a witch. All for this. For salvation from a goddess of pure hate.”

A sob escaped me.

I looked down at Samkiel. He was limp in my arms and deathly gray, all his color stripped away, my sunshine gone. My soul cleaved in two. Pain didn’t come close to describing what I felt holding him. This was brutal agony, and I didn’t know if I would survive a loss like this again.

“I tried to speed up the progression of the mark. I tried to help. Even with the prophecy, I warned you both.”

My head snapped toward Roccurem. “Prophecy?”

Roccurem’s three unwounded, opaque eyes stared at Samkiel and me. “One falls, one rises, and the end begins. So it was foretold the second Unir bound his son. One carved from darkness is you. One carved from light is him. The world will shudder as it does now. This is how the world ends.”

“I can’t... I can’t do this again. I won’t survive.”

Even the fate seemed to crumble at the plea in my voice. “You can.”

My hand closed over Samkiel’s, the coldness seeping into my very bones. I jerked my gaze toward Roccurem.

“What about the mark? I’m his amata, right?”

“Yes. You have already started the bonding, but it is unfinished.”

A sharp chill fell into the room, and my skin prickled. I didn’t take my eyes off Roccurem, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt that we weren’t alone anymore. I cradled Samkiel’s body closer to me and stared at Roccurem. The cold mist, whatever it was, seemed to hesitate.

“Tell me how it works.” The words were a strangled whisper.

“I am unsure if that will hel—”

“Tell me!” I bellowed, my voice deep and cruel, the sound of an ancient and violent creature.

Roccurem flinched. The universe halted. The cold in the room grew spiky in alarm.

“The first step in the ritual is blood.”

Our blood deal.

Blood of my blood.

Reggie’s form wavered as if he struggled to hold himself together. “The second step is body.”

Sex.

I want you.

“Last, and most important, is the soul. That is all the Mark of Dhihsin truly is. It is a sealing of a soul split. Your power becomes their power.”

“Soul?”

“Love is the purest expression of a soul you can share, and the words spoken seal the mark. It is the final step. I thought it would be spoken sooner, but you are both damaged, stubborn creatures.”

Hope flared in my chest.

“Samkiel told me he loved me before... If I say it, is there a chance?”

Roccurem glanced behind me, and I didn’t need to turn to know death hovered, waiting and watching.

“Even if it does, it will require a sacrifice of some magnitude. Resurrection has a cost.”

Hope flared in my chest. “I don’t care.”

“I do not know how this will affect you or him. Death has never been this close. Not even with Gathriel and Vvive.”

Gathriel and Vvive.

I remembered the name from when Logan and I were in Yejedin.

Gathriel was a powerful warrior wounded in battle and on the edge of death when Vvive found him. She swore on her blood, body, and soul, praying to the Formless Ones, the ones before creation, to save him. That was when the mark appeared. It was the first soul tie, and it sealed them together in every way possible. She saved him that day, saved the world, really.

A frigid wind swept in, sharper than any blade, the aching cold scraping against my bones. I glanced around the room and leaned over Samkiel protectively, his massive body limp in my arms.

I wouldn't bring Gabby back. I couldn't be so selfish, but Samkiel? The realms needed him. He was a light, a force of nature, and possibly the only being who could eradicate Nismera. Those were all good reasons, but above all, I needed him.

"If there is a cost for resurrection, then so be it. I'll pay it." The alternative was losing him, which would never be an option for me.

I had told Gabby every day that I loved her. She was my sister, and we'd shared everything. When she died, I wanted the word "love" to die with her. I never wanted to feel that deeply about anyone ever again, never wanted to be hurt like that again. No matter how I tried, Samkiel refused to let me lock my heart away. He showed me what I could have. He promised he would never leave me, yet here I was, my soul shattered and Samkiel cold in my arms.

I took a deep breath and focused, turning every bit of grief and sadness into cold, hard steel. I leaned forward, pressing my forehead to his and linking my fingers with his.

"If Roccurem is wrong, and I am truly out of time, if this doesn't work, I want you to know that I am nothing like your father, Samkiel. I refuse to live without you. There will be no peace in this realm or the next. I will burn this universe down to embers for you. I will leave nothing untouched, taking apart anyone that's ever hurt you piece by piece. So when you hear the screams from however far away you are from me. When you feel the very stars shake from the rage you aren't here to pull me back from, when you hear them beg and plead for mercy, I need you to remember that it's because you and your stupid, annoying persevering ways got to me. I want you to remember that you got under my skin when I hated you. I want you to remember that you made me happy and made me feel when no one else could. I want you to remember that you saved me in every way possible and never once gave up on me. So when the very fabric of the universe burns, I want you to remember that I love you."

The air in the tunnel grew heavy, the cold darkness retreating with a hollow whisper. Pain radiated through my left hand. I hissed and glanced down. A reddish-orange glow burned beneath my skin, etching intricate whorls around my third finger. The laser-like beam cooled, leaving behind a jet-black brand, but it was so much more and went so much deeper.

A seal.

The Mark of Dhihsin.

As quickly as it burned, as it showed, it disappeared.

Samkiel took a breath, his eyes fluttering open before closing once more, but a rhythmic heartbeat echoed through the tunnel, quickly synching with my own.

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NINETY-THREE

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DIANNA. THE FLOATING CITY OF JADE.



“How deeply you must love someone that death itself fears taking them?”

We stood in an enormous room, one wall carved out, revealing the sky of a world so far from my own. The two suns painted the sky in golds, oranges, and violets, a constant light show above. Broken pieces of an old moon ringed the planet, affecting its gravity. Gold and pink clouds encircled the floating city. Vines and flowers draped the walls and hung from the ceiling, the transition between outside and inside seamless.

“How are you feeling?” I asked him.

“Exceptional, thanks to you getting us here in time,” Roccurem said.

I shrugged. “You told me where to go. I just flew.”

I glanced at him. His form was no longer shredded and broken.

“Does fate actually answer to anyone?” I smirked and rested my head against the smooth doorway.

“We were destined to coexist with the gods and those that came before them. I long for those days once more.”

I didn’t respond, the weight of the last day finally settling on me.

“Resurrection has a cost. I assume you paid yours.”

I glanced at my bare, smooth finger, trying to forget what that mark had felt and looked like.

“I guess.”

A low moan had me straightening and focusing on Samkiel. He lay unconscious on a floating bed a few feet from me. I hadn’t left him since we made it here. His chest rose and fell, but I still counted every breath and heartbeat.

I felt Roccurem's eyes bore into me. "You saved him."

I nodded, not taking my eyes off him, a part of me afraid that he would be taken from me again if I did. The beings, Roccurem called the Asclepius, worked on Samkiel as he rested. A peaceful and secretive race, they were powerful healers known across the cosmos. Their pink skin had a gold sheen that matched the sky. Their clothes were a variety of long dresses and tunics that brushed the floor, jewels draping their shoulders and wrists.

They moved around Samkiel. Some carried bundles of dried plants they had set on fire, the ends smoldered, emitting a thick gray cloud of smoke that smelled spicy and bitter. Others smeared a violent green paste on the large gash across his midsection, the only wound that hadn't healed when our bond formed. Their queen had been less than happy when we'd arrived, and that my eyes burned crimson didn't help the situation. But that was another problem for another time.

"Why is the wound not fully healing?"

My eyes never left his chest as it rose and fell, afraid if I even blinked, it would stop again.

"He was not meant to survive it."

My lip curled in disgust. "I'm going to kill all of them."

I watched, careful to stay very still as they worked. The last time I breathed too loudly, they screamed and cowered. Apparently, Ig'Morruthens in this realm were more feared than they were on Onuna.

"Nismera does not know he still lives. Since the realms are completely open, no one will suspect."

"Good. I want it kept that way."

"The Asclepius will not speak of it."

My head turned toward him, and I knew my eyes were blazing. "If they do, they die too, and I burn this city until it crashes to the ground."

The room fell silent, every eye turning toward me. Roccurem smiled reassuringly back at them, and they nervously returned to work. "We must focus on getting The Hand back and stopping his psychotic family." I tried to say it calmly so I didn't disturb them as they palmed a multicolored liquid onto Samkiel's side. He groaned, twitching from the cold. I stepped forward, a growl emitting from me before I realized he was not hurting. They paused, all of them glancing toward me as if I would explode.

Roccurem sighed and turned toward them, their lyrical language rolling off his tongue. They nodded and relaxed, a few even smiling before

returning to their tasks.

"Nismera is not one to be underestimated or trifled with. She has a legion, and now with Samkiel's death, they will see her as king of all twelve realms and every world in between," Roccurem said.

"Not for long."

"She has ties to the Otherworld, Dianna. Old, deep, powerful ties. The Otherworld is open now. That is where she will go first."

I nodded, glancing at Samkiel again.

"The rage bubbling in your gut must not cloud your head with plans of running in blind."

I started to pace. The Asclepius squeaked and scurried for the door.

Roccurem shook his head but stayed, watching me. "She is a goddess, my liege. A very old, very powerful, very angry goddess."

"I fear no gods and no kings."

"I know. Just please be careful. You are needed." Roccurem stepped into the hall.

"Don't tell him." He paused and turned to look at me with all six of his eyes. "Let me be the one. Please."

Roccurem nodded. "It is not my story to tell."

"Goodnight, Reggie."

A flicker of emotion passed across the fate's face. I thought I knew him well enough now to say that hearing the nickname I had given him made him happy.

He nodded again and closed the double doors behind him. A hush fell over the lush room, not even the plants rustling in the wind. I carefully slipped onto the bed, curling up next to Samkiel. I rested my hand on his chest, unable to keep myself from checking my finger, our mark nowhere in sight. But the steady beat of his heart matched mine, and that was enough. Samkiel's body relaxed as if feeling me near comforted him even in sleep. He reached out and pulled me close, tucking me against his body and resting his head on top of mine. I inhaled deeply and fit myself against him, the world fading away as I listened to his heart beat, just as I had so many nights before.

Resurrection has a cost.

Dread filled my being, and I wondered as sleep claimed me if I had paid with more than just the mark.

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